



## **Diasporic Longing for Home: A Study of *A House of M. Biswas***

**Hariom Rawat**, Research Scholar  
Department of English, Gurukul Kangri  
(Deemed to be University) Haridwar.  
hariomrawat1993@gmail.com

### ***Abstract***

V. S. Naipaul's *A House of Mr Biswas* depicts Mohan Biswas's arduous journey to have his own house. This sense of belonging that a house has is a typical desire of the diasporic people. Suffering from a sense of rootlessness as they leave their culture behind, diasporic individuals are always in search of an anchor (especially a home) that they can clutch onto. It is also evident in how they tend to overdo religious rituals and rites more religiously than what is practised on the land they left behind. However, at the same time, they have a strong desire to get adopted and adapt to the culture of their new place. The paper "Diasporic Longing for Home: A Study of *A House of M. Biswas*" explores how Naipaul, through Mohun Biswas' desire for a home, represents the diasporic sensibilities.

### **Keywords**

*A House of Mr Biswas*, Diaspora, Hybridity, Mohun Biswas, Naipaul, Rootlessness.

Notable for being V. S. Naipaul's first work to garner international praise, *A House of M. Biswas* deals with an Indo-Trinidadian named Mohun Biswas. He wants to possess his own house, but he ends up being subjugated in the Tulsi family after marrying into theirs. For forty-six years, Mohun Biswas has fought for freedom. After his father drowned, he was moved from house to house and longed for a permanent domicile. After being dependent on the Tulsi family through his marriage, he rebels and tries to break free by taking up a series of jobs. Although it borrows some details from Naipaul's father's life, the book is primarily a postcolonial analysis of a colonial era that has long since passed. William Walsh summarises:



“The substance of the novel has to do with the transformation of Mr Biswas, a slave to place, history and biography, into a free man, the signand realisationof that emancipation being his house” (Walsh 31-32).

Walsh's comment above accurately describes Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas is an exile adjusting to a foreign culture while striving to establish his own identity about his heritage. This is a common struggle for diasporic people who want to be respected in their new home. Those adopted into a diaspora constantly strive to find a balance between themselves and the nation they left behind. Because of cultural differences, however, this process never ends; diasporic people cannot just abandon their own culture (the culture of their home country) and expect to thrive; they must also immerse themselves in the culture of their chosen homeland. Thus, Homi Bhabha's "hybridity" - "not one, yet double" - describes the mental and psychological manifestations of being a part of both cultures concurrently experienced by diasporic individuals. The exiled man in this diasporic context perpetually seeks comfort and stability by asserting his identity. Mr Biswas is one of the finest examples of this type of diasporic individual caught in the gamut of cultural conflict that encompasses his whole being.

The novel primarily takes place in an Indian setting. The protagonists and antagonists in these books wear traditional Indian garb and have mostly Indian names. On the other hand, it is incredibly diasporic because it portrays Indians and their cultural issues in an alien environment, and the protagonists strive to convey their diasporic sensibility by always claiming to be Indian. People in diasporic situations sometimes feel conflicting emotions: longing for the homeland they left behind and eagerness to settle down in a new place that offers a better life. In this paradox of choice, all diasporic people are entangled in a web that prevents them from living fully as natives of their adopted country while also preventing them from achieving their deepest ambitions. In this light, the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha has essential things to say regarding diasporic life since diasporic people have "hybrid" lives. V. S. Naipaul also addresses this liminality of diasporic life in his writings.



Almost every character in *A House of Mr Biswas* has an Indian name, including Bibi, Raghu, Mr Biswas, Dhari, Sitaram, Jairam, Tara, Padma, Shama, Pankaj Rai, Shivlochan, Sushila, Sumati, Savi, Moti, Seebaram, Pratap, Prasad, Dehuti, Ajodha, Mungroo, Tulsi, Bissoonydaye, Sadhu, Lakhan, Govind, Hari, Anand, etc., which implies that V. S. Naipaul was mainly attempting to handle an Indian setting, as his concern was to portray the Indians in the diasporic setup. We also notice that their jewellery and clothing are heavily Indian, which leads us to believe that their cultural formations and setup are still mostly Indian, even though they currently reside outside India. This is likely due to their efforts to preserve a heritage they have lost but often remember fondly.

They participate enthusiastically in Indian festivals and customs. Thus, it is clear that in describing the pundit Hari, Naipaul observes that Hari "never looked so happy as when he changed from estate clothes into a dhoti and sat... reading from some huge, ungainly Hindi book" (114). This provides more evidence that diasporic people experience psychological and emotional joy anytime they can participate in celebrations of their homeland's traditions and culture. Alluding to the diasporic people's "half-life," in which they are half Indian and half West Indian, Naipaul uses these benefits to make his case throughout the book. The people living in the diaspora constantly struggle with and worry about this duality.

