



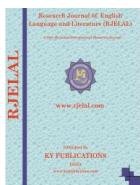
IDENTITY CRISIS AS A THREAT TO MR. BISWAS'S EXISTENCE IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

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Abstract

This article tries to explore the issue of identity in postcolonial literature. In the era of globalization the need for immigration has increase for various reasons. This in turn results in the dawn of multicultural land with cultural diversity. The article focuses on the issue of identity that surges with immigration in a multi ethnical land, particularly in a colonial world. For this purpose V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* has been taken where the protagonist Mohan Biswas is always in search of identity in a multicultural society for his existence. It tries to analyze the protagonist Mohan Biswas from the perspective of rootlessness and identity crisis. It also examines the methods undertaken by the protagonist to construct an identity in the society and thereby break away from rootlessness.

Key Words: Identity crisis, rootlessness, diaspora, hybridity

Introduction

A person feels identity crisis when he gets difficulty in creating identity in his surroundings. Identity crisis might be a state of uncertainty and confusion during which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically owing to a change in their expected aims or role in the society (Woodward, 2002). The Oxford English dictionary defines identity as "The fact of being who or what a private or thing is". A person's identity can be shaped by his nationality, ethnicity, gender, language, class and culture. The identity may be broadly divided into personal identity and social identity (Hall, 2003). The personal identity is the conceptualization of the self in relation to others, whereas the social identity is derived from the person's membership in social groups. The increase in mobilization and post modernism has led to the hybrid identity. Culture shapes and informs a person's identity. A person in postcolonial countries tries to assert his identity in

society in multiple ways (Rao, 2004). One of the best known writers in English today is Vidyadhar Suraj Prasad Naipal, himself a product of post-imperialist society. He has written extensively about different aspects of post-colonial society (Lee, 1972). In his writings, he tends to end up dealing with the identity crisis of individual (Singh, 1992). *A House for Mr. Biswas* traces the journey of a man whose only dream is to own a house of his own. The image of the house is a central, unifying and integrating metaphor around which the life of Mr. Biswas resolves. Delineated in compassionate tones, for Mr. Biswas the house represents a search for emancipation from dependence. The novel paints the picture of Mr. Biswas as he struggles to preserve his own identity in an alien environment and tries to forge an authentic selfhood. It narrates the search for independence and identity of a Brahmin Indian living in Trinidad. The novel is set in Trinidad and covers the story of three generation. The novel

encompasses a direct association with the modern problem of identity crisis. It portrays a single man's struggle to arrive at authentic self-hood. The novel sketches the character of Mohun Biswas, the protagonist, as he tries to find relief from rootlessness and have a house of his own. The 'house' is symbolic of identity and self-respect. It represents one's culture and one's roots. The present article studies *A House for Mr. Biswas* from the point of view of identity crisis and rootlessness and to analyze novel in order to identify the identity crisis of Mr. Biswas. The objective here is to discuss the identity crisis of Mr. Biswas as a threat to his life and to show how Mr. Biswas struggles to preserve his own identity in an alien environment.

In today's world it's very significant to define oneself with a minimum of one thing. One's identity determines one's position or situation in society wherever one lives. It seems to be unavoidable, essential transitory state of mundane consciousness on the way of becoming. And when a person lacks identity he becomes psychological refuge. In *A House for Mr. Biswas* V. S. Naipaul depicts the importance of identity mainly by the protagonist Mr. Biswas. The writer shows how Mr. Biswas moves from one place to another for attaining a house, his selfhood, his identity. The state of necessarily uncertain identity is insecurity that propels Mr. Biswas to search for ultimate significance, his self. The importance of the studying of this text lies in the fact that it will help the readers to know about dynamic and fluid nature of identity. It helps the readers to know about the diasporic identities that causes identity crisis. It helps to know how identity creates meaning in one's life and how a person suffers from alienation because of identity crisis.

