



An Echo of Nostalgia in Exile Literature: A Study of V.S Naipaul’s “A House for Mr. Biswas”

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Abstract

This paper examines the pervasive theme of exile and its psychological ramifications in *A House for Mr. Biswas* by V. S. Naipaul, situating the text within the broader framework of twentieth-century diasporic literature. It foregrounds the emotional and existential dimensions of displacement such as alienation, fragmentation, and identity crisis through the lived experiences of the protagonist, Mohun Biswas. Drawing upon Vijay Mishra’s concept of the “diasporic imaginary,” the paper positions Naipaul within the context of the Plantation Diaspora, emphasizing the inherited trauma and cultural dislocation of indentured Indian communities in the Caribbean. The study interrogates the dialectic of “home” and “exile” as interdependent constructs, where home emerges not merely as a physical space but as a metaphor for identity, belonging, and psychological stability. Through Mr. Biswas’s persistent quest for a house, the novel symbolically articulates the individual’s struggle for autonomy and self-definition within an oppressive socio-cultural milieu represented by the Tulsi household. The paper further engages with existentialist thought, drawing parallels with Albert Camus’ notion of the absurd and modern man’s estrangement in a meaningless universe. By analyzing Naipaul’s narrative as both autobiographical and socio-historical, the paper argues that the text functions as an “absent epic” of the Indian diaspora, capturing the tensions between cultural inheritance and modern aspirations. Ultimately, Mr. Biswas’s attainment of a house, despite material and emotional precarity, becomes an allegory for the reclamation of dignity, identity, and agency in a fractured world. The paper concludes that Naipaul transforms exile from a condition of loss into a creative and existential impetus, redefining it as central to the modern human condition.

Keywords: Exile, Diaspora, Identity, Alienation, Home, Naipaul, Plantation Diaspora, Existentialism

This paper entitled “An echo of nostalgia in Exile Literature: A study of V.S Naipaul’s “A House for Mr. Biswas” analyses the psychological forces viz. repugnance and anguish which creates the feeling of alienation and fragmentation within a person in a diasporic world. This paper explores the subject of exile in the twentieth century literature. In the light of Naipaul’s novel “A House for Mr. Biswas”, it attempts to examine the theme of isolation, frustration, identity-crisis and how an individual tries to locate a place of his own to assert his identity. From the critical perspectives of Vijay Mishra’s essay “In the diasporic imaginary: theorizing the Indian Diaspora”, I shall substantiate my argument that how V.S Naipaul belongs to the Plantation Diaspora. It also makes an in-depth and insightful study of Mr. Biswas’s existential predicaments and complications, exploring those crucial circumstances where he being alienated in the Caribbean society finds himself in an utter wretched state. A humble effort has been made in the paper to bring forth Naipaul’s advancement from a regional writer to one with more worldwide allure.

With the falling apart of traditional assumptions, many writers had come to share a sense of the inanity of man’s situation, a sense of “the divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting...” Camus views Man as an



exile in a meaningless universe: “In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile.” (A Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, cited in The glossary of literary terms, ed. M.H Abrams,p.86). Eugene Ionesco expresses the same feeling in an essay on Kafka: “Cut off from his religious ,metaphysical,and transcendental roots, man is lost...”.

To understand the real meaning of the words Exile and Home, we must see them in relation with each other. In a way they are different facets of the same truth. Home is just not a place with walls, doors and windows, but a place where one belongs, where one grows up learning the many ironies of one’s life. It trains our mind for the real world that awaits us beyond the wooden door. It tells us how to enjoy happiness and face tough times too. In a way, home is love, joy and security. But on the other hand, Exile is just opposite. It snatches away all the freedom and belongingness that one has received from his home making him lead his life in a kind of seclusion. Although the home is often considered as an ideal concept where the sun is always bright and the birds always chirp, but it is rarely felt so. In a way Exile has greater power to motivate that person for his unfulfilled desire. It’s because such seclusion or solitude often leaves them thinking only about their aim. That is why the walls of prison have seen so many great writers and social reformers than those of ideal home. This love of home and torment of exile are not new but go hand in hand right from biblical age. Adam and Eve were banished from their first abode of bliss, similarly in our own country; we have witnessed the lament for the lost ‘Ram Rajya’ and we all have seen what followed it. Thus it’s this combined effect of the love for home and the torment of being estranged from it that finds its way deep into the roots of human psyche. If we look back, when travel and communication were not accessible to mankind and men lived in villages and towns in settled communities, “within the security of their own societies”, Exile was considered as a measure of political punishment. However as their knowledge of world widened, men left the security of their homes and started exploring different parts of several continents in order to advance both materially and economically. On the other hand there was another form of exile, which was more of a forced one rather than voluntary, caused by slavery, colonialism and war which ruined the lives of many innocents, disrupting their means of livelihood by uprooting them from their native lands. Thus we find modern man struggling to locate his roots, reluctantly accepting homelessness as the destined condition of his life. Where is home for the Tibetans or the Palestinians? What about those Indian Punjabis whose ancestral homes are now in Pakistan? The word Home stands for all that has been lost, in fact the harsher the experience of deracination, the more one yearns for his homeland. Hence, apart from being a solitary and exotic figure, the Exile has now become the type of modern man.

