

A House for Mr. Biswas
**V. S. Naipaul's Journey from Self-discovery to Search for
Identity and Stability**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the literary quality and fictional skill of V.S. Naipaul, the Nobel Laureate of Indian origin, who occupies a distinctive and conspicuous position in the galaxy of the Diaspora writers and it examines how his writings do concentrate on Disintegration, exile, alienation, loss of values and quest for identity, journey from self-discovery to search for identity and stability with the special reference to a *House for Mr. Biswas*.

Keywords: V.S. Naipaul *House for Mr. Biswas* journey, self- discovery, search for identity, stability, galaxy, diaspora, disintegration, alienation.

V.S. Naipaul, the Nobel Laureate of Indian origin, has a distinctive and conspicuous position in the galaxy of the Diaspora writers. In the decade following the sixties Naipaul's writings show a change in focus. Till that point, the historical descriptions and cultural critiques of colonized (or ex-colonized) contexts had been conducted in terms of a colonizer-colonized counterpoint (active-passive, authentic – parodic, etc.) and this was paradoxically reflective of the writer's black-and-white colonial psyche. Inevitably, "all the writings so far had, despite carefully deployed distancing techniques and the affection of objective narrative, some autobiographical investment (Gupta 42). Disintegration, exile, alienation, loss of values and quest for identity are the terms often applied for defining the experiences of the people of the third world nations and in the aftermath of imperialism, the miserable societies of these third-rated countries were found struggling to achieve their economic self-reliance, political stability and a national self-esteem which are yet beyond their reach. In such a chaotic situation, the expatriates in general and the indentured Asians in particular are in a gruesome predicament. Their ancestral identity is "a dead-ended past and original culture has disintegrated and dissolved amidst the alien surroundings. No doubt the condition of these self-made slave societies marooned on alien lands has become more miserable in the recent

whirlwind of globalization and the throes of marginalization, deracination, disintegration and nowhere-ness have become more painful and unbearable than ever” (Singh vii). Having a terrifying passion for truth, even if it is sour, Naipaul has undoubtedly emerged as a relentlessly truthful delineator of the gruesome maladies of the immigrants and his novels present” a true picture of the indentured Indians – rather Asians in their floatsam existence as derelict peoples in the wilderness of the modern world” (P viii).

V.S. Naipaul, better known by his initials. is one of the few original voices of our times. He was born in Trinidad on 17th August 1932 as a member of a minority’ race and religion. His family was a part of the Hindu Indian community of workers and petty merchants important to that part of the British Empire to serve the commercial interests of the Empire. From an early age, Naipaul displayed a distaste not only for the traditional Hindu way of life followed by his ancestors but also for the slave society of Trinidad which remained under British rule till 1962. When he was in the fourth form at Queen’s Royal College in Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad, he wrote a vow in his *Kennedy’s Revised Latin Primer* to leave Trinidad within five years. However, it took him six years to redeem his vow. V.S. Naipaul left Trinidad for England in 1950, graduated in English from Oxford University in 1953 and settled in London afterwards. He has to his credit publication of such notable novels as 1.*The Mystic Masseur* (1957), 2.*The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), 3.*Miguel Street* (1959), 4.*A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), 5.*Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), 6.*The Mimic Men* (1967), 7.*Guerrillas* (1975), 8.*A Bend in the River* (1974), 9.*The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), 10.*A Way in the World* (1994).

Even though he hailed from a remote corner of the Third world, he belonged to the mainstream of the modern English novel. He received a knighthood in the 1990. New year’s Honours list for services rendered to literature. In 1993, he won the first David Cohen British Literature Prize for a lifetime achievement as an author. In addition to the above, he is a recipient of Rhys Memorial Prize in 1958, Maugham Award in 1961, Phoenix Trust Award in 1962, Hawthorne den Prize in 1964, Smith Literary Award in 1968, Arts Council Grant in 1969, Booker Prize in 1971, Bennett Award in 1980, Jerusalem Prize in 1983 and T.S. Eliot Award in 1986. Having been born and brought up in the slave society of colonial Trinidad, Naipaul felt lonely in metropolitan London. He lived in London bedsitters and he wrote:

“All mythical lands faded, and in the
big city I was confined to a smaller world
then I had ever known. I became my flat,
my desk, my name” (19).

Often, nodding off with the electric heater on, he would wake to a nightmare that he was in topical Trinidad. Though living mainly in London, he travelled frequently in the West Indies, North and South America, India and Africa. However, he found every country to be a nightmare for an uprooted man like himself. Naipaul’s creative power was shaped by the

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acute perception of his own displacement and his fiction deals with the twentieth century themes of the fragmentation of the social order, the sense of the void, the meaningless of endeavour in an amoral universe and the absurdity of man's situation. Exile is the spur as well as the subject of his writing. Totally isolated by his displacement and temperament from allegiance to any country, community or creed, he examines the world with an unclouded eye. In his country marked by political upheaval, mass migration, colonization and revolution, it is inevitable that much of the modern literature should be literature of the exile. The writings of V.S. Naipaul too, draw upon an experience totally based on alienation and exile. "All his novels deal with the displaced or dispossessed who do not have, never had, and by the nature of things, never could have, a home against which their condition of exile can be assessed" (Joshi 11). No doubt, his works are paradigmatic of the whole genre, thereby forming a major current in twentieth century life, thought and art.

