

## Carving of an authentic selfhood in *A house for Mr. Biswas* of V. S. Naipaul

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### Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to depict the dispossessed people's struggle for the carving of an authentic selfhood. The social identity of the people is rotted in their culture, while at the individual level; it is determined by personal achievements. In order to have the feeling of wholeness, it is necessary to fuse the individual and the social consciousness. It is natural that the displaced people, uprooted from their real homes, find themselves out of place in an alien land. The several restrictions imposed on their life pattern in the colonies suppress and distort their identities. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Mr. Biswas has to put up a relentless struggle against the forces which try to crush his individuality.

**Keywords:** selfhood, home, identity, independence

### Introduction

The carving of an authentic selfhood is a major problem of the dispossessed individuals. In this way, the quest for roots and independence undertaken by Mr. Biswas in an alien, chaotic centre less world universally symbolizes quest of every immigrant. A Quest for selfhood is one of the most recurrent themes of V. S. Naipaul's writings which project a restless and agonized Indian's struggle to attain an authentic selfhood. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, V. S. Naipaul's most unforgettable novel traces the typical journey of born outside, Mohan Biswas from cradle to grave who is an uprooted, derelict man. He shuttles from one place to another in a perpetual quest for a place which he can call his home. Mr. Biswas belongs nowhere as his immigrant background makes him a permanent stranger. The search for house becomes the search for roots and independence.

V.S. Naipaul is a post- colonial intellectual who has no fixed address; his Third World is delimited, confined to those colonies whose societies are composed of immigrant people. They have no root in the soil in which they live. Mr. Biswas, the East- Indian protagonist lacks a history, a tradition and a house. He remains a visitor wherever he goes. Mr. Biswas is born at an inauspicious hour at midnight in a wrong way with such unfortunate features such as six fingers, wide teeth with spaces between them. A person with such features according to the pundit will be "alecher and spendthrift" possibly a liar too as well ... that is a shocking sign of course. The only thing can advice is to keep him away from trees and water, particularly water." (09)

Accordingly Mohun Biswas is imposed restrictions since birth to be far away from water and trees. He is deprived of the enjoyment of independence and freedom that his brothers Pratap and Prasad are permitted. Even the midwife's prophecy is that this boy will eat up his own mother and father. Thus the prophecy of the pundit and the midwife mark the identity of

Mohun Biswas as an inauspicious. His father, one of the best divers of the village dives into the pond to find his son Mohun but he is himself drowned.

Now the fragmentation of Biswas's life begins after his death. He has to leave his village and move to Tara's place Pagotes, only to be wanderer. Hermassi has rightly remarked: "Displaced from their real homes and transported to distant lands, they experience a totally negative sense of place. They are unable to possess in the spiritual sense the land they have in the physical sense."(4)

After coming to pagotes, Biswas and his mother live completely on Tara's charity. The decisions of his life are taken by others like Tara. Even his mother loses her hold over him. He is sent to the Canadian Mission School under the supervision of Lal, a strict school master. He has a bitter experience here. At this school, in the company of Alex Mohun discovers his skill as a sign – painter. This enables him to taste independence and individuality. But when he starts learning by hearts, he is taken out of school by Tara and sent to pundit Jairam, an eccentricman, to receive his training. All this enhances his rebellion and quest for independence. His experiences at Mission School and Pundit Jairam's house shape his longing for a 'house' his own, an independence of his own. After spending six months with this pundit, he is thrown out by Jairam. Biswas returns Pagotes expecting his mother will welcome and console him. But his mother expresses her apprehensions. Now Tara sends Biswas away to help her husband's rum shop, which is looked after by Bhandat, her brother-in-law. Biswas is accused of stealing a dollar and turned out. Now Biswas cries out in his humiliation to his mother: "why do you keep on sending me to stay with other people."(49)It is the first time when Biswas declares his revolution to have his own house which for him has become a symbol of liberation.

His sign painting brings him into contact with Hanuman House where he is trapped into modern marriage without any dowry. He is expected to become a Tulsi because he has no money or position. Here he feels that it is a typical joint family which function the same pattern as the British Empire in the West-Indies. Hanuman House provides shelter to Mr. Biswas but wants total delusion of his identity in return. When Mr. Biswas finds out that men are only needed as husbands and laborers or that they are non-existent in the Tulsis family, his inner self rebels. Govind, one of Tulsi sons-in-law suggests that he should leave sign-painting and become a driver for Tulsi estate, he immediately voices his dissent "give up sign-painting? And my independence? No, boy my motto is: paddle your own canoe. (62)

