



Unhomeliness in V.S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas

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Abstract

This paper reads Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* through Homi K. Bhabha's notion of "unhomeliness". It offers an analysis of the sense of unhomeliness which is best reflected in Mr. Biswas's character as a post-colonial subject. Meanwhile, the displacement of Mr. Biswas is discussed, behind which Imperialism has played a key role especially in bringing a sense of alienation to such formerly colonized people. In this regard, the paper is an attempt to reveal that the individuals displaced by colonialism never attain a sense of homeliness.

Keywords: unhomeliness, colonialism, post-colonial, misery, displacement, alienation

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Introduction

A Historical Background

V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is set in the forties and fifties of twentieth-century Trinidad under British rule. Indigenous Arawak and Carib lived in Trinidad in the fifteenth century before the Spanish conquest. When the British controlled Trinidad in ۱۷۹۷, the majority of the country's population were slaves of African origin working on sugarcane fields. After the abolishment of slavery by the British Empire in ۱۸۳۳, the island increasingly turned to cocoa production, and more than ۱۰۰,۰۰۰ workers from India came to the island as indentured laborers who supposedly agreed to work for a term before returning to India. However, they were generally forced to stay.

Naipaul moved to London near the beginning of the mass arrival of Afro-Caribbean people into England when the ۱۹۴۸ British Nationality Act gave citizenship to everyone living in British colonies. This wave of migration resulted in immense racist reaction in the UK as well as changing the structure of society in the Caribbean, where those educated in Britain (like Anand in *A House for Mr. Biswas*) chose to return immediately found access to more economic opportunities but often felt socially estranged from both their home countries and England. Albeit, imperialism played a key role in bringing a sense of alienation and disorder to previously colonized countries. (Ramchand ۹۵; Nandan ۷۷-۷۵; Jonas Egbudu and Leonard ۱۶۳-۱۶۲).

About the Novel

A House for Mr. Biswas was published in ۱۹۶۱ in which a miserable West Indian Hindu finally attains his symbol of success and independence that is his own house. It begins with the death of Mohun Biswas of heart disease at the age of forty-six. Mr. Biswas, the protagonist of the novel, is a descendant of those East Indian people who are taken to Trinidad as forced laborers in the sugarcane fields, and he has been affected by misfortune and disgrace. Homeless and unhappy, he has moved from place to place, from one type of job to another, with every little success followed by disgrace.

Biswas's wife is a member of the Tulsis clan, to whom she has always been her loyal and who has treated him with disdain. Mr. Biswas buys a run-down house that he can ill afford; However, it is his own and represents an assertion of independence from the overpowering Tulsis. His premature death leaves his wife and children penniless. His house stands empty. *A House for Mr. Biswas* has undergone some changes in terms of content and style before taking the last shape it already has. Consequently, Naipaul decides to include in the book belongings of one's house with implications besides a man's story. As he says: "In the writing, the book changed. It became the story of a man's search for a house and all that the possession of one's own house implies" ("Writing 'A House for Mr. Biswas'" ۲۲). Thus, the house



becomes a central theme and symbol that has other meanings beyond its literal meaning as a physical structure.

Through both semantic and pragmatic meanings of the house as an identity, the novel's main character struggles to obtain the feeling of homeliness at whatever price possible. In this quest, he faces obstacles, some of which make the whole journey ambiguous in the end.

In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the protagonist is based on Naipaul's father. Looking back on his childhood, the son Anand (Naipaul) is the narrator of the story. Therefore, Biswas's search for identity can also be considered as the author's search. During the lifetime of Naipaul's father, the once strong but narrow-minded culture of the Indian population of Trinidad was in many ways suffocating to someone who challenged its values, fragmented due to the forces of colonialism.

Unhomeliness in *A House for Mr. Biswas*

Unhomeliness can be defined as the feeling of not being at home even when one is physically at home, and this is a clear condition of the colonized and postcolonial subject (Byrne ۷۰).

