

**Displacement and Rootlessness in *A House For Mr. Biswas* by
V. S. Naipaul**

Satish Grover, M.A., M.Phil., Research Scholar

Roll No. A166831005

Department of English, UCBS&H

Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo (Punjab)

groversatish4@gmail.com

[+919463079435](tel:+919463079435)

Dr. Vijay Prasad, Research Guide

H.O.D., Department of English

UCBS&H, Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo (Punjab)

prasadvijay30@yahoo.com

=====

Abstract

Displacement and Rootlessness are related terms as displacement gives birth to rootlessness. Mohan Biswas in *A House For Mr. Biswas* is displaced again and again exclusively as well as inclusively. He has inherited displacement by taking birth to the parents who are indentured laborers. There are a large number of characters in the novel who have been separated from their roots and pass through the experience of displacement. The people who migrate to other countries for any reason feel the nostalgia for their homeland left behind and a feeling of fear on the strange land that gives birth to the feeling of homelessness. V. S. Naipaul understands how insignificant an individual is when he is without roots. In his *A House For Mr. Biswas*, one man attempts to overcome the wasteland of Trinidad's East Indian community.

Keywords: V. S. Naipaul, *A House For Mr. Biswas*, Displacement, Rootlessness, Homelessness, Nostalgia

Displacement and Rootlessness are related terms as both the terms are experienced by the Diaspora. Displacement gives birth to the feeling of rootlessness. The term displacement is a state of being out of one's own place. In this situation someone or something is displaced from his / her original place and put into the new place. In the situation of displacement one feels as if he or she has been cut from his / her roots. These are the common experiences faced by the immigrants as said by Mcleod, "they can be deemed not to belong there and disqualified from thinking of the new land as their home" (212). The displaced subject feels devoid of his roots as he has lost his / her original language, culture, beliefs, traditions and religion. This is because today movement from one place to another and even from one country to another has become so common due to the advanced communication and transport means. The reason behind it may be job, trade and further studies. Earlier, it was due to slavery, imprisonment, invasion and exile. The sense of place has essential significance in the understanding

of human identity. The emotional, cultural and psychological identity of these immigrants is deeply related with difference, distance and dislocation. Displacement is described by Homi K. Bhabha as “A disorienting condition: the borders between home and world become confused and uncanny, the private and public become part of each other forcing upon us a vision that is as diving as it is disorienting (41).

Displacement is the sense of being in between of two or more cultures. A homeless person does not have the feeling of belonging since he / she is in a psychological limbo which generally ends in some psychological disorders and cultural displacement. Alienation is also related with displacement. It is defined “as a feeling of separation or isolation which results problems stemmed from rapid social changes such as industrialization and urbanization which has broken down traditional relationships among individuals and groups and the goods and services they produce alienation”. (The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy)

The word Diaspora first entered English in the late 19th century to describe the scattering of Jews after their captivity in Babylonia in the 5th century B.C.E. The term originates from the Greek Diaspora meaning a dispersion or scattering found in Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible such as the expulsion of Jews from Judea and the fleeing of Greeks after the fall of Constantinople. Recently, different kinds of Diaspora have been discussed based on its causes such as imperialism, trade or labor migrations, or by the kind of social coherence within the Diaspora community and its ties to the ancestral lands.

Diaspora literature is a very vast concept and includes all the literary works written by the authors outside their native country but remain related to their homeland through their works. Diaspora literature always conveys the sense of loss and alienation which is the result of migration and expatriation. It has alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity as its themes. In the words of Uma Parameswaran: “First is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange-land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of Diaspora existence by evolving themselves ethno cultural issues. The fourth is when they have ‘arrived’ and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues”. (165)

People who have flown and tried to settle over the distant territories of the world for various reasons have always found themselves in dual conditions in the process of settling down. They don't get away from the settled assurance of home and they cannot allow their roots being blown over into garments of uncertainty & insecurities on foreign land. Robin Cohen gives several different types of Diaspora as victim Diaspora, e.g. Jews, Africans, Armenians, Labor Diaspora e.g. indentured Indians, Imperial Diaspora e.g. British, Trade Diaspora e.g. Lebanese, Chinese and Deterritorialized Diaspora e.g. Caribbean people, Sindhis, Parsis. Whatever type of Diaspora, mostly the migrants suffer from the pain of being far off from their homes and the memories of their motherland prick the minds of migrants.