Methodology

After completing the introductory point it is needed to describe how I organize my term paper. Now I am giving some brief information in which way this research is going to be conducted specially the methodology to be followed to fulfill this work. This is a text based study and the work is conducted in an analytical way. I collect information from the library of my university. Here the text book is the primary

source and there are other sources consist of some articles and different websites used as secondary sources.

Textual Analysis

Identity is an important aspect of understanding the self and identifying with society and the rest of the world. It is the most controversial issues. Sometimes it is misused and overused. It is related to someone's ideology, beliefs. Now it is identities not identity, because a single person may have several identities. A person who is emotional can be a murderer. He or she may be a Marxist. Identity is not a pure thing. It is fluid. One cannot fix anybody by a single identity. It is obvious that characters and mainly protagonists in postcolonial novels are often pictured as struggling to figure out who they are, and attempting to find their place in between the old native world and the imperial world. This quest for identity in the postcolonial literature has been revolving around the key features that forge and build an identity. These key features overlap; that is, when tackling one of them we find ourselves unconsciously talking about the other. Some of these key features consist of the notions of language, home, hybridity, multiculturalism and otherness. Postcolonial literature is the best way to find out how post-colonialism and their subjects try to redefine or rebuild their new identities through their pre-colonial past and their colonial experiences. The question of identity in itself is very crucial to the writers who come from a similar background related to colonialism and its aftermath since they express their feeling of loss and try to find out any links that make them feel the sense of belonging somewhere and find out who they are regarding their own societies or the west.

The post-colonial diaspora narratives demonstrate the nostalgia of diaspora for their distant homelands and their quest to retain their racial and ethnic identity in a hybridized world. As a post-colonial migrant intellectual V.S. Naipaul deals with post-colonial displacement and homelessness resulting from diverse diasporic movements. From his own position of displacement, Naipaul turned his attention to other displaced individuals in the "half-

made" societies of the world that were searching for the meaning and fixity in their dishonored lives. The main protagonist, Mr. Mohun Biswas in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* faces the problem of identity crisis in his every phase of life. "I am going to get a job of my own. And I am getting to get my very own house too"(Naipaul 64). This vow of Mr. Biswas typifies his longing for his freedom, social and family respect and acceptance that constitute his 40 years struggle to gain his own identity. The moment Mr. Biswas is born; he already has the burden of deformed identity which will make him feel that he doesn't belong. He is born with six fingers. "Born within the wrong way" (Naipaul 15), as they assert. This alienates him from his peers and the society. The Pundit, who was called to read the boy's future, said that the boy will grow into lecher, a spendthrift, and a liar. The pundit's advice was that, the boy should be kept away from trees and from water. The midwife attending upon the birth of the boy made the prediction that the boy would eat up his own mother and father. Mr. Biswas is not allowed to go near ponds and rivers. Raghu himself is an excellent swimmer and he has been training his other two sons, Pratap and Prasad in the art of swimming. Mr. Biswas remains at home with his sister Dehuti when Raghu takes his other two sons with him on such occasions. From the way of beginning of his life Mr. Biswas is alienated from his family. He is treated as an alien being and this very alienation helps him to face identity crisis. Thus Naipaul portrays the complexity of the connection between a person and his origins and his inability to flee from it. Yet Mr. Biswas searches for his own identity "I am just somebody. Nobody at all" (Naipaul 279).

The novel takes its material from the excluded peoples who are alienated from societies to which they apparently belong, and who are in search of an identity because the identity crisis serves as a threat to their existence. The state of one's feeling of getting been deracinated and displaced is termed "unhomeliness", a term coined by Homi Bhabha and other theorists of post-colonialism. It is the sense of being in between of two or more cultures. An unhomed person doesn't have the feeling of belonging since s/he may be

a psychological limbo which generally ends in some psychological disorders and cultural displacement. Here, being "unhomed" does not mean being homeless. To be unhomed, as Lois Tyson states in "Critical Theory Today", "is to feel not at home even in one's own home because you're not at home in yourself; that's, your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee" (Tyson, 2006). And in this novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Mr. Biswas becomes a psychological refugee because of his homelessness.

