



Extraordinary Journey of an Ordinary Man: A Critical Exploration of Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17107347>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 16-08-2025

Published: 10-09-2025

Keywords:

Belonging, House, Identity, Post-colonial, Socio-cultural, Societal expectations,

ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical exploration of Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, investigating the multifaceted nature of identity in a post-colonial context. This paper demonstrates how the protagonist grapples with the conflict between personal desire and social expectations and how this conflict plays a significant role in shaping his sense of belonging and identity. The author represented the house as a symbol of Mr. Biswas's ambitions of independence, stability, security and a sense of belonging in a post-colonial Trinidadian society. Through a close reading of the novel, we will be able to comprehend the complex interplay of family relationships and societal expectations and their impact on human condition and search for self. This research paper provides an in-depth analysis of diverse human experiences in the course of the protagonist's journey of owning a house and social identity.

Introduction:

Naipaul had tasted the flavour of success and fame after the publication of *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The novel shows the lifelong pursuit of an ordinary man for a house, a life, and a legacy. It is an autobiographical novel based on the life and struggle of Naipaul's father, Seepersad Naipaul, an Indian origin Trinidadian. The novel highlights Mr. Biswas's hardships, mental conflict, family relationship and identity crisis poignantly. Through presenting struggle and hardship of the protagonist, Mohun Biswas, the novel offers an extraordinary journey of an ordinary man through the course of struggle, triumph, and



tragedy in a post-colonial society. Mr. Biswas's pursuit of autonomy and identity is resonated in his longing for a house. Hence, the novel casts a scrutinizing eye on individual desires, family relations, and societal expectations to deliver an introspection of quest for identity and sense of belonging in a post-colonial context.

Quest for Identity

Quest for identity as a theme is the soul of this novel. The novel focuses on Mr. Biswas's journey marked by mental conflict, unyielding spirit and smile of victory. Mr. Biswas, a Trinidadian belongs to Indian diaspora, experiences the conflict between his Indian cultural tradition and Trinidadian social context. Mohun was born with a deformity, six fingers in each hand, labelled as an ill omen and a bad luck since his childhood. Village pundit predicts that Mohun would summon his father's death. His father's accidental death by water completes the prophecy. After his father's sudden demise, he was forced to take shelter in various relative's homes. He starts apprenticeship to a pundit but it doesn't work out as he gets cast out. Later he starts working with Bhandat, ill-tempered abusive brother of his uncle, in a grocery store. Mohun left the job after a short period. Later on, he decides to shape his own fortune. He becomes a sign-painter and comes across the Tulsi's while working as a sign-painter for their store. He meets Shama in Hanuman house. Perhaps, he developed a little infatuation for Shama, but, his romance to Shama was misinterpreted as marriage proposal. He steps into married life which he actually doesn't want. He becomes a member of Hanuman House and gradually becomes a slave of authoritarian Tulsi family. He feels confined and strives to claim his individuality. In spite of his efforts and hard work he faces humiliation. He is forced to work at the Tulsi estate. Eventually, he becomes a journalist and started working for *The Trinidad Sentinel* on a trial basis. His career as a reporter of Trinidad Sentinel is marked by familial obligations and socio-economic challenges. He also works there as an editor but after a short period he is fired. Although, he manages to set himself free from the clutches of Tulsi's. Finally, he buys a house which is later known to be constructed with poor materials. However, he finally can claim this house as his own. This is the house which provides him a sense of belonging. "For Mr. Biswas, the house was a symbol of his independence, of his freedom from the Tulsis. It was a symbol of his own identity, of his own existence." (Naipaul 146)

Mr. Biswas's struggle for autonomy and his uncompromising attitude showcases his resilience in the face of adversity. He goes through a lot of challenges and trials, but he remains strongly resolute to his ultimate goal of owning a roof of his own. Despite socio-economic challenges, familial obligations and societal expectations, Mr Biswas's unwavering determination and perseverance bring him success in



establishing a social identity. His identity is further shaped by the tension between his Indian cultural roots, family relationships and present Trinidadian post-colonial context. Thus, Mr. Biswas's journey offers a deeper introspection on individual search for meaning and existence in the world.