In all his works, his own mind and the environment that brought it into being is his main subject. Being an exile, his basic response to this condition is a search for identity. His writing is a process of self-discovery. Cut off from his actual home, he rebuilds the lost home in fictional terms with the help of words. The exile's sense of isolation, the ache of not belonging is clearly evident in all the works of V. S. Naipaul. In his novels, he has charted the course of his self-discovery – from a search for identity to the complete desolation experienced by the permanent exile. V.S. Naipaul's reminiscences of his early life in Trinidad and his efforts as a youth in London to establish himself as a writer recur throughout his work. "His relations with people he meets in the course of his travels affect the very nature of his memories and enlarge his perspective on his heritage" says A. N. Yadav (P 25); the religion and customs of immigrants from colonial India who settled in colonial Trinidad did obviously affect his literary and imaginative perspective. Lillian Feder comments:

"In every country he, Naipaul was concerned with the relation of the historical past even in its seeming absence – to the present. The most intense personal reaction he records is empathy with the heirs of a history of slavery and colonialism, the economic, cultural and psychological oppression and especially the assaults on individual identity with which they still contend" (P 13).

V.S. Naipaul grew up in the West Indies after slavery had been abolished, but the memories of colonialism and slavery still haunted the islands in which he grew up. The British governed the colony and the people of the island were encouraged to think of Trinidad as 'Little England'. His early childhood was spent in the reconstructed India. The Indians who came to Trinidad as the immigrant labourers were mostly from the villages. They formed close-knit communities and sought to deny the finality of their transference by rigid

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observance of ritual. As soon as he had left his village, the immigrant Indian carried his village with him. “Naipaul is the product of a distinct combination of circumstances. A Brahmin Hindu born in Trinidad, he is an Indian by ancestry, Trinidadian by activity and British by residence. He found the squalor of Trinidad stifling to his spirit. The childhood and youth spent in Trinidad, the bond between father and son and the Hindu background – these three strands of his personal life were conspicuous shaping factors of Naipaul’s sensibility” (Yadav 26). According to A.C. derrick, “one major thematic strand runs through all the novels of V.S. Naipaul: whether set in the West Indies or in England, they are satiric demonstrations of individual and social limitations. The social condition that Naipaul represents in his novels is shoddy and limiting, offering little more than on absurd or ridiculous existence. Repeatedly he shows the frustration of energy and ambition. Success is the reward of trickery, vulgar materialism, self-delusion or the values of the colonies monkey-game’. For the individual, rebellion or non-acquiescence proves a largely futile exercise. The theme of personal failure dominates all of Naipaul’s work” (Pant 37). In the words of Suman Gupta,

“Naipaul has engaged with a wide variety of interlinked issues and contexts: the issues range from personal history to the historical determination of culture and society; from colonization to the constitution of post-colonial states; from the complexities of specific racial groups, religious communities, and nationalities, to the broader concerns of human spiritual needs, intellectual life, political ideology; from fiction to reality and from fantasy to truth ... Naipaul is ultimately memorable not merely for his thoughts and ideas but because he is a good, perhaps great, writer of books” (P 97).

The features like a recurring image, idea or character type point to some deep impression made on the writer’s mind by a particular experience or event in his life. He consciously uses the novel to define his position and to impose order in his life. Bruce King writes: While novels and short stories have seldom been about himself, they have reflected the various stages of his disillusionment with Trinidad, his despair with India and his concern with being a homeless excolonial” (P 108). Naipaul is an articulate critic, not only of society and literature in general but of his own life and work as well. In 1958, in *The Regional Barrier*”, he speculated about his limited prospects as a novelist thus:

“The social comedies I write can be fully appreciated only by someone who knows the region I write about.

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Without that knowledge, it is easy for my books to be dismissed as farces and my characters as eccentrics ... It isn't easy for the exotic writer to get his work accepted as being more than something exotic; something to be judged on its merits" (P 21).

Living in England, he depends on an English audience, but he writes about the stranded Indian community in the West Indian island of Trinidad. Consequently, he feels that the major obstacle between him and his audience is a geopolitical boundary. Feeling the necessity of a tradition on which to build, Naipaul turned with a kind of romanticized veneration to English and European writers. There, of course, his regional barrier intervened. He said thus:

"To us, without a mythology, all literatures were foreign Trinidad was small, remote and unimportant, and we knew we could not hope to read in books of the life we saw about us. Books came from afar; they could offer only fantasy" (New Statesman 452)

Naipaul's fantasy resulted in a habit which he described as a 'process of adaptation'. His writing them, is "an ordering of experience". It is a "shaping rather than an inventive imagination" (White 24).

In his novels, he presents facts as fiction and fiction itself is seen as a way of understanding the factual world. Literature and life interpenetrate, fiction and non-fiction complement and counterpoint each other. For he himself said in an article entitled "London" as:

"Unless I am unable to refresh myself by travel – to Trinidad, to India, I fear that living here will eventually lead to my own sterility ..."
(Naipaul 16-17).

