

Displacement, Identity, and the Quest for Home: Examining Rootlessness and Alienation in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the experiences of displacement, alienation, and identity crisis depicted in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, demonstrating how these struggles resonate with the universal human condition of surviving in colonized and postcolonial societies. The novel chronicles the life of Mohun Biswas, a descendant of East Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad, from birth to death. Throughout his existence, Mr. Biswas endures humiliation, poverty, and homelessness, moving between precarious employment while seeking dignity and autonomy. Married into the oppressive Tulsi clan, he faces constant disdain from his in-laws while his wife remains loyal to her family. His purchase of a dilapidated house—though financially ruinous—represents his ultimate assertion of independence and identity. The novel masterfully illustrates the duality of human existence: the interweaving of joy and sorrow, triumph and defeat. Naipaul's characters—displaced wanderers moving from Africa and India to the West Indies and Britain—search desperately for stability and cultural identity in a world where traditional values have eroded over three centuries of colonial disruption. Against this fragmented backdrop, they struggle to find anchors that might provide meaning and continuity to their fractured lives.

Keywords: Rootlessness, Alienation, Identity, Home, Westernization, Postcolonialism

Introduction

V.S. Naipaul stands as one of the most significant and controversial figures in postcolonial literature. His work has garnered both extraordinary praise and sharp criticism for its unflinching examination of Caribbean, Indian, and Third World societies. Naipaul's unique perspective stems from his complex identity: born in Trinidad to Indian parents, educated in England, and perpetually displaced. This multifaceted background grants him both

insight and distance, enabling ruthlessly honest assessments of postcolonial societies unencumbered by sentimental attachments.

His literary corpus consistently explores themes central to postcolonial experience: cultural displacement, identity crisis, the illusion of independence, and neo-colonial predicaments. His own rootlessness—simultaneously a burden and a source of clarity—informs his penetrating social criticism. While his judgments have provoked controversy, they emerge from intimate familiarity with the communities he depicts.

Among Naipaul's works, *A House for Mr. Biswas* remains his most celebrated achievement. Published in 1961, the novel traces one man's struggle for autonomy and identity through the symbolic quest for property ownership. It simultaneously documents the erosion of Hindu culture under Western influence in Trinidad's East Indian community. Through irony and cynicism, Naipaul exposes the tensions between Eastern traditions and Western modernity, creating both a personal bildungsroman and a social history of Trinidad's Indian diaspora.

The Existential Hero

Mr. Biswas embodies characteristics of the existential hero, perpetually at odds with his environment. Like modern individuals alienated from society, he inhabits a world where ethics seem irrelevant amid universal struggle and suffering. His existence unfolds in persistent loneliness and isolation. Repeatedly, he makes choices that promise liberation, only to discover he has been living in delusion. Reality continually eludes his grasp, yet he persists in seeking it.

The house becomes his ultimate symbol of belonging—a tangible anchor in an unstable world. His relentless pursuit of home ownership foreshadows the broader struggles of diasporic communities seeking rootedness in foreign lands. This quest reflects Naipaul's own experience and that of his father, whose unfulfilled dreams provided the emotional foundation for the novel. The narrative, deeply autobiographical in inspiration, achieves remarkable poignancy through its blend of humor and heartbreak.

The Struggle for Individuality

From childhood, Mr. Biswas experiences profound unease following his father Raghu's untimely death. Naipaul meticulously constructs his protagonist's personality: irritable, tense, frequently argumentative with his wife Shama and her family, yet simultaneously courageous, persistent, and possessed of a wit that generates humor throughout the narrative.

Mr. Biswas commits what the Tulsi clan considers an unforgivable transgression: asserting his individuality. His in-laws demand conformity and submission, viewing his independence as threatening. A telling incident occurs when he presents his daughter with a dollhouse—an act that disrupts the household's tranquility and leaves him exhausted beyond

irony or words. This interior weariness represents a form of rebellion, a silent resistance that mocks the eloquence of open agitation.