The theme of exile and alienation had been so predominant in twentieth century literature that it can be termed as the ‘literature of exile’. It is the same post world war period in which people were trying to cope up with the new evolving theories and were groping for self-definition too. Most of the renowned names in literature of that period were actually products of exile. To name a few, we can take the names of Conrad, Joyce, Beckett, Nabokov and of course V.S Naipaul. Some African and Jewish writers who brought forward the plight of the Negro and the Jew community are Baldwin, Bellow, Mailer and Malamud. They all shared the same sense of loss. With the power of his imagination, an exile writer reconstructs a surrogate homeland in order to compensate for what is lost in real life .As Salman Rushdie said, “It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back; even at the risk of being mutilated into pillars of self. It is obvious that there never can be a real and a factual reclamation of the lost homeland; it will always be a fictional one. The Expatriate literature creates, “fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.”(Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, Penguin books 1992 p.10).Hence, loss of homeland is not actually a loss but a permanent gain that aids the fictional world created by the author.



Being a Trinidadian by birth, Indian by ancestry, British by the virtue of his oxford education, V.S Naipaul is the product of a distinctive combination of circumstances who inherited the insecurities of the transplanted colonial having an ambiguous identity. Being a multi-layered international writer, the question of his identity generally crops up due to his immigrant background. But he has expressed his resentment over being labeled as a West Indian, Caribbean or Third World writer, as he said in an interview, “I have been breaking away from that tag all my life...It’s all the things I reject, It’s not me.”(*Discover Naipaul the American Way*).Naipaul fits in this new version of Indians, an anglicized model of the immigrant Hindus; who nonetheless, remains an outsider in London, because he cannot establish a bond with its society culturally or socially and in India because he is a ‘New World’ Hindu. Between 1840 and 1970, over a million Indians were transported to numerous British colonies and to Dutch Guiana (Surinam) as indentured laborers to work on sugar plantations. The ‘Sugar Diaspora’ (of South Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, Guiana and Surinam) emanated from the policy of Indenture. The history of this collective experience has been articulated in two ways: as positivist historiography that sensitively outlines the ‘truth’ conditions of the experience.(Tinker; Lal); and as radically interrogating the trauma of the actual experience of plantation life so as to represent the people of the old Indian Diaspora as “creatures of peasant flesh squelching through mud and cane field, bearing about us the stench of fish and fresh blood”.(Dabydeen 9).The kind of experience Dabydeen talks about, encapsulates the lives of people of old Indian Diaspora . V.S Naipaul belongs to this Plantation Diaspora.

In “The Diasporic Imaginary: theorizing the Indian Diaspora”, Vijay Mishra meditates on the ruptured identity of the old Indian Plantation Diaspora. In Naipaul’s writings, Mishra reads the inherent contradictions of the old plantation Diaspora’s identity, as a writer of liminal society, his angst is very much visible in his works .Mishra opines that Naipaul is haunted by the trauma of his indentured ancestors and can’t get rid of it. His works therefore need to be seen as allegories of Diasporas rather than of nations which Fredrick Jameson had suggested. His works reflect old Indian Diaspora’s readiness to assimilate in the grand European narratives of modernity. Mishra calls “A House for Mr. Biswas” an ‘absent epic’ of the Diaspora, similar to a sort of diasporic “Ramayana”. The story of exile of Lord Rama enamored Mishra, because the latter too is identified by loss and suffering. That’s why his epigraph at the beginning of the book consists of a couplet from Tulsi Ramayana, along with quotations from A House for Mr. Biswas and The Ground beneath Her Feet. He considers “A House for Mr. Biswas” as a sort of “bedraggled” epic of the Indian Diaspora, full of dispirited and dolorous characters and depraved settings. Thus, Mishra lays out for us a powerful way of (re)reading Naipaul by placing him in “a Diaspora poetics of classic capital”.

In a world characterized by Diaspora and disorder, the intense aspiration for ‘a home’ is symbolic of the quest for roots. A home here doesn’t simply stands for a concrete structure and one’s dwelling abode instead it’s to be deciphered as a ‘metaphor for one’s own identity’, individual as well as national. As Vikram Seth very beautifully summarizes this facet of an exile’s life: “I envy those who have a house of their own,/who can say their feet Rest/on what is theirs alone” and then have an assurance all his life “That things will not revert to that/ those I love may keep/what I have kept.”(Vikram Seth, *The Humble Administrator’s Garden*, Delhi: O.U.P 1987.p.37). The indefinite article ‘A’ used in the title “A House for Mr. Biswas” connotes the protagonist’s desire to belong somewhere and to have a meaningful existence. A House for Mr. Biswas speculates the lives of Indian immigrants settled in Caribbean who have to constantly tussle in trying to integrate into society while not forgetting their roots. Described as a failed pundit and an accidental journalist, Mr. Biswas is personified with lots of ancestral inputs. This novel shows a life from the alienated, completely rural community of the early twentieth century through its creeping contact with a larger society and the text reaches its culmination point when Mr. Biswas rises to become a journalist and ‘house