As he grows up, Mr. Biswas experiences seemingly endless prejudices and ridicules. The community within which he lives in is bounded by traditional superstitions and caste discrimination; thus his misshapen fingers make him feel a true outsider. But misfortune is not only brought by his six fingers, they have been living in poverty even before he is born and their financial owe continues. In fact, it worsens that they hardly eat. Mr. Biswas becomes thin with stunted growth and acquires sores and eczema. This appearance of his heightens his insecurity and his alienation from the people around him. Poverty drives Mr. Biswas to seek employment. He is hired by Dhari to look after his calf. Finally, Mr. Biswas is exulted because someone trusts him. But it is a short lived glory as his clumsiness and lower self-esteem make him lose Dhari's calf. He runs away to avoid punishment. Mr. Biswas's father drowns in the pond when he is looking for him in the forest. This fulfills one half of the midwife's prophesy when he was born. Mr. Biswas faces identity crisis when he wants to get admitted in the Canadian Mission School where he received instruction from the teacher by the name of the Lal who has been converted from a low Hindu caste to Presbyterianism, a sect of Christianity. Lal, the teacher has after his conversion, began to look upon Hindus with contempt, as part of this contempt, he generally speaks to them in English of which, however, he has only a smattering. Lal demanded Mr. Biswas's birth certificate which Mr. Biswas does not have but it is a part of one's identity. Bipti goes to consult Tara about the birth certificate which was required at the school. Tara took Bipti to a solicitor by the name of F.Z. Ghany. Ghany is a Muslim but he makes most of his money from

Hindus. Tara explains that a birth certificate is required for Bipti's son, Mr. Biswas. Ghany asks what the date of birth of Mr. Biswas was, and Bipti said that it was the 8th of June. Ghany takes down the date specified by Bipti and other necessary particulars and says that the birth certificate would be got ready soon. It is clear that, how Mr. Biswas gets stumbled to create his identity from the very primary level of his life. Another show of Mr. Biswas's struggle for his self-identity is when, in the classroom, he is forced to write "I am an ass" (Naipaul 47) on the board. Although this is his punishment for his disobedience, he will not do this if he has a strong confidence of who he is. The statement humiliates him among the students. Perhaps a physical punishment like cleaning the space or running round the ground is more fitting. This is more dignified than the self-inflicting defame. To create identity Mr. Biswas moves one place to another place. Just when Mr. Biswas was beginning to learn stocks and shares in the arithmetic and when he is about to study Bell's Standard Elocutionist in order to prepare for the visit of the school inspectors, he is taken out of the school by Tara and told that he would now be put under the charge of the Priest in order to be made a Pundit. This is clear that his sense of free will to make an identity is always dominated by others. Mr. Biswas was now entrusted to the care of Pundit Jairam. For eight months Pundit Jairam has taught him Hindi, introduced him to more important scriptures and various ceremonies. Pundit Jairam has burst into a temper for Mr. Biswas's misdeed and told him that the latter could never become a Pundit. Mr. Biswas was then asked to pack up and quit. Now, Mr. Biswas runs after a new identity. Working at the rum-shop is a new experience for Mr. Biswas. Here, he has to work under Bhandhat's supervision.

It was said that Bhandat drank heavily, is in the habit of beating his wife and keeping a mistress of a different community. Mr. Biswas also discovered that, Bhandat is cheating his customers by giving them less than the full measure of drinks ordered by them in the shop. In this way Bhandat is making extra money for himself. Mr. Biswas further comes to know that there different brands of rum, actually the same rum is poured into all the bottles