As Gordon Rohlehr observes, "Tulsidom depends for its existence on the psychic emasculation of men and on the maintenance of their sense of inferiority" (189). Mr. Biswas recognizes this dynamic and refuses to accept it. From the outset, he adopts an aggressive stance, refusing full integration into the Tulsi organization. He joins the Aryan missionaries—Hindu revivalists—partly to antagonize the Tulsis and challenge their doctrines. This affiliation particularly irritates Mrs. Tulsi, who fears it might jeopardize her son Owad's enrollment in a Catholic college.

For Mr. Biswas, opposing the Tulsis represents more than personal vendetta; it constitutes resistance against a system that denies him dignity and integrity. He views "Tulsidom" as a microcosm of his community, where attacks on the family structure represent attacks on oppressive communal traditions.

Jealousy and Self-Realization

Mr. Biswas experiences jealousy when Owad departs for England to pursue higher education—an opportunity forever beyond his own reach. This moment crystallizes his awareness of his own stagnation and failure. The realization that he has accomplished nothing in life intensifies his bitterness and sense of futility.

The conflict between Mr. Biswas and the Tulsi family persists throughout the novel, never fully resolved. Naipaul brilliantly depicts both the communal life of the traditional Hindu clan and Mr. Biswas's struggle against it. The Tulsi household teems with conflicts, arguments, and compromises—a way of life founded on established rituals and emotions. For Mr. Biswas, accepting Hanuman House and its order would mean embracing slavery and surrendering his soul. He cannot tolerate the Tulsis' self-centeredness and hypocrisy.

As the Tulsi family gradually deteriorates, Mr. Biswas's escape becomes increasingly feasible. In the novel's later sections, his relationships with his children Anand and Savi, and with Shama, evolve into something distinctly modern. Personal family bonds strengthen as extended family ties weaken. They begin regarding each other as unique individuals rather than merely as spouses, parents, or cultural representatives.

The Quest for Self-Reliance

Though his struggle appears to be an ordinary man's battle against overwhelming circumstances, Mr. Biswas's efforts to free himself from the stifling Tulsi environment prove remarkably tenacious. He dedicates his entire life to establishing and validating an independent identity. When fellow son-in-law Govind urges him to abandon sign-painting, Mr. Biswas responds defiantly: "Give up sign-painting? And my self-reliance? No, boy. Paddle your own canoe is my slogan" (107).

The belief in fate's hostility permeates Mr. Biswas's family history. His maternal grandfather greets his birth as evidence of destiny's indifference. Mr. Biswas spends his life battling these forces, surviving through courage and optimism, enduring both physical and emotional hardships. He exists in a semi-permanent state of displacement until finally acquiring his own home. Until life's end, he never feels truly at home anywhere, lacking enduring connections.

A Positive Resolution to Dislocation

A House for Mr. Biswas offers a relatively positive approach to the problem of displacement. Despite the limitations imposed upon him, Mr. Biswas fights relentlessly against forces seeking to suppress his individuality. Though his struggle proves long and unsettling, he ultimately succeeds in negotiating space for himself and realizes his dream of home ownership—an extraordinary achievement for someone from such humble origins.

Unlike the heroes and anti-heroes of Naipaul's other novels who ultimately reject their communities, Mr. Biswas represents the multiplicity that fundamentally constitutes home. His constant struggle against the harsh Caribbean society evokes the universal experience of ordinary people resisting oppressive circumstances. The story remains powerfully connected to its creator, exposing a father's unfulfilled dreams in the Creole world and a son's helplessness and frustration at those unrealized desires.

Postcolonial Identity and "Unhoused" Existence

Most of Naipaul's characters are shaped by social and political forces as well as personal concerns. They live half-lives suggested by colonial and postcolonial interactions, remaining "unhoused" within themselves, situated on boundaries between temporary and permanent identities. *A House for Mr. Biswas* opens with an image of a lonely elderly man completely resigned to his fate:

No one paid him any attention. Fate had brought him from India to the sugar estate, aged him quickly and left him to die in a crumbling mud hut in the swamplands; yet he spoke of Fate often and affectionately, as though, merely by surviving, he had been particularly favoured. (15)

Naipaul's approach combines kindness with sardonic observation. The old man's sole achievement is survival, accomplished through passive acceptance—what Naipaul identifies as the most seductive aspect of Indian identity.

