



A Thematic Study of V. S. Naipaul's Novel "A House for Mr. Biswas"

B. Lily Pushpam and Dr. Amutha Dhanaraj

Department of English, Karunya Institute of Technology and Sciences, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at analyzing the various hidden, explicit, aboveboard and shady themes of the novel. The article tackles the concepts of individuality, independence and identity crisis in the novel. A constant search for identity, which is prevalent throughout the novel, is reflected at different angles in the article.

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Introduction

V.S. Naipaul is one of the eminent diasporic authors in English whose reputation, as a novelist and a travel writer, has invariably been split. His works are set in many places, explores many themes and takes the reader on a journey of experiences from the local to the global and from a narrow perspective to a broader and more encompassing vision. Though his writings were widely admired, his views sometimes aroused controversy.

Naipaul is an expatriate from Trinidad whose over riding business as a novelist is to project fastidiously the complex fate of individuals in a cross-cultural society. He is a Trinidadian-British writer of Indian ancestry. He is a second generation Indian whose grandfather had been brought from India to Trinidad as an indentured labourer in the 1880's.

Naipaul wrote:

Half of us (Indians) on this land of Cagunes (in Trinidad) were pretending perhaps not – perhaps only feeling, never formulating it as an idea that we brought a kind of India with us, which we could, as it were unroll like a carpet on the flat land.

'Two worlds': V. S. Naipaul's 2001 Nobel Lecture.

The themes in his novel display a unique affection for the homeland of his birth. It deals with the historical period of colonialism and indenture and the experiences of migration and displacement with respect to Trinidad.

Victim hood could have been his central theme, granted his background. But he overcame that with the same determination with which he had strongly fixed his mind to be an author. It is onerous in Naipaul's case to outline and define 'home.' The word home is linked with identity, and therefore his works often centres on identity, quest and displacement. Naipaul's writings frequently carry references to his cultural heritage, rooted in: Trinidad (birth place), India (ancestral place) and United Kingdom (place of education).

A House for Mr Biswas is a postcolonial contemporary third world fiction. Fragmentation, alienation, and exile are the common terms associated with the postcolonial literature. The novel also tackles the concepts of Literacy, Imagination and Autonomy. The book acquaints and paves the way for the Cultural Studies withal. Independence vs Belonging, Inner vs Outer Reality, Individual vs Society, Amity vs Antagonism, Identity Crisis, Circle of Life, Alienation, Displacement, Rootlessness, Colonialism, Oppression and Escape are some of the major themes of the novel. There is a constant search for identity throughout the novel, which is reflected in almost all the stages of the protagonist's life. It is also a Künstlerroman novel, as it is a narrative about the artist's growth to maturity, and could be classified as a specific subgenre of Bildungsroman.

Mr. Biswas's pursuit for a house reflects his rummage around for 'Belonging and Independence'. There is an unending conflict between his belongingness and independence. Throughout the whole book, lacking any better option, he lives wherever he is allowed to go, almost always with relatives, employers, or even relatives that employ him. However, he almost invariably hates the people he lives with and the places where he lives, feeling that he does not belong and resenting his dependence on others, which leads him to endeavour and discern a house of his own. The house where Mr Biswas is born ends up vended to a neighbor and demolished for the construction of oil drilling infrastructure: his original place of belonging, "the only house to which he had some right," is destroyed, that would have made his family extraordinarily wealthy had they stayed. After this loss, he ricochets among other people's houses for his whole life, at least eleven places altogether, none of which he belongs in, because none of them belong to him. He consistently feels a burning desire to turn "from a visitor into a dweller" by building a home for himself, creating a

place where he belongs and can live independently from others.

Naipaul's approach to how individuals relate to places shows that individuals' quest for home and a place of belonging is complicated first, by the reality of homelessness, and second, by the socio-cultural complexities peculiar to every place. The relationship between 'the Inner and the Outer reality' is quite complicated, though they are interconnected. Whatever exists in the external world, the sun, moon, stars, air, sky, earth, ocean, and different natural elements of life we see, comes into the external reality. The cosmic universe, along with the physical manifestation of life created by humans are all parts of the external reality. We have dreams, desires, memories, want, needs, pleasures, thoughts, feelings, emotions, subtle impressions, breath, sensation, imagination, etc which all come into the internal reality. As without the past, no situation or event can appear in the moment, we don't see the outside life in its natural form; rather we see it, with our individual perception. The house becoming the symbol of the protagonist's identity in the novel is a reverberation of the affiliation between his inner and the outer reality.

The notion that life begins with birth and ends with death is nothing new or unaccustomed to authors, and many incorporate this into the themes of their books. 'The Circle of Life' is nothing but a symbolic representation of birth, survival and death. This theme is handled with meticulous and diligent care, and almost all the readers, especially Indians, could connect themselves with the protagonist and to the circle of life. Mr. Biswas is an everyman character. V.S. Naipaul tells stories that show us ourselves the reality we live in. *A House for Mr Biswas* is a book for people who have struggled continually to figure out how to live their lives, people who have dealt with the opposing forces of obligation to family and the desire for independence. It helps the readers to understand the ever-changing balance of power in families, the slight accidents that change lives forever, the hard-won tiny victories, the slight ratcheting up and down of expectations. It is not some nice and tidy story with a beginning, middle, and end. Naipaul aims for something far more epic: to describe a man's life.

He virtually starts with Biswas's birth and tracks this wilful, sad, assertive man's life all the way to his death. Mr. Mohun Biswas has been fighting against destiny to attain some facade of independence, only to face a period of catastrophe. Shuttled from one residence to another after the drowning death of his father, that he's unwittingly accountable for, the boy is withdrawn prematurely from school and apprenticed to a pundit, but is cast out on bad terms. Mr. Biswas yearns for a place he can call home, but once he marries into the masterful Tulsi family on whom he indignantly becomes dependent. Mr. Biswas embarks an arduous and endless struggle to weaken their hold over him, and buy a house of his own.

The novel is episodic and packed with conflict. Mr Biswas subverts the heroic convention. He is the protagonist who is smart and funny, but also often petulant, mean and

unsympathetic. His enemies are mostly his relatives, though they are largely unlikable they also have their admirable moments. The narrative of the novel is propelled by a clear goal – the acquisition of the titular house – which could only be achieved by the most exhaustively circuitous route. The novel is of epic length and formal perfection. It contains two notable peculiarities: its setting, which, being domestic, is unusual for an epic; and its geographical location, Trinidad, an important island within the Caribbean however not a particularly influential one on the world stage.

The 1961 novel *A House for Mr Biswas* by V. S. Naipaul is significant as Naipaul's first work to achieve worldwide acclamation. Naipaul imbibed the ambition to become a writer from his father. It was his father who continued to encourage his writing aspirations when his first novel was rejected, at the age of eighteen, by the publisher. His book declares that each one of us can choose to be a free individual, as it is a matter of will and selection and, above all, intellect. This proves to be one among the most crucial themes of the novel. It is often referred to as a partly autobiographical novel as it draws some elements from the life of Naipaul's father. It tells the story of Naipaul's father, Surajprasad Naipaul, an unsuccessful and efficacious writer and reformer, in the guise of Mr. Biswas. Biswas's son, Anand, represents the author himself. The book deals with a question of identity in a foreign atmosphere for a man who is of Indian origin. How he struggles and to what extent is he able to establish himself and prove his existence is the central theme of the novel.

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