owner' in downtown multi-racial port of Spain. The novel, apart from being a success story of immigrant's life and New World assimilation also traces the failure of Hindu culture to remain alive in the West Indies. It's a study of the tumult in Hindu society in Trinidad, both the ossification of a culture into rituals and the loss of traditional values within a multi-racial society. Through a series of evocative metaphors, Naipaul examines the tension of an individual caught in such a perplexing situation. The story of a fatherless, homeless child of six to becoming a father of four, settled in a house of his own at the time of his death is not merely a story of Mohun Biswas- a Trinidadian born Indian, but also the social history of the Indian community in Trinidad. That's why Dr. R.A Singh remarks that Naipaul's writings acquire "three dimensional structure-historical, social and psychological."(Singh, R.A., Ibid. 2.)It's a partly autobiographical text as the character of Mr. Biswas is modeled on the figure of Naipaul's father, Seepersad, who was also a journalist in the Trinidadian Guardian, and who died at the age of forty-seven in almost the same material and mental condition as Mr. Biswas and Anand who represents his own literary ego. The novel delineates the trauma of a tainted and troubled past as it analyzes the sense of alienation and pangs of exile experienced by the characters. Mr. Biswas doesn't uphold the conventional Hindu ideologies and feels completely isolated, being the lone fighter against the conservative system and its sterile, obsolete customs and rituals. As Deodat explains, "The stagnant decaying Hindu world; the poverty and chaos of the Creole society; and the painful struggle of one man to rise above both, are all rendered with the authenticity that only historical truths will allow, and the artistry that only a truly talented writer can generate."(Deodat, Ravindradat. *V.S Naipaul's fiction, 1954-71, Fragmentation and Rootlessness*) Naipaul constructs the plot in such a way that Mr. Biswas is married to Shama, a gullible, orthodox and little-educated daughter of the Tulsis. The Tulsis emblemize the then existent, narrow, dogmatic, irrational beliefs and customs of Trinidad Hindu society. They are so-called pious and devoted Brahmins who are staunch believers of the conventions of Hindu cultural system. They also belong to the upper strata of the society i.e. the landed aristocracy in the Hindu community whereas Mr. Biswas belongs to a laborers' class. As a result, Mr. Biswas has to face a lot of trouble due to cultural clashes and social conflicts which makes his life even more complicated because he is unable to adjust himself in the antagonistic surroundings. As Gordon Rohlehr remarks: "Hanuman house reveals itself not as a coherent reconstruction of the clan, but as a slave society, erected by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who need workers to help rebuild their tottering empire .They therefore exploit the homelessness and poverty of their fellow Hindus and reconstruct a mockery of the clan which functions only because they have so completely grasped the psychology of a slave system.(Rohlehr, Gordon, "*Character and Rebellion in A House for Mr. Biswas*",op.cit.,87) Thus a House becomes a minimum basic necessity for him that would alleviate his misery. Impecunious, months of illness and despair, dying at the age of 46 in his irretrievably mortgaged house, yet he is struck "by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it, to walk into his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wishes, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noise except those of his family[...].How terrible it would have been ,at this time, to be without it, to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family, worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth, to have lived and died as one who had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated".(Naipaul, V.S. *A House for Mr. Biswas*) Naipaul here depicts the struggle of a working class individual who dreams of acquiring his own house at least before his death. Hence, Mr. Biswas's relentless fight to process his own 'house' and steer clear of the grip of the Tulsis's household is seen to parallel man's need to develop a way of life which is uniquely his.(Cooke 1980:73)

Thus, V.S Naipaul's works deal with the worldwide crisis of homelessness and the individual as an exile in an alien universe, he takes an account of both the causes and consequences of the situation. Naipaul's novel constructs a dwelling place for his autobiographical self in such a way that it brings *autos* and *bios* (self and life) complexly



together. But knowingly or unknowingly, whether he's writing a travelogue or novel, he tends to trace a self-conscious symptomatic response to the need to discover an appropriate literary form to frame a 'psychic and symbolic sense of homelessness.'(Ball 2003:90).His writings reflect the world of twentieth century and revolve around themes of alienation, fragmentation of the social order and a bleak vision of emptiness and meaninglessness of despair and ennui. V.S Naipaul's magnum opus, "A House for Mr. Biswas" sheds light on the experiences of indenture, migration and deracination with respect to Trinidad. However, the problem of alienation, exile and displacement are addressed by Naipaul with a positive approach as Mr. Biswas doesn't rebel against established customs because of social or political beliefs. In fact his revolt is against any value system that tries to subdue his individuality. Mr. Biswas's relentless struggle to gain freedom and dignity as echoed in his yearnings to own a house becomes an allegory of the attempt to emancipate oneself from determinist dependence.

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