Accordingly, Naipal is a traveler looking for things to write about. "I can only write about a place when I am away from it. The experience must be complete, and I must be able to look back" (Gussow 9).

Quest for identity is a compelling theme in his fictional world. For instance, in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, from birth to death, Mr. Biswas is subjected to problems which arise as a result of his instability in accommodation. As if to underscore this, Mr. Biswas is born, away from his father's house. After his father's death, the villagers drive them away by

destroying his mother Bipti's garden. At the age of six, Mr. Biswas is expelled from the "only home to which he had some right" (AHB 40).

Mother and son find refuge in one room of a mud hut in the back trace of Tara's house. After a few years of schooling, he is packed off to live with Pundit Pairam in order to be trained as a pundit and when he comes back from there in disagree, he is shifted off again to live with Bhandat at the run shop. Accused and cruelly beaten with a belt, he once again returns to Bipti's room in the hut and cries out of her:

"Why do you keep on sending me to stay with other people?" (AHB 65).

The death of his father has left Mr. Biswas homeless and emotionally bewildered. His unstable accommodation makes him realise that a house would provide the basic stability a man needs. "For the next thirty five years, he was to be a wonderer the next thirty five years, he was to be a wanderer with no place, he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of Tulsis" (AHB 40). The various houses through which Mr. Biswas passes as temporary resident make him conscious of his homelessness. The feeling is very intense though he is not aware of how he is going to overcome it. He seems to be in a blind alley.

It is at this stage that the longing for a House which would provide him with stability, sprouts and shoots leaf after leaf by every milestone he passes and flourishes into a firmly rooted tree in his middle age. Biswas is a derelict, shunted from one dark hut to another, from one dark room to another, for thirty five years of his life. In none of these places would his absence make a difference for "in one of these places had he even been more than a visitor, an up setter of routine" (AHB 132). This despair fills Mr. Biswas with a sense of his own lack of stability in relationship and identity. As a child, Biswas dislikes living as a poor dependent in his aunt Tara's back trace. He quickly acquires what Naipaul describes as the "exile's compensating sense of temporariness" (P 276). It has been said that "Mr. Biswas's problem is not just to live, but first of all to make for himself a world to live in" (Joshi 127). One day when he unthinkingly declares to Bipti, his mother:

"I am going to get my own house ...", he finds the symbol of his quest. A house of his own, then becomes the focus of quest for something that will imbue his life with stability and identity. The meaning of the house is made richly clear in the concluding lines of the prologue:

"How terrible it would have been, at this time
to be without it, to have died among
Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large,
disintegrating and indifferent family;

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to have left Sharma and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated" (AH B 14).

While sign painting in a shop belonging to the Tulsis, Mr. Biswas enters into the state of slavery which furthermore unstabilizes his life. His lack of mental stability, the evening he decided to marry Shama, following his clumsy advances to her, adds up to his urgency to build a house of his own. The importance he ascribes to building a stable familial relationship is clear with his thought of a house, on deciding to get married. Born in a Hindu Brahmin family, where the father, mother and children lived in a separate house, before his father's death, it is not strange on the part of Mr. Biswas to long for a stable accommodation and relationship in a separate house, away from the in-laws. In general, he wishes to establish stability. Mr. Biswas agrees to marry Shama because it seems to promise a stability in life. He hopes to find a social identity through his marriage. Contrary to his expectation Shama and Mrs. Biswas are given a part of a long room on the top of floor of the wooden house. The very sight of the place makes him think of escape. On the realisation of his position, he is scared of losing the little identity he has. He feels that only if he has a house for himself, he can maintain his identity. His stay with the Tulsis, makes him suffer a lack of identity. His suffering is so intense that it has a strong spiritual and psychological impact on him. Further, he feels like an outsider or alien in relation to his wife and children. His existence therefore becomes paradoxical. He decides that it is essential for him to make a mark of his existence at all costs. On reviewing the whole life of Mr. Biswas, one is compelled to decide that Mr. Biswas has sacrificed the very essence of both his personal and family life. As a result of his homelessness, he has to lead a life deprived of identity and stability.

The rights he enjoys in his house provide him, his identity as the owner and head of the house. The thought that he had been responsible for buying this house proves the stability he had achieved one day he passes away, mourners, men women and children came to his house. "The polished – floor became scratched and dusty the staircase shivered continually; the top floor resounded with the steady shuffle. And the house did not fall" (AHB 589). The stability of the house indicates Mr. Biswas's achievement in life. Absence of Mrs. Biswas is felt by Shama and the children, when they return to the "empty house" after the cremation. The word "empty" stands for the place Mrs. Biswas occupied. He had achieved the identity as a husband and father. In a word, Mr. Biswas is said to have left a mark of his existence by establishing stability and identity in the form of the house. To conclude, it may be said that the stay of Mr. Biswas is the story of a lowborn Indian's absurd, yet heroic struggle for identity and independence in colonial Trinidad.

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