

# A Critical Study Of Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul's "A House Of Mr. Biswas" And "The Mimic Men" In The Postcolonial Scenario

Harikumar Pallathadka

*Manipur International University, Imphal, Manipur, India*

*harikumar@miu.edu.in*

## **Abstract**

*There is no doubting that the concept of identity crisis is the basic and primary concern in postcolonial texts. With the onset of globalization, the movement of individuals from one country to another has accelerated for various reasons. As a result, one can see the creation of multicultural land with the concept of variety. When one considers Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (V.S. Naipaul)'s novels *The Mimic Men* and *A House for Mr. Biswas*, one can see a sense of rootlessness and identity emerge. The current research also examines how the protagonists attempt to build identities by overcoming their sense of rootlessness in a colonial setting. Without a doubt, alienation and isolation are themes that appear to permeate the current novels as you read them. This painting also portrays the plight of indentured Indian laborers who traveled to the Caribbean islands in quest of significance in their life. These books also look into the difficulties that these workers faced and attempted to overcome.*

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

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

It goes without saying that in Commonwealth Literature, West Indian literature finds its pre-eminent and dominating position. In the study of literature, the cultural aspect is part and parcel of it. The most recurrent themes discussed in this type of literature include the themes of rootlessness, alienation, and search for meaning which finds a pivotal place in Western Indian literature.

To explore this 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 laborers who migrated to Caribbean Island in search of new meaning and direction. The writers associated with this type of literature illustrate the aspiration, yearning, problems, and plights of the immigrants in those islands beautifully.

There is no doubt in denying the fact that there was an emergence of newly 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 age, they were faced with the choice of either taking over the British values or asserting their identity" (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 in search to find out the meaning of their existence 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 reality. Some of Naipaul's recurring themes of the collaboration 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. (34)

It is beyond doubt that various factors play a dominant and significant role in shaping an individual's identity in which gender, language, ethnicity, nationality, and culture are worthy of detailed consideration. As far as identity classification is concerned, it can be divided into social identity and personal identity. On the one hand, social identity closely connects with a person's membership in the social group. On the other hand, the personal identity has its conceptualization of the self concerning others. The hybrid identity is the result of postmodern activities and the expansion of mobilization in 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 article, 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 Men*. The central protagonists suffer from the problem of rootlessness and alienation in society. In his novel, *The Mimic Men*, Naipaul has powerfully depicted the deplorable situation of the immigrants on the large scale who are the victims of the displaced world in the present novel by adopting the confessional mode of narration. The writer has explored and analyzed the trials and tribulations of the alien people in a foreign culture very minutely.

Rootlessness, alienation, and search for identity have been projected by the writer with the ring of legitimacy and originality in depicting the traits described above. In *The Mimic Men*, one comes across a vast and extended knowledge of the writer's concept of isolation. The central protagonist is the victim of the three cultures, Indian, Caribbean, and British. The irony of the situation does not prevail in the novel as the central character goes for Indian ancestry, nor can he reconcile with the Caribbean culture. Still, he decides to be in London for the quest for his identity. The protagonist's failure of searching his roots makes him totally an outlander in any culture. This article is a powerful illustration of the triple deportation in three different ways of life.

The main character of the novel, Ralph Singh, has been delineated as a man running after materialism, stardom, and property in society. He wants to attain all these things by hook or by crook. As a practical person as he is in his real life, he consistently 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, there is no trace of any dedication and endearment as these values are absent in his life. He has adopted a playboy attitude in his life where there is imitation, but he shows off of being authentic and genuine in his mood. He also claims himself to be a

scholar who is prepared to face anything in life, but all this indicates the underlying corruption rampant in society. In his character, a manifestation of different aspects of a precursor of a colonial character is bewildered in an atmosphere where there is biasness and cross-culturalism pre-occupied with the concept of identity. He is portrayed by the writer with the imitation of European or Western ideas on different life issues. He has given up his ideas, culture, stride, family, and his own identity for the sake of colonial values that he follows 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 tremendous and profoundly suffers from the sense of alienation, divorced from culture and, no doubt, a man who is defiant not to follow his ancestors' traditional and conservative values. Because of this sense of alienation and aloofness, he, no doubt, seems to be deflected in his perspectives. Escape from the Indian culture and its values are perhaps the main reason he feels helpless and corrupt to the core. This article is a powerful exploration of the theme of confusion and bewilderment that leads the main character, who wants to achieve his goal, moving towards uncertainty. So, Ralph cannot imagine and expect anything but meaninglessness, aimlessness, and nothingness in such circumstances.