Bhabha's definition for Unhomeliness is "something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world". This concept of unhomeliness constitutes the center of his notion of Hybridity defined as something: "that is new, neither the one nor the other" (The Location ۳۷, ۱۳). Hence, being unhomey is not just about physical displacement, but what all the conditions and mental state it creates along. It is mainly about the sense and feeling of being out of place; not being at home psychologically, or in the words of Tyson it is "an emotional state" (۲۵۰). For Bhabha, cultures become hybrid after the resultant process of hybridization by the colonial power effect. Accordingly, it can be seen that none of the cultures is pure and original or genuine. As Huddart writes: "Bhabha directs our attention to what happens on the borderlines of cultures, to see what happens in between cultures" (۷). This in-between in Bhabha's words is the third place which is neither the one nor the other, since the translation or meeting between different cultural forms occur in a setting where both these spaces are already preoccupied (Farahbakhsh and Ranjbar ۱۰۸). Thus the alteration of each culture permanently in ways not easily undone. Here, the newly appeared culture creates the feeling of unhomeliness in the concerned individuals.

Mr. Biswas as a stereotype of East Indian immigrants has characteristics different from the communities that were already settled in Trinidad. Kavita Nandan makes a difference between Afro-Caribbean and Indians in their dislocatedness in Trinidad society:

The indentured East Indian community of the West Indies was largely a homogenous group isolated from other cultures. They did not generally intermarry with Afro-Caribbeans. Furthermore,



because the Indians came to the Caribbean much later than the Africans, it was harder for the Indians to shake off a sense of transience and homelessness. The African West Indians settled in the West Indies in a way that the Indian West Indians were not able to. The latter was far more dislocated and ambivalent and remained homeless (۷۷).

The above-mentioned state of unhomeliness is best reflected in Mr. Biswas's saying when he tells his son "I am just somebody. Nobody at all". He is a man who feels as nobody since he has found himself somewhere he does not belong to or yearns for somewhere he does not find. When his son tells him that he is his father, Biswas says, "Wrong. I am not your father. God is your father" (Naipaul, *A House for* ۱۳۰). Perhaps Mr. Biswas sees his dissimilarity with God in that God has a place of its own while he has been displaced from his place. This shows the significance of having a home of one's own where one belongs to. That is why for Biswas, "home is not where one starts from, but the goal for which one's whole being strained; home is not a place where you are born, but where you die" (Ormerod, *Theme and Image* ۵۹۱).

Throughout the novel, several houses can be noticed, each with its implication for Mr. Biswas. He does not feel comfortable until the end when he builds a house of his own in which he finds comfort and independence. He grows in a family whose roots are still loose due to the near immigration history of his ancestors. This condition of displacement affects the personality of Mr. Biswas either subconsciously or consciously an early age and reflects through his daily experience and encounters in the community he lives. There is certainly the main reason behind this, "For certainly that *unheimlichkeit*, that 'unhousedness' or 'uncanniness' which characterizes much colonial displacement, is a primary force of disruption in postcolonial life" (Bill Ashcroft et al., ۲۱۸). This disruption has some depth in mind as much as it has some length in time of the protagonist in his encounters outside of his family and home. This is the direct result of lying in-between, as Carthew explains about the protagonist, "this 'adaptation to Trinidad' has the effect of setting him apart from all the others in his society, implying his determined self-extraction from the Hindu indentured-labour ghetto, but without ever making him appear servile to white society" (۶۱). Thereby, Mr. Biswas initiates a fight against unhomeliness in the position Bhabha regards as the third place.

Just as his first home had vanished along with all evidence of his birth, so dust, decay, and darkness continually threaten to consume Mr. Biswas and all of his hard-won achievements. He is still young when his father dies and he does not stay afterwards with his aunt that long when he falls into an arranged marriage with a girl of Tulsi household. Having no home of his own he goes to live in Hanuman House, the Tulsi home, and for most of the rest of his life fights weakly to prevent himself



from being absorbed by the dreadfully engulfing Tulsis connection ruled over by the widowed Mrs. Tulsis and her son-in-law Seth.

The house of Hanuman in the novel is sketched in a way to reveal its unmatched properties to the personality of Mr. Biswas. In an attempt to affirm the unhomeliness of the house, the author uses gloomy words in describing it:

An alien white fortress. The concrete walls looked as thick as they were, and when the narrow doors of the Tulsis Store on the ground floor were closed, the House became bulky, impregnable, and blank. The side walls were windowless, and on the upper two floors, the windows were mere slits in the façade (۷۷).

