

## Theme of Exile in V.S Naipaul's Novel 'A House for Mr. Biswas'

Dr. Manisha Dwivedi

H.O.D (English) Dr. C. V Raman University Bilaspur, C.G. (India)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study V.S Naipaul's A House for Mr Biswas as a literature of exile by focusing on the struggle of the main protagonist Mohan Biswas who lives in the state of exile. Exile is the state of being away from home, often by force. Most of Naipaul's works deals with the theme of exile. His works reflect his state of mind and his famous novel A House for Mr Biswas deals with the theme of exile in detail, which reflects Naipaul's own state of alienation and self-exile. A House for Mr Biswas is autobiographical in nature as it is inspired by the story of Naipaul's father. Mr. Biswas's only desire is to belong somewhere and to attain selfhood. Through the character of Mr. Biswas, Naipaul tries to describe his own feelings of displacement and exile. This paper critically analyze the theme of exile in Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas.

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### 1. Introduction

The concept of exile is one of the prominent issues in the literature of modern era. Oxford Dictionary defines exile as an "enforced removal from one's native land," it can also mean "expatriation" or prolonged absence from one's native land, endured by compulsion of circumstances or voluntarily undergone for any purpose. There is a kind of exile which is different from general definition of exile. In the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Baudelaire redefined the meaning of exile by including internal exile as a manifestation of the condition. This displacement excludes a physical uprooting and is strictly internal. In addition to this acquired layer of meaning, the question of exile is complicated further by the modern author's assumed distance from the rest of the community. The modern version of exile becomes inextricably linked with the already alienated condition of modern man and the modern world. Internal exile is a form of exile that many writers face. It is the most damaging exile as in this state the exiles feels alienated from a society and lacks sense of belonging.

The modern diasporic Indian writers can be classified into two categories in terms of dealing with the theme of exile. The first one is those who have spent a part of their life in India and have carried the baggage of their native land offshore thus deals with physical exile and its impact. The other category includes those who have been born and brought up since childhood outside India. They have had a view of their country only from the outside as an exotic place of their origin and find themselves rootless. V.S Naipaul is one among such writers who deals with the theme of exile in a sense of rootless.

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in Chaguanas, Trinidad on August 7, 1932. He is an Indian Brahmin uprooted from the land of his ancestors. His grandfather migrated to Trinidad as an indentured labourer. He had migrated from India (particularly Benares in Uttar Pradesh which is now called Varanasi) to teach the Indian cane-workers of Trinidad. His father, Seepersad (1906-53), was a journalist and a good literary writer too. The family moved to Port of Spain, where Naipaul attended Queen's Royal College, Trinidad. He was awarded Trinidad government scholarship in 1948. With the

help of the same, he studied literature in England at University College, Oxford in 1950. Naipaul was knighted in 1989 / 1990 by the Royal family. He has won many awards and accolades to his credit for his brilliance that is manifest in his works. He is a 1971 Booker Prize winner for his novel *In A Free State* (1971) won the Nobel Prize in literature in 2001.

He lives as an expatriate in England because of his self-made exile and travelled across about which he wrote in his fictional and non-fictional works.

His works show a deep concern for the cultures of the colonized countries, the socio-political and cultural history of India and the economic conditions of a few Eastern Countries passing through a period of transition from colonial dominion to independence. Most of his early works have been instrumental in placing the society of Trinidad on the literary map of English speaking world. The works afterwards have projected him as a journalist, a successful novelist, a keen writer of travelogue and a great master in the art of nonfiction novels. Some of the major known works of Naipaul are *A House For Mr Biswas*, *In a Free State*, *A Bend in the River* and *The Enigma of Arrival*.