The Symbolic Significance of the House

The house stands as a symbol of Mr. Biswas's desire for stability, autonomy, and a sense of belonging. Throughout his life, Mr. Biswas always strives to break the shackle of servility. The house was the one and only means for him to assert independence and a social identity. Owning a house became the main purpose of his life. The house is portrayed as the destination of Mr. Biswas's lifelong journey to acquire a physical space which he can claim as his own. His endeavours continuously hindered by the societal expectations imposed on him by his community and family. But he left no stone unturned in the path of procuring a house of his own. He faces numerous obstacles, criticisms, and humiliations but he remains indomitable as a sole warrior. Because, he knew that buying a house of his own would be the answer for all criticisms and humiliations.

“The house was a refuge, a sanctuary, a place where he could be himself, without fear of ridicule or criticism.” (Naipaul 210)

The house is the witness of Mr. Biswas's extraordinary journey marked by conflict between personal desire, familial obligations, and societal expectations. The house reflects financial stability and class status of its inhabitants. It is obvious that the quality a person's living place displays his/her financial condition and social status. Mr. Biswas's stay at Hanuman House designated as a life of servitude and constant humiliation. Hanuman House of Tulsi family and the desired house of Mr. Biswas's showcase a contradictory image of home.

On the other hand, the poorly constructed house and the burden of loans symbolize Mr. Biswas's disappointments and failure. And the failure reflects his vulnerabilities, helplessness and limitations. The house displays the temporariness of success and transient nature of contentment. Mr. Biswas dies five years after procuring the house, showing the fleeting nature of success and happiness. Despite the transience of achievement and contentment, the house represents Mr. Biswas's life long struggle against societal obstacles.

Post-colonial Complexities



Mr. Biswas is portrayed as a representative of Indian diasporic community living in Trinidad. The socio-cultural conflicts and constraints which Mr. Biswas faces throughout his life span mirror the hardships of Indo-Trinidadian people. He grapples with his Indian cultural heritage and social expectations of post-colonial Trinidad. The effects of societal, cultural, and political factors lead to cultural hybridity as Mr. Biswas traps between his Indian cultural roots and present Trinidadian socio-cultural landscapes, reflecting his fragmented post-colonial identity. Migration from India to Trinidad and cultural dislocation from Indian root are two important factors of his sense of alienation, making the situation even more difficult for him to find a sense of self and belonging in an alien environment where socio-cultural norms, believes, and values are contradictory in nature.

“The colonial past was still close, and the people of Trinidad were still trying to find their place in the world”. (Naipaul 121) It is clearly evident in the above line that post-colonial scenario plays a pivotal role in shaping the sense of self of Trinidadian people. The colonial legacy is still in action, moulding the social, cultural, and economic scenario of Trinidad. Mr. Biswas is compelled to navigate these colonial complexities in his search for self and belonging. The dominance of Tulsi family reflects the colonial power structure. Mr. Biswas’s indomitable attitude and struggle to break the shackle of servility symbolize his stand against colonial power dynamics and the quest for independence and self-definition.

Family relations and Societal Expectations

Family dynamics play an important role in the path of identity formation. Mr. Biswas came across the multifaceted experience of servitude, humility, and criticism during his stay with Tulsi family in hanuman House. Tulsis belong to the higher strata of the Trinidadian society. They treat everyone those who belong to the lower class as their servant. The matriarch of the family holds supreme authority, reflecting colonial dominance. They didn’t expect the attempts of achieving autonomy and self-definition from Mr. Biswas, rather, they expect him to accept their cultural tradition and societal values, that is the reason they are extremely critical to Mr. Biswas’s endeavours in asserting his individual identity.