and different names. Bhandat is living with his wife and two sons in a two-room house. Mr. Biswas had to sleep with Bhandat's two sons on a hard mattress on the floor. From his wages, Mr. Biswas begins to give one dollar in a month to his mother Bipti whom he would go to see on Sundays and Thursdays' afternoons when the shop is closed. He works in the rum-shop only for his identity which helped Mr. Biswas to lead his existence. But this is hampered when Mr. Biswas is dismissed by Bhandhat. Mr. Biswas is accused of pilfering the money from Bhandat. Mr. Biswas said that, he has not touched Bhandhat's money and that he is not even aware that there was any money in the house. But Bhandat gives him a beating with his leather belt and turns him out of his house. Mr. Biswas has no other alternatives but to go for searching a new identity for his existence. He now thinks of getting a job somewhere else. He has passed many shops, including those of a tailor, a barber, an undertaker, a dry goods seller and so on. But none of these trades seemed to interest Mr. Biswas. He returns home to the back trace disappointed. Bipti suggests that, he should go and make up from Tara from whose rum-shop he has been driven away, but Mr. Biswas said that he would rather kill himself.

Then, Alec re-appeared in Pagotes. He has given up his job as motor mechanic and had become a sign-board painter. Mr. Biswas has been a very good hand at lettering and so Alec suggested that, Mr. Biswas should also become a signboard painter. Alec then introduces Mr. Biswas to the proprietor of a café where Alec has undertaking some painting work. In this way Mr. Biswas become a sign writer. He continues to paint signs. It is a satisfying work but it comes irregularly. Alec wandered from district to district, sometime working sometime not working. So that the partnership is often interrupted by the periods of idleness. There are any weeks when Mr. Biswas is altogether out of work, and when he only reads.

As sign-painting does not bring much money, Mr. Biswas wonders what else can do. He buys elementary books on science. Among the books he bought is even volume Hawkins' Electrical Guide, from which he wants to learn some kind of mechanical and electrical skills. But to acquire such

skill he needs equipment which he cannot obtain from anywhere. The result is that his interest in electrical matters faded away. He then becomes a conductor on one of the Ajodha's buses which runs in competition with other buses. There are times when Alec, who never stuck to any one trade or to any one place, comes to Pagotes and speak of certain pleasures. Alec takes Mr. Biswas to certain houses which at first frightens him, then attracts him, and finally just amuses him. Then one day Mr. Biswas goes to Hanuman house at Arwacas to paint signs for the Tulsi Store. He has been interviewed for the job by Mr. Seth who is a brother of Mrs. Tulsi's dead husband. Mr. Seth engages Mr. Biswas on minimum possible terms. Mr. Biswas finds the Tulsi Store disappointing affair in spite of the feat that several shop assistants are members of the family and are related to Mrs. Tulsi in one way or the other. He feels that he would have to be very careful while painting signs at this place. Here he meets Shama, a daughter of Tulsi's whom he later marries. His marriage makes him worried. He wonders what would happen to his mother and where he would live with his wife. He has no money and no job. As for his sign-writing, it is good enough for a young man living with his mother, but it is hardly a secure profession for a married man to get a house for himself and his wife, he would first need a proper job.

His marriage makes him realize that the life even after a love-marriage, it is not romance, but an act of responsibility. Without money and without a dowry from the Tulsis, Mr. Biswas has no choice but to move in at Hanuman House. He develops a mental complex because of the disagreeable family atmosphere. To Mr. Biswas, it is typical joint family which functions on the same pattern as the British Empire in the West Indies. Hanuman House provides shelter to Mr. Biswas but wants total dilution of his identity reciprocally. When Mr. Biswas finds out the men are only needed as husband and laborers or that they are non-existent in the Tulsi family, his inner self rebels. He finds himself unwanted in the Hanuman House which he sees as a communal organization where he is treated as indifferent rather than hostility. Although he tries to win acceptance in the family, he holds his tongue and

