
IDENTITY CRISIS IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS*, AND *THE MIMIC MAN*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt in denying the fact that the concept of identity crisis in the postcolonial writings in the central and chief concern. With the advent of globalisation in the world, immigration of people from one country to another country has gained momentum for one reason or the others. Consequently, one can witness the emergence of multicultural land with the idea of diversity present in it. Taking into consideration V.S Naipaul's novels, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, one can witness the ideas of rootlessness and identity crisis emerging out of this work. The present paper also brings into light how the characters try to construct an identity by breaking the rootlessness in a colonial world. Undoubtedly, alienation and isolation are the themes that seem to filter through the minute reading of present novel. This work also reflects the fate of the indentured Indian labourers who, in search of some meanings in their lives, went to Caribbean islands. It is also an exploration of the challenges that these labourers faced and tried to overcome.

Keywords: Identity, postcolonial, crisis, quest, challenges, indenture.

It goes without saying that in the commonwealth literature West-Indian literature finds its pre-eminent and dominating position. In the study of literature, the cultural aspect is the central and chief concern. The most recurrent themes discussed in this type of literature include the themes of rootlessness, alienation and search for meaning which find the pivotal place in the Western Indian literature.

In order to explore the central motif of quest for identity crisis in West-Indian literature, the writers use different and diverse techniques to cope with the issues of identity and alienation. Most of the literature written during this period is closely concerned with the fate of indentured Indian labourers who migrated to Caribbean Island in search of new meanings and directions. The writers associated with this type of literature illustrate beautifully the aspirations, yearnings, problems and plights of the immigrants in those islands.

There is no doubt in denying the fact that there was an emergence of new independent countries with the backdrop of the British Empire as C.D. Narasimhaiah, in his well-known book, *Essays in Commonwealth Literature*, focuses on the issues of cultural and political identity when he puts it as : “when the erstwhile British Colonies came of the age, they were faced with the choice of either taking over the British values or asserting their identity.” (Narasimhaiah, 1995, 123) In this direction, V.S. Naipaul’s works, both fictional and non-fictional, are a powerful illustration of the complex issues dealing with the lives of the individuals, societies and cultures who are constantly searching to find out a meaning of their existence as while analyzing the central thematic concerns of Naipaul’s works Madhusudan Rao finds: “V. S. Naipaul has used fiction not only as a way of chronicling life, but also as an instrument of analysis and clarification of the reality. Some of Naipaul’s recurring themes of the collusion of culture and ambiguities in human adjustment: the colonial situation which produces a sense of alienation and the motives within the individual which create the structure of human relationships you unique to the colonial or postcolonial society.” (Rao, 1999, 34) According to Oxford English Dictionary, the term ‘identity’ can be defined as “the fact of being who or what the person or thing is.”

It is beyond doubt that there are various factors which play a dominant and significant role in shaping the Identity of an individual in which gender, language, ethnicity, nationality and culture are worthy of detailed consideration. As far as the classification of the identity is concerned, it can be divided into two types: social identity, and personal identity. On the one hand, social identity has its close connection with a person’s membership in the social group, whereas, the personal identity has its conceptualization of the self in relation to others. The hybrid identity is the result of the postmodernism activities and the expansion of mobilization in the society. Culture is primarily related to play its role in shaping and informing a person’s identity. In the postcolonial scenario, an individual tries to assert his or her identity in numerous ways.

In the present paper, an attempt has been made to throw ample light on V.S Naipaul’s concept of ‘identity crisis’ in his work *A House for Mr. Biswas*, and *The Mimic Man* in which the central protagonists suffer from the problem of rootlessness and alienation in the society. In *The Mimic Man*, Naipaul has powerfully depicted the deplorable situation of the immigrants on the large-scale who are the victims of displaced world in the present novel by adopting the confessional mode of narration.

The author has explored and analysed very minutely the trials and tribulations of the people who are alien in foreign culture.

In the present work, we come across restlessness, alienation and search for identity that has been projected by the writer with the ring of legitimacy and originality in the depiction of aforesaid traits. In *The Mimic Man*, one comes across a wide and extended knowledge of the writer's concept of isolation as the central protagonist is the victim of the three cultures-Indian, Caribbean and British. The irony of the situation prevails in the novel as the central character neither goes for Indian ancestry nor he is able to reconcile with the Caribbean culture, but decides for the London for the quest of his identity. The protagonist's failure of searching his roots makes him totally an outlander in any culture. The present work is a powerful illustration of the triple deportation in three different ways of life.

The main character of the book, Ralph Singh has been delineated as a man running after materialism, stardom and property in the society. He wants to attain all these things by hook or by crook. Like a practical person as he is in his real life, he always denounces dishonesty to hide his own. He has been painted as an outstanding, a pretender and a mimic man who conceals his triviality in intellectual fallacy, and whose very position in the society misleads shallowness and liquidation or failure of values in the society.

Ralph has been presented as a character very much aware of imitation in his life. In the portrayal of his character, we do not find any dedication and endearment there as these values are totally absent in his life. He has adopted a playboy's attitude in his life where there is imitation, but he makes a show-off of being real and genuine in his attitude. He also claims himself to be a scholar who is prepared to face anything in life, but all this is an indication of the underline corruption rampant in the society.

In his character, we find a manifestation of different aspects of a precursor of a colonial character who is bewildered in an atmosphere where there is biasness and cross-culturalism pre-occupied with the concept of identity as he is portrayed by the author with the imitation of European or Western ideas on different issues of life. How the Western world perceives him, is a matter of big confusion for him. He has given up his ideas, culture, stride, family and his own identity for the sake of colonial values that he is following ardently.