“The Tulsis were a family of high caste and a good breeding, and they expected a great deal from their relatives.” (Naipaul 45) Tulsi family showcases the traditional family structure, embodying strict social rules and cultural principles. Mr. Biswas’s struggles to set himself free from the clutches of Tulsis symbolize the conflict between traditional constraints and individual expression. Naipaul highlights the contradictory roles of family relations in this novel. It is clearly evident that family is both a source of mutual bonding and constraints. Mr. Biswas’s is drawn to marry Shama due to misinterpretation of his romance as marriage proposal. Initially Mr. Biswas grappled with mutual understanding and emotional



bonding in his relationship with Shama. Their different class and cultural background are responsible for the lack of emotional bonds between Shama and Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas strives to establish an emotional bond with Shama but somehow it didn't work out because of their mindset embedded with different social class, cultural background and upbringing. Later, an emotional connection mutual respect develops between them. Shama manages day to day household affairs permitting Mr. Biswas to focus on his goal. Mr. Biswas's emotional attachment with his children is not strong enough as he gives importance to his all-consuming goal over their needs. He struggles to establish a deep connection with his children due to his own sense of dislocation and alienation from his family.

Naipaul explores the family relations and societal expectations in the formation of individual identity.

The Universal Human Experience

Ultimately, the novel highlights the human experience through exploring the theme of quest for identity. Mr. Biswas's life is presented as the microcosm of universal human condition. His struggles to gain a sense of identity and belonging in an adverse socio-cultural scenario is highly relevant in today's globalized world, where individual identity is fragmented. "He had been an individual, with his own name and his own face, and he had been nobody" (Naipaul 416). Mr. Biswas's journey for asserting self-definition is not just entirely a matter of personal quest rather it symbolizes the universal search for meaning and self-expression. He feels dislocated from his Indian roots and remains isolated in an unknown socio-cultural landscape. "He was an alien in the house, a stranger." (Naipaul 67) This feeling of disconnection is a natural human experience for a person who is in a situation of conflict between past cultural tradition and present socio-cultural norms and beliefs in a new homeland.

In this novel, Naipaul investigates the family dynamics and its effect in formation of individual identity. Mr. Biswas's relation with his wife and children is multifarious. His relationship with his wife Shama is marked by lack of emotional connection. He often struggles to establish a mutual bonding with Shama due to her higher social hierarchy and background. He was forced to marry Shama that is probably another reason behind their lack of emotional attachment, reflecting common human experience. Mr. Biswas often gives importance to his all-consuming goal over the needs of his children. Through the tumultuous journey of Mr. Biswas, the readers can perceive that family obligations often impose limitations to one's prospects. Naipaul underscores that family is a source of support as well as a source of obligations and constraints, shaping individual sense of self.



The author also investigates the transience of success, happiness and human life through Mr. Biswas's life of insecurity, uncertainty, and mortality. After five years of buying his desired house Mr. Biswas has breathed his last.

Conclusion:

In this novel Naipaul recounts Mr. Biswas's commendable journey from homeless to settled, from nobody to somebody. Mr. Biswas embarks on a journey to create his own identity, and the destination of his journey is to acquire a house that he can claim as his own, and where he can live without fear of being humiliated and criticised. He endures a lot of criticism from his relatives. Despite he manages to survive and achieve goal even in the face of adversity, expressing his resilience. This paper highlights how family dynamics, cultural background and social hierarchy play a significant role in the formation of identity and sense of belonging. This research article also underscores the interplay of social and cultural factors. The house itself symbolizes Mr. Biswas's strong resolution for self-definition. Naipaul presents two contradictory images of house, the Hanuman House of Tulsi family represents traditional restriction and servitude where Mr. Biswas's desired house stands for his freedom, autonomy, and self-expression. He encounters multiple failures throughout his life. He faces numerous humiliations from Tulsis. Despite all this, his will power and determination make him potent to achieve the ultimate goal of having a roof of his own, expressing self-definition. His life-long struggles to create identity in a critical socio-economic condition make him an extraordinary human being. Thus, Mr. Biswas's journey remains extraordinary and inspirational even in today's socio-cultural context.

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