tries to win a favor. This does not mean that he is willing to lose his freedom and independence. When Govind, one of Tulsi's Sons in law, suggests that he leave sign-painting and become a driver for Tulsi's estate. Mr. Biswas immediately voices his dissent: "Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No way. My moto is: paddle your own canoe?"(Naipaul 107). It seems that for Mr. Biswas, sign painting preoccupied by him voluntarily has become a vicinity of his identity. He refuses to adopt a profession which is related to the Tulsis, and he's not able to merge himself to insignificance like other son-in-laws a number of whose names are even forgotten in the Tulsi family. In the section entitled the Chase, Mr. Biswas begins his independent life with Shama. From the beginning, however, Mr. Biswas has the sensation that in Chase he's an unnecessary and unwanted man which real world was to start for them soon in other places. To Mr. Biswas "Chase was a pause, a preparation" (Naipaul 147). Here, Naipaul, identifies the desire of Mr. Biswas to have a house of his own while also acknowledging the problem of alienation among the displaced people. Interestingly, after coming to Chase, Mr. Biswas's attitude to Hanuman House changes. Whereas he has used to think that Hanuman House is not ordered, he discovers that, 'the House was the world more real than the Chase and less exposed; everything beyond its gates was foreign and unimportant" (Naipaul 188). Mr. Biswas thinks that the life in Chase will help him discover his own identity, but it is the sense of isolation that looms large and he fails to find his authentic selfhood. He discovers that, he wants to have his own identity among East Indians. Mr. Biswas now feels that despite hostility, he is recognized as a mimic man in Hanuman House. At Chase he feels alienated. What Naipaul seeks to convey is that a person's social identity depends on the society to which he belongs and that the family is sustaining and stabilizing experience for marginalized individuals like Mr. Biswas. For Mr. Biswas, life is meaningless without Shama, his children and even the Tulsi's. This makes Mr. Biswas visits to Hanuman House more frequent. Life at Green Vale may be a more distressing experience. After the spacious accommodation in Chase, the single room into which he moves with

and family and furniture leave him feeling suffocated. Although the Green Vale gives him a sense of freedom and importance, his actions in Green Vale is motivated by excessive insecurity both physically and mentally. He cannot adjust himself to his life in the Tulsi barracks. As the conditions in the barracks are awful and intolerable, Mr. Biswas thinks it is necessary to build a house of his own. He does not have enough money for the purpose and yet owing to his desire for independence and for living in a neat house, he embarks upon a project which leads only to a feeling of frustration because the house cannot be completed. Only one room in his house, of which Mr. Biswas is certainly the owner, is habitable, and Mr. Biswas moves into it. But he does not attain any peace of mind even after shifting in this house because he is now oppressed by a feeling of loneliness by vague fears about his future and by strange questionings. As consequences he suffers a nervous breakdown and has to be carried to Hanuman House in order to be nursed back to health. The house build by Mr. Biswas at Green Vale is subsequently burned down by the laborers who had been hostile to him from the very beginning. Thus his desire for independence and for self-assertion comes to nothing.

The second part of the novel is focused on Port of Spain, a place that opens new avenues for Mr. Biswas. The city provides him with the opportunities to establish himself professionally, something he has long searched for. At first he has to live in the house of his sister Dehuti and Ramchand. Thus even now independence has eluded him. After some days he obtained a job as a newspaper reporter in Trinidad Sentinel with a salary of fifteen dollars a month, a job that helps him earn some respect from Tulsis too. Now, he is not a trouble maker anymore to Mrs. Tulsi. When she offers him two rooms in her house in Port of Spain, he readily accepts. He is not a non-entity anymore. Shama, one her visits to Hanuman House, is able to assert proudly that the "Children are afraid of him" (Naipaul 40). Mr. Biswas, too never feels what he used to feel when Shama is pregnant for the fourth time, "One child claimed; one still hostile, one unknown, and now another" (Naipaul 227). There is no hostility from either side. For the time being, he