While praising diasporic culture, Naipaul offers a satirical analysis of it to show how people in diaspora cling to traditions they have left behind in the hopes of clinging to what they perceive as their "homilies." According to the pundit, Mr. Biswas was born to wreak havoc on the Biswas family. So, to lessen the bad, the expert says —

"you must fill this brass plate with coconut oil - which, by the way, you must make yourself from coconuts you have collected with your own hands - and in the reflection on this oil, the father must see his son's face" (17).

Mr. Biswas is a down-and-out guy at the beginning of the book, yet he rises to greatness and falls short time and time again, much like most diasporic people. Attempts by him to demonstrate the dignity of a free man add intrigue to his life story. Despite its comedic moments,

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Naipaul's ironic declaration gives the work "a vision of the abyss" since it shows that the protagonist, a henpecked husband, tries to assert himself humorously throughout his life's journey.

Insinuating that Naipaul is parodying the setting, these kinds of emulations of the land's rites and conventions are essential to note that diasporic writers like Naipaul frequently employ such parodies to draw attention to how they naively cling to what they have left behind. One possible humorous element is that these rites are less seriously observed in India than among the diasporic population. To show how these rites have become meaningless to the diasporic population, Naipaul used parody and, by extension, ridicule. However, they insist on these traditions because they believe it will help them stay true to their heritage and identify as Indians in the broadest sense. As a result, Naipaul gives a detailed account of the diasporic culture's birth and funeral ceremonies throughout the book.

Readers are reminded of the Indian society's struggle to eradicate orthodox rituals by these characters' adherence to them; nonetheless, Indians in the West Indies cling to these orthodoxies in the belief that they help them preserve their homeland's culture. In his work, Naipaul aimed to highlight the absurdly precarious status of the Indian West Indian diaspora. Imagine this is just one part of the storey. When we learn that the Tulsis "did puja every day and celebrated every Hindu festival," it is clear that they are still a part of Indian culture and religion (244).

Even among Indians living in the diaspora, some rituals are observed daily to appease the gods and goddesses. They continue to cling to their purportedly genuine Indian religious identity despite decades of settlement in the West Indies; doing so gives them a feeling of belonging and identity. A sense of identity, fundamental to one's day-to-day functioning, is bestowed by belonging to a particular place. Like Mr. Biswas, who opposes idol worship at Tulsi's Hanuman House, we all need a place to belong to have a sense of identity.

According to some historians, like Naipaul's biographer Patrick French, the novel's protagonist, Mr Biswas, may have been based on Naipaul's father, who dealt with similar issues.

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While it is true that Mr Biswas does not believe in Hinduism and does not partake in any of its ceremonies, he does condemn idol worship and other aspects of Hinduism. One thing that stands out about the life of Indians in Trinidad is their strong feeling of Hinduism and Indianness.

One notable aspect of Trinidad's Indian population is the youthful spirit and eagerness to see the globe exhibited by the island's Indian youth. On the other hand, the older generation wished to return to their homeland, overstayed their welcome in the West Indies, and believed they had only been for a short time. Sandwiched between the old and the new generations, Mr Biswas is bewildered and has yet to learn where to turn for comfort. *A House for Mr Biswas* effectively portrays the Indian Trinidadians' conflicted feelings. This generation's ambivalence is so intense that it prevents them from returning to India, even when given the opportunity. It will never become a reality, yet the yearning is still there.

What follows as the most prominent feature of the narrative is that the protagonist, Mr Biswas, experiences both a material and psychological embodiment of his endeavour to construct a home for himself. The experience of relocation and disintegration is universal among exiles, and one way they cope is by constructing a home that is uniquely theirs. Because of the inherent sense of belongingness in a home, the novel's protagonist, a foreign national who experiences feelings of displacement in her new environment, strives to build a house that will fulfil this need. To rephrase, he is trying to escape his current situation as a Tulsis dependent. In the words of Gordon Rohlehr: "Independence is the ideal which Biswas seeks, and which he equates with identity" (88).

Conversely, his fixation on a house may represent his need for liberation from the stifling Tulsis environment. So, according to Meenakshi Mukherjee, "the unaccommodated man's repeated attempts to find a stable location in a ramshackle and random world" is the novel's central theme (Mukherjee 22). That is why it is possible to read *A House for Mr Biswas* as the chronicle of a man's never-ending struggle against the superstitions and conservatism of his Hindu family and the poverty and anarchy of his Creole community, both of which are emblematic of the post-colonial era. Naipaul displays brilliance when applying this topic to



multiple themes and levels. It is said that people who dwell at the Hanuman House “stood like an alien white fortress ... bulky impregnable and blank ... the side walls were windowless” (47). Nevertheless, no matter where his life's path led him, Mr Biswas was always reliant on the kindness of strangers: “For the next thirty-five years, he was to be a wanderer with no place he would call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsi” (40).