Naipaul is often known for talking about displacement and rootlessness. His choice of themes refers to his state of mind. Despite staying almost twenty-seven years at Wiltshire Cottage in London, he feels himself an alien and outsider there, as he said in one of his interview: "London is my metropolitan centre; it is my commercial centre and yet I know that it is a kind of italicise limbo and that I am a refugee in the sense that I am always peripheral. One's concerns are not the concerns of the local people" (Joshi 84). Naipaul himself said, —To take an interest in a writer's work is, for me, to take an interest in his life; one interest follows automatically on the other ( *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad*, 212). Therefore, it can be said that Naipaul's works and his life reflects each other.

Naipaul's writings have always focused on the loneliness, sense of exile and alienation. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is one of the most personal of the novels by Naipaul. It was published in 1961 and was first of Naipaul's novels' to achieve worldwide

success. The character of Mr. Mohun Biswas is inspired by his father – Seepasad Naipaul. The house, in the title, is an assertion of his identity. —Since the days of Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, man has been looking for a house; this primal search for shelter has become so much deeply entrenched that it has turned out to be an archetypal aim of all individuals. (*V S Naipaul: A Literary Response to the Nobel Laureate*, 83)

The story of Mr Biswas is about alienation, about belonging to a particular society yet living in “exile” from it in his unrealised ambitions. the novel reflects Naipaul's father's life and writings, but he also draws from his own experience of exile to create Biswas sense of alienation and estrangement in the colony that he could not leave but which the author did. It is also based on Naipaul's father's short story, —*Mohun*. It is an autobiographical work that draws upon an experience totally based on layered levels of alienation and exile.

The novel begins with the fact that Mr. Mohun Biswas, a journalist who lived on Sikkim Street in the St. James district of Port of Spain (the capital of weeks before he died. Before his death, he had been ill for quite some time, spending so long at the hospital and recuperating at his home that, eventually, the paper was forced to let him go, giving him three months' notice and a complementary lifetime subscription.

The entire life of Mohun Biswas was, actually, filled with misfortune (and the death even was tragic and untimely). He was born in reverse position and had six fingers in his hand and due to these signs; Pundit Sitaram who made his horoscope predicted that he would be a spendthrift and a lecher with an unlucky sneeze. He also predicted that Mohun would be responsible for the death of his parents, that he would “eat up his father and mother”(12), and warned that his father should not see his face until twenty-one days of his birth. Later in his life, he was often reminded of this prediction made by Pundit, and it always increased the bitterness that already pervaded his heart and made him feel more miserable. It further aggravated his sense of loneliness. While he was only a boy, his brothers, Pratap and Prasad used to enjoy themselves by roaming around in the village, swimming into the ponds and rivers while he was compelled to stay at home, where the only option for him was to play with his sister Dehuti. Thus he was alienated even from his family. Often he used to crave to see the outside world, to roam freely like others. But for him “life was unpleasant only because the Pundit had forbidden him to go near ponds and rivers” (18). After the death of his father he was admitted to a school but here he was regularly flogged by his teacher Mr. Lal, who once “ordered him to write I AM AN ASS on the blackboard” (46). Thus the constant humiliation and physical and mental abuse casted negative impact on his personality and gradually he developed a kind of animosity towards people and became more isolated and lonely. After studying here for six years, Biswas was sent to Pundit Jairam to learn religious scriptures and to get training for the profession of a pundit. His sense of self- respect got hurt when he was flogged and ill treated by Pundit Jairam. While expelling him from his house, Pundit Jairam spoke in a very harsh and cruel manner “You will never make a pundit. I was talking the other day to Sitaram who read your horoscope. You killed your father. I do not want you to do that to me” (55).After

that he goes to work in a rum shop run by his aunt Tara's brother-in-law. There, he is wrongfully accused of stealing a dollar. So, he again leaves the place and joins one of his school friends in the sign-writing business as at school Biswas developed a talent for lettering which helped him becoming a sign-writer.