Writers of the Indian Diaspora have been at the center stage in the last decade chiefly because of the theoretical formulations being generated by their works. Migration takes place due to various reasons and in the Indian context the migratory movements were governed by historical, political, economic reasons including higher education, better prospects and marriage. The Diasporic Indian writing covers every continent and part of the world. The feeling for the motherland is the most overwhelming sentiment of the Indian Diaspora, wherever it exists. When travelling was difficult and unusual, the yearning of homeland was more intense. Their nostalgia, together with a curious attachment with their native country's traditions, religions and languages gave birth to Diaspora literature.

V.S. Naipaul (1932, Trinidad), a postcolonial novelist with a Diasporic contemplation, analyses various problems of the colonial as well as Diasporic people. In the 1880, his grandparents migrated from India to work as farm laborers in the Indian immigrant community in Trinidad. In 1939, when he was seven years old, Naipaul's family moved to Trinidad's capital, Port of Spain. Ironically, Naipaul was destined to seek escape from that very country where his ancestors sought refuge, because he found the cultural bankruptcy too overwhelming in Trinidad. Naipaul tried to find roots elsewhere. In fact it is Naipaul's sense of rootlessness which leads him through numerous countries, the result of which has been the books on travel. Obviously, there is restlessness in Naipaul's soul. His search for roots has resulted in an unbroken string of literary triumph. Today, he is recognized as one of the few original voices of our time. He is the best known of the West Indian novelists, Naipaul's fourth novel, *A House For Mr. Biswas* established him as the other of a major twentieth century novel.

Naipaul's *A House For Mr. Biswas* depicts the migration of Indian people as indentured laborers in the Caribbean island. These people were not happy into Caribbean island as they had been displaced from their origin culturally physically & psychologically. The novel presents Mr. Biswas's lifelong pain for being displaced and rootless in the Caribbean island away from his ancestral land, India. Homi Bhabha describes it as "separation from origins and essences" with always a sense of "unhomeliness (Bhabha, 1994, 120).

Mohan Biswas is displaced again and again exclusively as well as inclusively. He has inherited displacement from his native country as his parents bear the stamp of indentured. The displacement is described by Nandan "Out of placements" (85). He has to run from post to pillar to find his identity and find a place of his own on the earth. As Leela beautifully describes the condition of Mohan Biswas, "In search of his own identity, Mohan Biswas shifts from village to town and from joint family to nuclear family but fails to find his own roots amidst socio-cultural change" (36). After this he goes to Port of Spain and lives with his family as a tenant of Mrs. Tulsi. He builds a house in Tulsi Estate in Short hills. But he again feels displaced as the house gets destroyed in a fire. Again he shifts into Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain. Here again he has to vacate the rooms he was living in to the other room as Owad has to live in those rooms.

The central figure in *A House For Mr. Biswas* is Mohan Biswas, a man aware of the void of his own future and the obscurity of his origin, desperately attempting to make a place for himself in

the world. The search of the protagonist in the novel for a home is a symbol of Naipaul's own search for roots. The novel begins at the end when Biswas has got his dream house. It is a rundown shack but that hardly matters. The important thing is that Biswas has found a place under the sun. Naipaul observes: "... How terrible it would have been at this time to be without it..." to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's position of the earth, to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated."^(A H F M B 13)

Naipaul too has attempted to lay claim to his position on earth. For Biswas, it does not really matter that "...The staircase was dangerous; the upper floor sagged, there was no backdoor; most of the windows didn't close..."⁽¹²⁾ Finally, after years of struggle, Biswas has been able to realize his dream. Both Biswas and Naipaul are haunted by the same sense of rootlessness. *A House For Mr. Biswas* is the story of a community which is struggling to make a dent in an alien society, a society which will not make an alien society, a society which will not make an effort to accommodate them. Biswas and his kind struggle on their own.