Social Context and Narrative Technique

A House for Mr. Biswas cannot be evaluated in isolation; it must be understood within its social context. Naipaul deliberately employs comedy to depict deeply painful situations while examining societal problems. He argues that his novel centers on collective commentary and criticism rather than creating social excitement. He views the creative process as genuinely dedicated to examining sociological dispositions, contending that writers often work toward outcomes of which they remain unaware.

The narrator's dual role as astute observer and affected witness grants Naipaul unrestricted authority to depict characters with passion and precision. As the narrator infiltrates the reader's consciousness, characters become accessible and multidimensional. Their thoughts and perceptions contrast ironically with their words and actions. Characters are examined both from their own perspectives and through others' opinions of them.

Home, Identity, and Literary Purpose

Since a house functions as a primary symbol, Naipaul's examination in *A House for Mr. Biswas* represents his search for his past and the creation of home identity. After becoming disillusioned with India, Naipaul begins viewing home and identity from a different perspective. Homelessness transforms from disadvantage to potential advantage, opening possibilities for those without fixed roots. Naipaul's major achievement lies in presenting the Caribbean experience as an elemental strand in the fabric of human nature.

Through literature, Naipaul discovered a means of organizing his experiences and defining his home identity. *A House for Mr. Biswas* exemplifies this process most effectively. The novel skillfully conveys colonial humiliation and nostalgia. His imaginative stories fundamentally concern the defenseless lying to and about themselves. He describes movingly how colonial subjects have learned to distrust everything about themselves and imitate imposed models of adulthood.

For Naipaul, writing constitutes an effort that compels him to rediscover his identity at every stage of his literary career. He has stated that creative writers discover who they are and where they belong through their work. Naipaul's quest for identity has been so thoroughly pursued that he remains uncertain of his own identity. Writing organizes his experience, providing coherence and continuity. Through art, he can connect his present to his past. Just as the house brings structure to the Biswas' lives, Naipaul learns about himself while recording his heritage.

Early Works and Self-Definition

Naipaul's early writings represent his attempt to honor his ancestors before severing his umbilical connection with them. Rather than being dismissed, these early novels emerge from his efforts to define himself and determine his place in the world. Naipaul's complex fate is that, despite his varied upbringing, he has not found his metaphysical home. His writings result from grappling with his own displacement and homelessness.

Naipaul believes fiction provides an ideal forum for social criticism. His works offer brilliant assessments of contemporary life while combining artistic awareness of the past in fresh, cohesive ways. They emerge as authentic representations of his society's suffering, misfortune, and pride. Though his work follows classical patterns, he revitalizes them through contemporary techniques: fragmentary flashbacks, private causerie, and disjointed narration revealing characters' mental states. Beyond addressing universal themes of cultural discrepancy, rootlessness, and identity, he uses his artistic genius to explore his own

problems as a long-term exile—the displaced self, homelessness, and the psychological and political conditions of alienation.

Conclusion

Homelessness represents a significant limitation in human life, while housing serves as a prerequisite for identity. Therefore, establishing oneself among the homeless and displaced becomes Naipaul's primary concern in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The multiracial environment created serious problems on both personal and societal levels. Colonized individuals experienced displacement in foreign environments through intense isolation and homelessness. This sense of inferiority and insecurity stems from mimicry, make-believe worlds, and the isolation of all colonized peoples. Cultural colonization leads to fractured consciousness and cultural disintegration.

A House for Mr. Biswas explores themes of loneliness, frustration, stability, and the pursuit of belonging in a multicultural society. Through Mr. Biswas's struggle, Naipaul illuminates the universal human need for home, identity, and dignity. The novel stands as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of colonial and postcolonial displacement, offering both a deeply personal story and a profound meditation on the condition of rootlessness in the modern world.

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