For the same, he happens to go to Hanuman House. It is the home of the Tulsis. Somehow, he happens to marry Shama, the sixteen-year-old daughter of Mrs. Tulsi. He is also expected to join the family and live there by working on the land with the other members of the family. It is a large, very large joint family. Here he was expected to merge his personal identity with Tulsis in exchange to food and shelter that he receives. But this was not an easy task for him. He felt trapped. His instant reaction “ now he was married. Nothing in the world except death could change that,” (92) explain his mental state. He is not happy there. He rebels immediately. But, unfortunately, he is without any money or position of his own. So, he finds himself dependent on the Tulsis.

Mr Biswas could not develop healthy marital relationship with his wife Shama, even when he was a newly married groom, “following his policy of caution, he had not attempted to establish any relation with her” (92). Later he returned to his house in Pagots. Then his aunt Tara visited Hanuman house and after her return, Biswas asked her whether she liked Shama, her reply that it was none of her business to decide that, hurt Mr. Biswas, for it “emphasized his loneliness” (103). Later, on the same evening, as he peddled towards Hanuman House, he was so unhappy that “ he wondered how many nights he would spend behind the closed façade of Hanuman House” (103). As he had no other option he returned to Hanuman House but here everybody except Shama was a stranger to him and often he would feel depressed as “it was a strain, living in a house full of people and talking to one person alone” (107) Thus all these incidents made Biswas feel more and more lonely.

While all other Tulsison-in-laws have accepted this situation, throughout his life Biswas made serious efforts to revolt against it. Their differences of opinion and ideology created wide gap between them and he used to feel himself all alone in that large family—even Shama, his wife, would not share his problems. The indifference of Shama intensified his alienation. Once, when he was brutally beaten by Govind, in the presence of Shama, she neither tried to intervene nor consoled him after the incident, rather “she maintained her martyr's attitude throughout...”(138) From her appearances and gestures she made him to feel guilty, as if only he was responsible for the entire episode. Had he just one person, just one person to whom he could reveal his heart, he might have felt less isolated. But he was destined to suffer in isolation.

Mr. Biswas' only desire was to live according to the desire of his heart but he had neither money, nor job, so he felt enormous pressure on him “to become a Tulsi” (99), to merge his identity into the Tulsidom. Yet with his unflinching spirit, he somehow managed his calm and even the worst circumstances could not break him down. Every effort of Mr. Biswas to become self -dependent was curbed down mercilessly. When he revealed his heart to Govind, another son-in-law that he

would like to earn for himself, "to paddle his own canoe" (108), he immediately revealed it to Seth and it antagonized everybody in the family against him. Seth rebuked him in the presence of everybody:

*We want somebody to work on the estate. Is nice to keep these things in the family. And what you say? You want to paddle your own canoe. 'Look at him!' Seth said to the hall 'Biswas the peddler. It runs in the family.' Seth said, 'They tell me your father was a great diver. But where has all these peddling got you so far? (112)*

Biswas was then, compelled to work at the estate at Green Vale to act as an overseer for Mrs. Tulsi's powerful brother-in-law. The work does not suit him. He constantly feels persecuted by the labourers under him. He also suffers a mental breakdown. Here he remained in such a pathetic condition that at times he undergoes a strange mindset and once at the time of this fury, when his wife Shama sent a message that she was bringing the children there for a few days, he immediately indulged in all kinds of negative thoughts. Naipaul describes it in a poignant manner:

*Mr Biswas waited for them with dread. On the day they were to arrive he began to wish for some accident that would prevent their coming. But he knew there would be no accident. If anything was to happen he had to act. He decided that he had to get rid of Anand and Savi and himself, in such a way that the children would never know who had killed them. All morning he was possessed of visions in which he cutlasses, poisoned, strangled, burned, Anand and Savi; so that even before they came his relationship with them had been perverted. About Myna and Shama he didn't care; he did not wish to kill them (284-85).*

Later, during his stay with Anand he tells him "I am not your father. God is your father.... I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know." (291) It explains the turbulent mental condition Biswas was passing through. He found himself totally incapable to establish any emotional bond with his family members and that further intensified his alienation.