The words alien, narrow, blank and windowless do not give the impression of a house that is favourable to a home-seeking person like Mr. Biswas. Ben Belitt views Biswas's arrival at the house as a whimsical hint by the author, "The ambivalence of Biswas as a latecomer to the karma of the Tulsis is perhaps Naipaul's most whimsical evocation in the long comedy of dispossession" (۳۱).

Mr. Biswas's quest for a house can be regarded as a symbol of his irresistible desire to claim space for himself, organize that space of his own accord, and determine his own life within it. After his childhood home oddly fades, Mr. Biswas spends his life moving from one temporary family house to another, fueling his desire for a house of his own. However, nearly all the functional houses in the book are run by women especially the Tulsis' Hanuman House in Arwacas. When men take charge of houses, they inevitably collapse: Mr Biswas's own houses at Green Vale and Shorthills are destroyed, and the large estate at Shorthills results in shambles because the men of the house strip and sell its parts for their gain. At the end of the book, Mr. Biswas finds enormous comfort when he returns from the hospital to find that his wife Shama has organized the house. His desire for independence through a house is unattainable in the meaning that he never truly comes to dominate the domestic space. The reason behind all this is explained in Bhabha's words, "In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" ("The World and the Home" ۱۴۱). Hence, the borderlines between home and non-home spaces become vague and confusing for the individual in question.

Primarily, there is the essential search for personal identity. Naipaul's unaccommodated character, Mr. Biswas is set wandering between the rotting Indian culture represented by the Tulsis and the indifferent modern society of Port of Spain. Forced to find his place in society or lose himself completely in the void, he maintains a sense of identity only by holding on to his vision of a house of his own. At forty-



six, when he is dying of a heart attack, he is thankful for attaining the strength and resolves to realize his dream. Mentioning in the prologue of A House for Mr. Biswas the bigger house and the most wanted one by the protagonist, the narrator says,

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 (۱۱).

From the paragraph above, it can be perceived how fateful and vital the house is for Mr. Biswas whereas it is his destination of independence. One's own house makes him/her worthy in life but it could be the opposite without. Even if one's own house does not provide a home or ends up giving the feeling of being at home, definitely neither other houses do. In the atmosphere of Trinidad society, it does not seem easy for Indian immigrants to have their own homes. The author makes this predicament an allegory to portray the everlasting homelessness and the feeling it carries along in post-colonial world, as John Thieme explains about Biswas, "His tragi-comic struggle to attain dignity, as reflected in his desire to own his own house, becomes an allegory of the attempt to emancipate oneself from colonial/determinist dependence" ("V. S. Naipaul's" ۱۳). Again, the House of Hanuman becomes a mini world of Indians and Mr. Biswas becomes a desperate and helpless Hindu constantly in a struggle to find a route for salvation but to no avail. As Rohlehr describes the scene,

The description of Hindu life in Trinidad exactly parallels all the descriptions of Hanuman House, The Chase, The Barracks, Green Vale, and finally the house in Port-of-Spain around which the Tulsis build a wall. The whole story has shown the difficulty of escape and the uselessness of rebellion (۱۱).

Thus, even in the case of having a home, it is unhomeliness that Mr. Biswas grapples with. His feeling of unhomeliness within his community originates from the feeling that he belongs to the world which only exists in his imagination (Jabar ۳۵). His subsequent movements to and from House of Tulsis in Port of Spain and Shorthills takes him back to an unwanted home better than not having one, even if temporarily. Perhaps Tulsis are not interested in their in-laws having their own houses while this might weaken their power, that is why they even interfere with their business to have more control over someone like Mr. Biswas. First, they fix him in their more or less useless shop in Chase. Next, they appoint him a sub-overseer on a sugar estate at Green Vale, where the restrictions of barrack-room life make him decide to build his own house. From the beginning, it appears an impossible undertaking. Eventually, the half-completed house, in which Mr. Biswas and his son Anand are living, undergoes severe damage by a storm. Building this house throws Mr. Biswas into the most serious crisis of his