As in all large Indian families, Biswas and his brothers and sisters are neglected. This kind of negative attention that Biswas gets foreshadows the neglect Biswas will face for the rest of his life because Biswas's brothers were not brought up properly. In spite of being Trinidadian by birth, the Trinidad Indian continues to borrow traits of living from the land of origin. For Biswas, there is no proper childhood. He is made to join the "glass gang". From there, he moves to the cane fields. Success among the Trinidad Indians means owing one's own house. It is just as important for them as it is for Indians in India. Biswas's elder brother, Pratap achieves the status long before Biswas himself. On Biswas's father's funeral, the photographer arranged the family members melodramatically around the coffin that shows the lack of genuine emotion. The coffin too, is "arranged" for the photographs. After the funeral, Biswas's mother is told to stop crying for the time for that is over. More down-to-earth matters, like money and the future, are now tackled. Only, there is no future for Biswas. He is trapped between two worlds, not even knowing what "belonging" is. Both culturally and emotionally, Biswas and his community are bankrupt.

After his father's death, Biswas loses the only home he has ever known, and is a wanderer for the next thirty five years of his life. He is pushed around by circumstances for the rest of his life. Industrialization conquers Biswas when the land on which his home once stood is turned into an oil-field. Rapid development has uprooted an individual from his home, just as Naipaul's forefathers were wrenched away from their home in order to fulfill the demand for labor on the West Indian plantations. A single man's aspirations are meaningless in front of such opposition. There are those Indians in the novel who try to give up the Indian way of life, but they fail to do so.

For instance, Lal is a converted Christian and holds all Hindus in contempt. He is as rootless as those who cling on to their Indianness. Biswas's mother is desperately poor, and helplessly dependent on one of her relatives for support. Young Biswas suffers one humiliation after another. Lal uses the rod on Biswas frequently, with obvious relish. The disintegration of Biswas's family life symbolizes the disruption of the family life of a Trinidad Indian. The only time Biswas is given

attention is during religious ceremonies and that too, because he is a Brahmin. Otherwise he is only a laborer's child.

Throughout the second chapter, the idea of homelessness is very clear. Biswas wanders from one house to another, searching for a sense of belonging. His stay with a relative Jairam comes to a humiliating halt when he is thrown out for stealing bananas. He goes to his mother who offers no welcome. Now, Biswas has to work in a rum shop where his position is not better than that of his grandfather who was an indentured laborer. Sometimes, he went to the back terrace to see his mother but there he felt unhappy and helpless. The job at the rum shop also ends on a note of disgrace. His mother can only remind Biswas of the pundit's words that he is an unlucky son. Biswas sets off to find another job. He tries to identify himself with a tailor and then with a barber. His search to identify himself with any of the professions is representative of the wider search for roots.

Biswas's wooing of Shama has the farcical, fairytale quality of a Hindi film with Shama's mother, Mrs. Tulsi playing the villain. It is the beginning of a long and highly unsatisfying relationship for Biswas. He is trapped into marrying Shama. After being bullied into marrying Shama, Biswas spends his time regretting the decision. After marriage his mind immediately thinks of escape. He argues with himself that if he avoids physical relationship with his wife, the final commitment can be avoided. But escape from the "Tulsi organization" is impossible. Biswas is trapped. He was expected to become a Tulsi, a nameless face with no identity of his own. Nothing except death can release him now. But he does not conform entirely to their rules, and confines himself to the narrow enclosure which serves as his "home". In his heart, Biswas knows the futility of putting up a fight against the Tulsis. He is haunted by a sense of insecurity which will be with him until the end; "suppose, Mr. Biswas thought in the long room, suppose that at one word, I could just disappear from this room, what would remain to speak of me? A few clothes, a few books. The shouts and triumphs in the hall would continue, the "Puja" would be done; in the morning, The Tulsi store would open its doors"⁽¹³⁴⁾. Biswas unconsciously raises metaphysical questions on man's place on this earth. Biswas realizes how insignificant any one individual is in relation to the universe, and how doubly insignificant any man was when he is without roots, and must depend on other human beings for survival. By his defiance of the Tulsi family, Biswas is harming no one but himself. The fact, which he cannot ignore is his homelessness.