The narrative paints a moving picture of Mr Biswas's fight for genuine self-hood and survival in an unfamiliar setting. Mr Biswas's dogged resistance against the power that seeks to tame his uniqueness mirrors Naipaul's life, which was marked by exile and estrangement in Trinidad. Despite the exhaustion and length of his struggle, he has finally achieved a place he can call his home.

Mohun Biswas, who is trying to figure out who he is, moves from a small town to a larger one and from a joint to a nuclear family, but he needs some guidance tracing his heritage through all the upheaval. A town is a fictitious location, similar to how the individual is both a creation and a fixed object. Symbolic of the desire for an individual to establish a real identity, Naipaul portrays Mr Biswas's frantic battle to obtain his own house. While Mr. Biswas's life story exemplifies a respectable individual's uprising against despotism, the Tulsi family's interactions with the Port of Spain and its inhabitants—including the Christian girl Shekhar marries, Dorothy and Owad—illustrate the clash of two cultures. This cross-cultural encounter aims to demonstrate how the ancient Hindu traditions that the Hindus of Trinidad brought from India succumb to the pervasive Western culture. Western society has undeniably diminished the traditional Hindu culture, but it has not absorbed it. The Tulsi family is known for its strict adherence to tradition, but when Western influences spread, that rigidity starts to fracture. Mrs. Tulsi's brother Seth assists her as household ruler after her husband's death. Along with Mrs. Tulsi, Seth and Padma are residents of Hanuman House and enjoy an equally elevated social standing. Shekhar, the son of Tulsi, combines Christian practises with those of Hinduism.



Naipaul's journey of self-discovery and metamorphosis is reflected in his novels. He rejects his Caribbean upbringing, takes on a mask of mimicry in England, travels to India in quest of his ancestry, and, at last, builds an identity based on his multicultural heritage. The goal of bringing these two cultures together is to highlight the ancient Hindu traditions that the Hindus of India brought with them. Because of the overwhelming impact of Western civilisation, Trinidad has collapsed. Western society has undeniably diminished the traditional Hindu culture, but it has not absorbed it. However, Hanuman House embodies the essence of ancient Hinduism. Both for himself and for other immigrants, he speaks out. Among the novel's most prominent themes is cultural clash.

“For every puja, Mrs.Tulsi tried a different Pundit since no pundit could please her as well as Hari. Moreover, with no Pundit pleasing her, her faith yielded. She sent Sushila to burn candles in the Roman Catholic Church; she put a crucifix in her room; and had Pundit Tulsi’s grave cleaned for All Saints’ Day” (94).

The first wave of immigrants tried to uphold their religion's strictures, but the second wave blended Hindu and Christian rituals. The novel presents multiple examples of how traditional Hinduism is watered down. "A place of deep romance and endless delights..." is how the Tulsi store transforms during Christmas. Mrs. Tulsi's son-in-law, described as "ferociously Brahminical in an embroidered silk jacket" (56), performed the last rites upon Pundit Hari's death. Some have pointed out that the Tulsi family's structure is reminiscent of a slave culture.

With terrifying insight, Naipaul has represented the inhabitants of the house and societies plagued by neo-colonialism. Naipaul shows the society of Indian immigrants to be disintegrating. The novel's depiction of social spaces in Trinidad, where a culture of imitation and hybridity has taken root, demonstrates how these spaces are ever-changing, negotiating and hybridising to articulate social meanings and identities within the context of diaspora. Against a backdrop devoid of norms and order, Mohun Biswas persists in fighting for his dignity. While he was a homeowner with a house full of problems, he had his most tremendous success in his later years. Home is where one finds safety, one's sense of self, and the ability to assert one's dignity. The acquisition of a home finally ends his protracted search for self-discovery. Opening a window into the history of a society that is intrinsically and endemically sick, the novel retraces Biswas's

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journey from childhood scabs and sores to the ultimate heart problem and death by heart attack. Along the way, it shows how neglect and poverty mark Biswas out for failure and an uncertain future.

The diasporic writers' experiences of exile and alienation give them the strength to write about healing and to leave an indelible impression on readers. As a result, the story depicts the Hindu culture of Indian immigrants deteriorating in a cosmopolitan setting that consistently challenges the concept of a fixed cultural identity. One man's fight against "homelessness" is chronicled in *A House for Mr Biswas*. The themes of estrangement and lack of belonging predominate in diasporic literature; among English Caribbean authors, Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* stands out. His works explore perspectives on rootlessness and alienation from backwards rural societies to modern cities. The collapse of the Trinidadian society of Indian immigrants brought about by hybridity is vividly shown by Naipaul in *A House for Mr Biswas*. By showing how social spaces are continually being negotiated and hybridised, the book illustrates how dynamic and fluid these places are. It also reveals how identities and social meanings are articulated while living in the diaspora.

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