life. Though at first the decision to rid himself from the limitations of the past gives him a new-found awareness of life's possibilities; a series of setbacks soon impede his excitement and it is not long before moments of anguished freedom that a prevailing depression sets in which brings about malaria disease. When the house is damaged by the storm, Mr. Biswas breaks down completely. He is only restored to good health when, once again a dependant in the Tulsi ménage, he hears that his Green Vale house has been burnt down by envious neighbours. Then, his first attempt at liberating himself ends in total failure and he is forced to regress into the assumed security of the colonial mindset. This battle on his part which is marked by triumph and loss makes him stuck in the continuous feeling of homelessness. Mr. Biswas's ongoing movement which depicts a Hindu individual's dislocatedness accompanied by an ever-present feeling of unhomeliness is shown in several phases along with implications throughout the novel: the passive dependent life as a child (his mother's house); the Hindu's dependent status as a member of the extended household (Hanuman House); a failed attempt at escape through small scale entrepreneurship (Chase); the restrictions of the plantation system (the Barracks); the impossibility of total emancipation (the houses he built at Green Vale and near Shorthills) and finally, the partial freedom possible once one has perceived one's limitations (the St James house). So the ultimate picture of Mr. Biswas's quest to own a home is not disappointing.

The images of homelessness in the wide geographical spaces are recurring ideas in Naipaul's writings. In this respect, Garebian says, "Naipaul's settings are chiefly small societies which foster narrow outlooks on life and ultimately contain no corner immune from life's violations" (۲۳). Mr. Biswas as a displaced figure embodies the sense of insecurity in exile which is transplanted in a colonial society with an ambiguous identity. Not just the house, but all structures and foreign images and peoples make him unsettled, thinking that home, as he sees it and perceives it, might solve the problem. Or else, interference in the small society from everywhere possibly keeps him rootless forever. Eventually, for Naipaul, establishing a home is a road towards finding one's identity as Mohan describes the novelist's perspective, "Up to House Naipaul's major concern was to reconstruct his past and establish his home identity because a home was then perceived as a precondition for identity; homelessness was thus viewed as a major limitation" (۱۲۶). Hence, once a displaced character like Mr. Biswas builds his house in which he imagines his own home, his genuine identity is framed, while before this situation there are limitations to his end all around.

Mr. Biswas's death in his own house can be seen Through a different lens. It is possible to realize what a tremendous achievement his ultimate house represented, whilst it also can be imagined that what had seemed failure for him was tremendous success. The dignity is implied in the title A House for Mr.



Biswas and reinforced in his constantly being called Mr. Biswas by the narrator even when he is still a baby. His death may be a tragedy but his life has been a triumph (Dasenbrock ۳۲۱). But is not it a pathetic triumph? Probably Mr. Biswas's dying a happy man is a sign of feeling at home or in Bhabha's term homely at last, although he did not practice the ownership of the house he built. Technically he resided in the house, but objectively the house did not show the signs of homeliness. As Ormerod puts it, "The derelict man in the derelict landscape is not only a symbol of the hero's predicament, but of the frustration of his love, and even when Anand is a child, the image changes to incorporate his father's unconscious fears for him" (۸۱). Thus, Mr. Biswas's unhomeliness is even reflected in his fruitless relationship with family and children when he finds himself in the image of his son.

In the end, Mr. Biswas buys his house for too much although it is full of defects. It is substantial enough to arrange his life and the lives of his family, and it exists as an outstanding achievement of his life: "From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent. The mind, when it is sound, is merciful" (۵۵۶). As a result, the ending is fraught with ambiguity while Mr. Biswas is accommodated both literally and metaphorically (John Thieme "Searching for a centre" ۱۳۵۷). "His portion of the earth" is holding a mortgaged ill-constructed house, even without his existence. Therefore, he is rid of unhomeliness only through his death as if the sense of homeliness has not to do with the land the family lives in, but with the absent original land they never going to restore or return to once they had been uprooted from.