Married to an English woman, he thinks himself to be a scholar of Western ideas or European education. It is the main reason why he is greatly and profoundly suffers from the sense of alienation, divorced from culture and, no doubt, a man who is defiant not to follow the traditional and

conservative values followed by his ancestors. Because of this sense of alienation and aloofness, he undoubtedly, seems to be deflected in his perspectives. Escape from the Indian culture and its values, is perhaps the main reason why he feels himself to be helpless, and is corrupt to the core. The present work is a powerful castigation of the theme of confusion and bewilderment that leads the main character, who wants to achieve his goal, moving towards godlessness. So, in such circumstances who cannot imagine and expect anything but meaninglessness, aimlessness and nothingness

On the other hand, V.S. Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* has been dramatised against the background of Trinidad environment that covers the saga of three generations. The novel is a powerful illustration of an individual's fight to arrive at authentic selfhood which reflects the identity crisis in the life of a modern man.

The present novel is powerful expression of the concept of identity crisis presented through the central protagonist, Mr. Biswas who is constantly engaged in search of his identity in the form of a house which become a symbolic representation of his identity. Indirectly, it also connotes one's roots and one's culture.

At the very outset of the novel, we find Mr. Biswas, a forty six year old man, sacked from his job. The novel covers the total life period of Mr. Biswas from birth till death, but on the death bed, he is relieved as he has a place of his own, his house, where he was breathing his last hours. This time period of forty six years of this man is replete with repeated failures, recurrent setbacks and anxiety that has been expressed by the novelist as he says: "Mr. Biswas was forty six and had four children. He had no money. His wife Shama had no money. On the house in Sikkim Street, Mr. Biswas owned, and has been owing for four years, three thousand dollars...It gave Mr. Biswas some satisfaction that in the circumstances Shama did not run straight off to her mother to beg for help. Ten years before that would have been her first thought." (Naipaul, 2005, 122)

The house is a metaphor for Mr. Biswas signifying nothing but achievements and meaning as well as a means to escape the void that has been created by the society as one of the critics Kath Woodward says in this connection: "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." (Woodward, 2002, 176)

It is an established fact that to assert one's identity in the society, one needs the support of the family that plays a dominant role in finding one's quest for his roots. The Hanuman House is symbolic of traditional Hindu world full of customs and superstitions. By criticizing and rebelling against the Tulsi's House, Biswas is showing his defense to search his identity in the lost world. Indulging in Aryan Samaj activities, is an effort by him to get his true self, and Tulsi's family is a rival in that sense. In the multicultural land of Trinidad, his rootlessness is reflected through his dreams and an assertion of his self as says Champaran Mohan in this regard: "The social identity of people is rooted in their culture while at the individual level, it is determined by personal achievements. In order to experience 'Wholeness,' it is necessary to fuse the individual and the social consciousness. In the case of artificially created colonial societies like Trinidad, this spirit becomes even more pronounced. With the result this homogeneous cultural identity becomes missing in the case of Trinidadian. They find themselves uprooted in an alien land". (Mohan, 2004, 234)

As a homeless wanderer, Biswas is the victim of the society. In order to assert his identity and escape from the isolation and alienation, he builds a house, but it is destroyed by the labourers. His strong quest for identity is perceived through his balancing of his ambiguous belonging to the two positions. After the destruction of his house in the Green Vale, he returns back to his earlier self, the shelter of home of Tulsi where he is the victim of social alienation resulting from his search and is symbolic of how the social systems are cruel and injustice towards an individual's aspirations.

In this way, it is quite significant to find how an individual identity is constantly threatened by the social forces as after his house is set to fire he is a victim of self alienation which reminds us of the idea of Melville Seeman who opines in this context "The loss of contact of the individual selves with any inclination or desires that are not in agreement with the prevailing social patterns as a result of which the individuals are forced... to feel incapable of controlling their actions. Self alienation has worse affects on individual than social alienation. It happens to be the basic form of age rootlessness and can easily impede an individual's mental and psychic development in a terrific manner." (Seeman, 1972, 12)

After many repeated attempts, Biswas's quest for identity finds its fulfillment in the form of a house in Port of Spain. Though the house is not built properly, but his satisfaction knows no bounds as his long struggle results in getting a place of his own in a foreign land as says Yashoda Bhat as a critic: "Nothing would have ached more than to die without having claimed to die on someone else's portion

of earth. 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; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, 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 and unaccommodated".(Bhat, 2002, 23)

Biswas's heroism lies in his self-respect and integrity. He dies as a contended man, as by achieving a place he tries to emancipate himself by fulfilling his dream of a home and tries to get rid of the feeling of alienation in the direction of finding an identity. It is a tragedy of a man who can be seen trying to adjust himself to a profound change in his society, and his personal outlook, and who, before he is forty, considers his career closed, and resents his ambition on his children. Thus, the novelist has artistically portrayed the plight of the Indian immigrant in West India.

In this way, after making a close and minute study of V.S. Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* we can safely and rightly aver the fact that as far as the theme of identity crisis is concerned, it is very well and deftly delineated through the main protagonist of the novel.

The major thematic concerns that emanate from a close and minute observation of his novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* are related to the predicaments and sufferings of the colonised people: their sense of alienation from the landscapes, their identity crisis, and the paradox of freedom. Besides it, the tough and difficult environment of colonialism have left the West Indian constantly under the burden of poverty and ignorance. But, the sufferers in real sense of terms are those who are without any shelter, poor and psychologically broken. In other words, they are totally dispossessed from the cultural and spiritual point of view.

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