He has to return to Hanuman House because the house he had built was destroyed by a storm. He had to have it recovered. he felt himself all alone, trapped and confined in one room. Here he remained alienated throughout his stay, often his wife Shama found him muttering that he was "trapped" in a 'hole'. 'Trap', she heard him say over and over. 'That's what your family do to me. Trap me in this hole'" (232)

As he is unable to confide on anybody, his inability to establish relation with other members of the family made him more isolated. The members of the Tulsi clan were dull, the Tulsidom is "founded on a system of classic slavery, food and security are bartered for independence," (Chakroberty 47). somehow Biswas could not adjust with it. At the Hanuman house his status was that of a total stranger as " he was troublesome and disloyal, and could not be trusted. He was weak and therefore contemptible" (104).

Thus all the time while he remained at Hanuman House he received only "aggrieved and aggressive stares" (151). If he had to accommodate with the rules of Hanuman House it "would be to stoop to the state of a slave." Therefore he resists it with all his power. He struggles up to the last to "release himself from the clutches of a stifling and suffocating world, symbolized by Hanuman House" (Chakroberty 46). He remained a stranger even till the end.

Again for his livelihood, he leaves the Tulsis and goes to stay with his sister in Port of Spain. He finds some work as a journalist on the *Sentinel* newspaper. This also leads to his reconciliation with the Tulsis. He also goes to live with his family at Mrs. Tulsi's house in the city, which she also shares with her younger son, Owad, till the time, he is sent abroad for study.

A close relationship develops between Mr. Biswas and his son Anand. He also takes a growing interest in his education. Meanwhile the Tulsis move to an estate at Shorthills. Mr. Biswas is also persuaded to join them. The Tulsi family begins to disintegrate under new social and economic pressures. As a result, Mr. Biswas leaves them and returns to Mrs. Tulsi's crowded house in the city. He lives there until he moves to his own house in Sikkim Street. He also had a fierce quarrel with Mrs. Tulsi and Owad.

His job at the *Sentinel* also changes to that of social investigator of 'Deserving Destitutes'. He is given a government post in a Social Welfare Department. He has all his hopes in Anand. He also wins an exhibition to the prestigious Queen's College in the city. Meanwhile the house, Mr. Biswas has bought in Sikkim Street, leads him to heavy debt. There are two reasons for that. First is the house is over-priced; and the second is it badly in need of repairing. Though there is a major loss and over-pricing, Mr. Biswas is happy that he possesses his own house and land.

The happiness of Mr. Biswas does not last long. The government department, he was transferred to, is dispersed. So, he returns to the *Sentinel*. But after some time he is put on half-pay; and eventually he is dismissed. He also develops heart-trouble.

His son Anand is now studying at a university in England. He has gone there on a scholarship. But he does not return during his father's illness. Fortunately for Mr. Biswas his daughter, Savi, comes back. She also gets a well-paid job. But, the poor fellow had suffered enough meanwhile and so, he dies suddenly. He is also given a traditional Hindu cremation. Thereafter, his wife and children return to the empty house.

It was his sense of alienation that motivated him to search for a house. House was a great need in his life, as it becomes a symbol of personal identity, solace, self-respect and independence, the elements he was deprived of throughout his life. Ultimately when he purchased a house at Sikkim Street, it brought an end to his constant struggle. This house, though heavily loaned, yet here he was not at the mercy of anybody, rather he was his own master. He experienced the sense of belongingness for the first time in his life. It evoked sense of security in him and strengthened his decaying relationship with the family. Here, he "found himself in his own house, on his

own half lot of land, his own portion of earth”(2). It was an end of his exile and alienation, now he was perfectly at peace and at last died gracefully in his own house.