Conclusion

A House for Mr. Biswas is indeed the search of an Indian immigrant for a meaningful place in the culturally mixed society of Trinidad. He becomes a typical man describing modern man's destiny in a rootless society. For displaced people like Biswas, longing for a house of his own is not only a matter of finding shelter from heat, cold or rain, but it is a symbol of stability, selfhood and cohesion which are the preconditions for the status of authentic selfhood. Through Mr. Biswas's various relations and experiences with people in different positions and places, Naipaul gets an opportunity to portray the unhomeliness, alienation, displacement and rootlessness of diasporic people. The various lodging places have their disadvantages. Hanuman House is authoritative in its organization and posture. The houses at Chase and Green Vale are unbearable because of the uncertainties surrounding their construction. These lodging places form a background and push Mr. Biswas toward the goal to own his house. The search for a home or a house is supposed to offer the protagonist a sense of salvation and a source of belongingness whose life was spent as a fantasy man. He as an escapist seems to be settled while heroically finds a home and in turn, acquires some form of identity. The death of Mr.



Biswas implies the impossibility of becoming stable in the sense of ending unhomeliness. The foreign land and diverse cultures prolong his homelessness and keep double consciousness along. The image of homelessness begins from the start of the protagonist's journey to find a home of his own through which he may settle down, get out of dependence and establish his identity. The physical structure does not salve him but rather keeps him unfortunate and reverses the whole effortful journey towards the goal. Perhaps the subjective point of view in the novel shows him dying a happy man in his own house, but objectively, he might not have found what he was looking for; homeliness.

پوختە

خانويەك بۇ بەرپىز بيسواس برىتتيە لە ژيانى بەرپىز مۆھون بيسواس، پالەۋانتيك كە لە چىرۆكى باوكى ق.س. ناپيۆل-ھوۋە سەرچاۋە دەگرېت لە كاتىكدا كە ھەول دەدات ئازادى بەدەست بىتت و خانويەك بۇ خۆى دابىن بىكات. بەرپىز بيسواس كە كورپى كرىكارىكى ھەژارە لە ترينىداد، ناچار دەبىت كە لە خانوو لەدوای خانووى قەرەبالغ و ھەراسانكەردا بژىت. ئەو لە بنەچەى ئەو ھىندىيانەى خۇرھەلاتە كە بۇ كارى بەزۇر ھىزاۋنەتە كىلگەكانى قامىشى شەكر لە دوورگەى ترينىداد و لە رووى كۆمەلایەتى و دەروونىيەۋە رووبەرووى نەگبەتى و رووداۋى جىاجىا دەبىتەۋە لە ژيانىدا. ئەم توۋىژىنەۋەيە، شىكردەنەۋەيەك دەخاتەروو لەبارەى ھەستى بى مالى كە بە باشتىن شىۋە لە كارەكتەرى بيسواس-دا ۋەك رەغىيەتتىكى پۆست كۆلۇنيال رەنگى داۋەتەۋە. لەھەمان كاتدا پەرتەۋازەبوونى بەرپىز بيسواس تاۋوتوۋى دەكرېت كە لە پشتىيەۋە ئىمپىريالىزم رۆلى سەرەكى بىنيوۋە بەتايبەت لە ھىنانەكايەى ھەستى نامۆبوون لای ئەو و ئەو خەلكەى كە پىشتىر كۆلۇنيزە كراون.

ۋشە كىلىيەكان: ھەستى بى مالى، كۆلۇنيالىزم، پۆست كۆلۇنيال، نەگبەتى، پەرتەۋازەبوون، نامۆبوون

المخلص

بيت للسيد بيسواس ينطوي على حياة السيد موهون بيسواس، بطل مستوحاة من قصة والد نايبول وهو يكافح من أجل تحقيق حريته وتوفير منزل خاص به. يضطر السيد بيسواس، وهو ابن عامل فقير في ترينيداد، إلى العيش كضيف في منازل مزدحمة و قاسية واحدة تلو الاخرى. هو من نسل الهنود الشرقيين الذين تم نقلهم إلى ترينيداد كعمال في حقول قصب السكر و تتميز حياته بالبؤس والحزن اجتماعيا ونفسيا. تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلا للشعور الإستغراب الذي يتجلى على أفضل وجه في شخصية السيد بيسواس كرعية ما بعد الاستعمار. في غضون ذلك ، تتم مناقشة نزع السيد بيسواس من موقعه ، والذي لعبت الإمبريالية وراءه دورًا رئيسيًا خاصة في جلب الشعور بالغربة لمثل هؤلاء الأشخاص المستعمرين سابقًا.

كلمات الرئيسية: شعور الأستغراب، الاستعمار، ما بعد الاستعمار، نزع من الموقع، شعور بالغربة



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