It seems that for Mr. Biswas sign-painting, taken up by him voluntarily, has become part of his identity. He is not ready to merge himself to insignificance like other sons-in-law, some of whose names are even forgotten in Tulsis family. He is the first one to rebel against the long held religious views of Tulsis. To spite the Tulsis, he joins the Aryans, a group of revisionist Hindu Missionaries from India advocating girls' education, caste system and idol worship. This displeased Mrs. Tulsi. Moving away from Hanuman House to the Chase with pregnant Shama is a personal triumph for Biswas. Now Mr. Biswas begins an independent life with Shama in The Chase. The house gives him freedom which is missing in the Tulsi family. Biswas wants to leave a place of his own on this earth. Kath Woodward has precisely stated: "Identity is closely linked to place, to key places and often to the place that we call home. In this sense, the map is a useful metaphor for understanding the formation and representation of identity in relation to location and situation as well as movements and translation." (65)

It is diagnosed the feeling of temporariness to be a typical condition among the displaced people. Mr. Biswas never gets over the feeling of temporariness throughout the period he spends at The Chase. After coming to the Chase, Biswas's attitude to Hanuman house changes. He realizes that though Hanuman house seemed chaotic to him, it was in reality ordered. He discovers that "the house was a world, more real than The Chase, and less exposed; everything beyond its gates were foreign unimportant." (68)

At The Chase he feels reduced to a non-entity. It is true that one's sense of identity is rooted in relationships, the denial of which can only lead to alienation. When Biswas realizes that Hanuman House is a sanctuary he needs, his relationship with the Tulsis undergoes a change. He visits Hanuman House more often and even tries to win their favour. Biswas's first attempt to paddle his own canoe meets with failure when his shop incurs heavy losses and he is forced to accept the job of a sub-overseer at a salary of twenty five dollars, in one of Tulsi estates.

Life at the barracks in Green Vale is a harrowing experience for Biswas. After the spacious accommodation at The Chaze, the single room into which he moves in with family and furniture leaves him feeling suffocated. Biswas had resolved to start building his house immediately after coming to Green Vale. The house meets the same end as the doll's house he had gifted his daughter Savi on her birthday and outraged Mrs.

Tulsi by the reiteration of his independence. The house Biswas starts building at Green Vale can in no way be an embodiment of his aspirations, for Biswas is still dependent on the Tulsis. Besides, financial constraints compel him to make compromises. The intensity of the alienation he experiences is reflected in his conversation with his son:

'who is your father?'

'you,'

'wrong. I am not your father. God is your father.'

'oh, And what about you?'

I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know'. (70)

Biswas moved into the ended room of his house with the hope that living in his own house would bring a change in the state of his mind. However when Tarzan, his dog, is brutally killed by the dispossessed laborers, Biswas is badly shaken and feels more threatened than ever. The same day he has a nervous breakdown. Biswas finds himself again in Hanuman House, where he is nursed back to health.

When he recovers, Seth breaks the news to Biswas that his house has been burnt down by the laborers. Biswas is immensely relieved by the news, for he can never think of going back to the house after the horrifying experience he has had.

Biswas leaves quietly without seeing Shama and his fourth child. When he sets out he has no idea where he is to go or what he is to do. It is quiet by chance that he gets into a bus going to Port of Spain and ends up as a journalist. Port of Spain provides Biswas the grip he has long been in search of. At the Trinidad Sentinel he is taken in as a reporter at salary of fifteen dollars a month. Apart from establishing his identity, the job also changes the attitude of the Tulsis towards him. Now he feels that he had won a victory.

Biswas's ambition of having his own house finally finds fulfillment at tiny hills. He shifted there but has to abandon because of its incontinent location and practical problems. In spite of all the negative aspects, it is in this house that for the first time the Biswases live together as a family. The experience of living together adds a new dimension to Biswas's ambitions. Now Biswas realizes that he has the responsibility of a father and husband as well, and his ambition can become truly meaningful only the aspirations of the other members of the family are also accommodated.

It is at the Sikkim Street house where he attains a family, a house, an individuality and independence. No doubt Mr. Biswas enters the house under the shadow of death that he has a stroke but the pathetic end of the novel affirms his triumph over his limitations.

### Conclusion

In concise, it is true that it is search of an Indian immigrant for a meaningful place in the Creole world of Trinidad. Mr. Biswas becomes an archetypal everyman describing modern man's fate in a rootless society. It is clear that for displaced people like Biswas's longing a house of his own is not only a matter of getting a shelter from heat, cold or rain; but it is actually a symbol of stability, selfhood and coherence which are the pre-requisites for the carving of an authentic selfhood.

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