forgets his wish to have a space of his own and enjoys his success and family life. His happiness, however, is short lived. The takeover of the Trinidad Sentinel by new authorities, Seth's break-up with Tulsi's and Mrs. Tulsi's decision to live in a shorthills take a change in Mr. Biswas's life. Meanwhile he builds a house of his own on the Tulsi's estate. After shifting into his house, he is at last becomes independent and leaves a sign of relief. But this dependence is short-lived. His house catches fire partly on account of his own in discretion and partly on account of accident and is burned down. Once again Mr. Biswas finds himself at Mrs. Tulsis' house, as a dependent and faces identity crisis. Mr. Biswas's ambition to have a house re-surfaces after his shift to Shorthills. He has exhausted all his savings to build the house there. But the house is not conveniently situated. Mr. Biswas once again moves to Port of Spain with his family and where he has been previously accommodated by Mrs. Tulsi. Since many other members of Tulsi also now shift to this house on Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas has no peace in mind. The conditions are insanitary and the noise is awful. Then Owad has returned from abroad and occupies the two rooms which Mr. Biswas has been occupying so that Mr. Biswas has to shift to another room in the same house. But Mr. Biswas leaves this house when the situation becomes worse. Owad slaps Anand for answering him back and in humiliation Anand urges his father that "[they] must move. [He] cannot bear to measure here another day" (Naipaul 551). Mr. Biswas who has himself faced such humiliation innumerable times during his childhood, is deeply moved by his son's appeal. He tells Shama that he is going to vacate the house very soon. The readers may find a change in Mr. Biswas's attitude towards having a house. Earlier the house was expected to lead to a discovery of his authentic selfhood and proclamation of his identity. This time, owning a house comes out of humiliation inflicted on his own son and Mr. Biswas's helplessness to protect his family. At that time, the house are going to be on a chunk of land where he and his family can live with self-respect and dignity. Even his wife, Shama, agrees to leave the house although she earlier advocated living with Tulsi family, saying, "I do not want anything bigger. This is just right for me.

Something small and nice" (Naipaul 580). Mr. Biswas manages to get a loan from Ajodha and buys a house. He describes his house thus: "The sun come through the open window on the ground floor and struck the kitchen wall. Wood work and frosted glass were hot to touch. The inside brick wall was warm. The sun went through the home and laid dazzling stripes on the exposed staircase" (Naipaul 572). Naipaul used words like "Sun" and "dazzling" in his description of the house, words that clearly reveal Mr. Biswas's happiness and sense of fulfillment. Later, Mr. Biswas discovers many flaws in the house, but the sense of satisfaction that he owns a house is there which saves him from the identity crisis and secures his existence.

Naipaul in his novel, very beautifully presents how a person runs for a house. He beautifully presents the importance of house in one's life. House is not only a matter of shelter in life but a prominent need of one's life. It becomes an emblem of personal identity within the world of alienation. And this very identity is a matter of existence for the displaced people. Kumar Porag underlines "the house is not just a matter of getting shelter from heat, cold or rain. In fact it is an imposition of order and carving, out of another selfhood within the heterogeneous and fragmented society of Trinidad" (Naipaul 72). Mr. Biswas's struggle to achieve identity and independence in a colonial set up seems to have failed but despite the death in debt and last days of his son Anand, Mr. Biswas has in fact triumphed.

To conclude, one must claim that "house" is used in the novel as a symbol of identity which Mr. Biswas searches throughout his life rather than escape from it. Naipaul in the novel suggests that, displaced people like Mr. Biswas must face identity crisis which brings sufferings in their life. At the same time, it is the identity crisis which stands as a threat to their existence and this is also true for Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas searches for his own identity so that he can understand his own place in the world. His shifting from Hanuman House to Green vale to Shorthills to Port of Spain to own a house is the testimony of struggle to get relief from the identity crisis and to make his existence free from any kind of threat. Indeed, his heroism lies in his self-respect

and integrity. He dies contended man. By achieving a place he tries to emancipate himself from the feeling of alienation and tries to find an identity. Thus Naipaul has artistically portrayed the plight of the Indian immigrant in West India. Mr. Biswas's search for his identity concludes when he achieves his identity in the form of house.

Limitations

The present study is confined only to the identity crisis of Mr. Biswas in the text of *A House for Mr. Biswas* though there are some other issues and areas like hybridity, diaspora, Marxism and so on. The study encounters some limitations and shortcomings with regard to unavailability of time, information, literature and other related materials.

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