On the other hand, V.S. Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, has been dramatized against the background of Trinidad's 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.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* is a beautiful castigation of the concept of identity crisis presented through the central protagonist, Biswas, who is constantly engaged in searching for his identity in the form of a house that becomes a symbolic representation of his identity. Indirectly, it also connotes one's roots and one's culture. At the outset of the novel, Biswas, a forty-six-year-old man, is sacked from his job. The novel covers the total life period of 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 the novelist has expressed 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 Shama did not run straight off to her mother to beg for help in the circumstances. Ten years before that would have been her first thought." (122)

The house is a metaphor for Mr. Biswas signifying nothing but and achievements and meaning as well as a means to escape the void that the society has created 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 concerning location and situation as well as movements and translation" (176).

It goes without saying that to assert one's identity in society, he or she 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 the traditional Hindu world full of customs and superstitions. By

criticizing and rebelling against the Tulsi's House, Biswas shows his defense to search his identity in the lost world. Indulging in Aryan Samaj's 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:

People's social identity is rooted in their culture, while at the individual level, it is determined by personal achievements. To experience a 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. As a result, this homogeneous cultural identity becomes missing in the case of Trinidadians. They find themselves uprooted in an alien land. (234)

As a homeless wanderer, Biswas is the victim of society. To assert his identity and escape from the isolation and alienation, he builds a house, but the laborers destroy it. His intense 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 the home of Tulsi, where he is the victim of social alienation results 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 pretty significant to find how the social forces constantly threaten individual identity 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 resulting from which the individuals are forced... to feel incapable of controlling their actions. Self-alienation has worse effects on individuals than social alienation. It happens to be the primary form of age rootlessness and can easily impede an individual's mental and psychic development terrifically. (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 correctly, 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 the earth. How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it: to have been killed 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". (23)

Biswas's heroism lies in his self-respect and integrity. He dies as a contended man. By achieving a place, he tries to emancipate himself by fulfilling his dream of a home and getting rid of alienation by 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 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 intelligent study of V.S. Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, safely and rightly conclude 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 emanate from a close and minute observation of his novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, related to the predicaments and sufferings of the colonized people, their sense of alienation from the landscapes, their identity crisis, and their identity crisis the paradox of freedom. Besides it, colonialism's demanding and challenging environment has left the West Indians constantly under the burden of poverty and ignorance. But, the sufferers are without any shelter, poor, and psychologically broken in the real sense of terms. In other words, they are dispossessed from the cultural and spiritual point of view.

#### **WORKS CITED:**

- [1]. Bhat, Yashoda. "Civilization, History And Naipaul's Fiction", in V.S. Naipaul: Critical Essays Volume II. Mohit K. Ray. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2002. Print
- [2]. Naipaul, V.S. *A House for Mr. Biswas*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1961. Print
- [3]. Naipaul, V.S. *The Mimic Men*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1967. Print
- [4]. Narasimhaiah, C.D. *Essays in Commonwealth Literature*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 1995. Print
- [5]. Rao, Madhusudhan. *Postcolonial elements in Modern Novel*, New Delhi: Atlantic, 2004. Print
- [6]. Rao, Mohan Champa. *Post Colonial Situation in the Novels of V.S. Naipaul*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2004. Print
- [7]. Seeman, Melvin. *Changes in The Form Of Alienations*, *American Sociological Review* 34.1 Feb 1996. Print
- [8]. Woodward, Kath. *Understanding Identity*. London: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print