## 2. Conclusion

Naipaul is autobiographical in relating his experiences of early life to his novels. His sense of loneliness, alienation, the feelings in a state of exile, the hindrances of exploitation, the social injustices, the tug of war between the Eastern Hindu communities and the western Christian community, the transition from a feudal world to a colonial capitalist world are the themes of his novels. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, his relationship with his father is reflected as an image of his real life. Displacement, loss and social castration are the major themes which relate the then immigrant society with some of the personal events. Migration in huge numbers accounted for the alienation of culture on a new land. On account to provide cheap labour, the workers migrated from around the Indian sub-continent to Trinidad and Tobago as the slaves from Africa to Europe and America. The cause of slavery and the plight of the indentured migrants became the themes of the novels of the writers like Naipaul. As a writer Naipaul gradually comes to understand the need to unify the man and the writer within him. It is under the motivation of this urge for self-realization that Naipaul visits India. Since his early childhood Naipaul had retained a vision of an imaginary India. But now he fails to 'rediscover' his identity in India because of the obvious gap that has come up between the imaginary land of his childhood and the land as he sees it now. The loss is traced in his changed temperament, vision and world-view from the 1960s onwards. Henceforth in his novels the novelist's vision seems to get increasingly bleaker. 332 If we look at three major aspects of an exile's life his crisis of identity, his position in relation to his homeland and the aspect of happiness and fulfilment in his personal life -- we can perhaps guess how over the period Naipaul's vision gets darkened. In the novels of his early literary phase, we note a yearning in the characters, for a lost homeland; still the characters are able to successfully acculturate to the changing reality and it is one of the causes behind the core of joy in these novels. In the novels of his middle phase, the characters come to attain their various goals only temporarily as at another further stage of their lives they eventually lose nearly everything they had achieved earlier. The aching sense of 'loss' almost incapacitates these characters to attain happiness and success in their lives.

The colonial man's reactions to alienation, disorder and displacement form the central concern of V.S. Naipaul's major fiction. His characters are caught in a complex and paradoxical situation from which they try to escape. The reality of colonial

and post-colonial societies as represented in the novels of V.S. Naipaul, himself a post colonialist, has often evoked mixed responses from his critics. Yet, the West Indies has been the subject of most of his fiction and non-fiction. Naipaul has acknowledged the influence of his background and reveals that one is really shaped by everything that occurs when one is young. He thinks that he was greatly made by his childhood and naturally by Trinidad. Naipaul's own life was characterized by rootlessness and alienation. As an East Indian in Trinidad, or as an East Indian West Indian Englishman in India, or as an East Indian West Indian in England, Naipaul has always been restless and displaced, a condition which his unique East Indian West Indian background can explain. Living in isolation in London, through necessity Naipaul remains twice displaced - from India the land of his forefathers and the West Indies to which his ancestors were brought as indentured labourers. Yet, Naipaul remains a citizen of the world, his novels being a telling testimony of the universal predicament of disorder that governs the Third World post-colonial societies today. Naipaul's indictment of the moral, social, 191 cultural and political corruption that existed in these post-colonial islands in the absence of any viable alternative forms of governance, earned him the epithet of a prophet of doom and gloom in Trinidad. The reality of the harrowing history of the Caribbean is seen by Naipaul as it is. A new identity based on order and creative regeneration can emerge only if these existent facts are acknowledged and remedied. Place and displacement are recurrent themes in post-colonial literature. In *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Mimic Men*, there is precisely this personal quest for meaning in a world that is perverse and alien. Self-knowledge cannot be based upon theoretical assumptions. The object of self-knowledge is the individual himself. Mr. Biswas and Ralph Singh, through their unique individual experiences, arrive at the means by which they discover their individuality and dignity. Naipaul's Mr. Biswas and Ralph Singh have shown that cultural displacement and dispossession need not necessarily lead to a pathological state of negation.

The concluding lines of the 'Prologue' express the theme:

"How terrible it would have been at this time, to be without it-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 unaccommodated." 6

Thus, the novel describes the struggle of the exile's desire to strike roots and attain an authentic selfhood. The sense of exile delineated in the story of Mr. Biswas, shows the fictional representation of Naipaul's own predicament.

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