Not only Mohan Biswas, there are other characters in the novel who have been separated from their roots and they experience the "sense of displacement" (Leela 36). Such characters are Seth, Mrs. Tulsi, Govind, W.C. Tuttle, widows of Hanuman House, Raghu, Bipti, Tara, etc. All these characters are uprooted as they are away from their own original homeland, India.

In the novel, there are characters who refuse to accept their derelict status. There is W.C. Tuttle who feels he has managed the right balance between the East and the West. Here is a description of the arrangement of photographs in Tuttle's house. "In one photograph, W.C. Tuttle, naked except for a dhoti, sacred thread and caste marks, head shorn except for the top knot, sat cross legged. Next to this, W.C. Tuttle stood in jacket, trousers, collar, tie, hat..."¹ It was W.C. Tuttle's way of blending east and west. The description of W.C. Tuttle's attempt to balance the two cultures shows how far removed

the Trinidad Indian is from his roots. Naipaul would have recognized Tuttle as a typical “mimic man” which Biswas is fighting against being. But Biswas is nothing really. In a fit of rage his son tells him that when he grows up, he does not wish to be like his father.

Even the vacation, for Biswas and his family was like Cinderella’s dream-come-true. What most people take to be only a natural fact of life-a home- is a fantasy for the rootless. After waiting all his life for a better life, Biswas now waits for death. “A lethargy fell over him. His face grew puffy. His complexion grew dark, not the darkness of a naturally dark skin, not the darkness of sunburn; this was a darkness that seemed to come from within...” (621)

V.S Naipaul deals with the colonial society in the West Indies, which is built on slavery and indentured labor, with no political or cultural identity. The Negroes and the Indians were carried to the sugarcane plantation, and left to decay, without a homeland or an identity, in an alien environment. *A House For Mr. Biswas* is undoubtedly Naipaul’s finest achievement. In it one man attempts to overcome the wasteland of Trinidad’s East Indian Community. The West Indian society demanded a race of people whose main ability is to survive, and it is appropriate that Naipaul’s own community should have been selected by fate to keep populate the region. The East Indian Community survives by acceptance but Biswas refuses to accept. He is determined to escape but his bid to escape apparently fails. But there is a way in which he has triumphed. In spite of his death in debt and the last days clouded in worry, Biswas’s attainment of a house is an assertion of his will to be different. He controls the environment rather than be mastered by it. We can conclude that Biswas’s life ends on an ambiguous note. Triumph is there, but a tragic triumph

=====
Works Cited

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
Cohen, Robin. *Global Diaspora: An Introduction*”. London: UCL, 1997.
“Diasporic Sensibility in V.S. Naipaul’s writings.”
Shodhganga, inflibnet.ac.in
Dr. S. Leela. “Homeland through Diasporic judgment in V.S. Naipaul’s *A House For Mr. Biswas*”
www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jess/papers/NCSCRCCL/volume-2/12.
Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory. A Reader*, ed. Jain, Jasbir. *Critical Spectrum: Essays in Literary culture*. Jaipur: Rawat Publication, 2003
Hammer, Robert D. (ed.), *Critical perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1979.
Klass, Morton. *East Indians in Trinidad*, Columbia University Press, New York et. Al, 1961.
Leela, S. “Homeland through Diasporic Judgement in V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas*. IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (IOSR – JHSS).
McLeod, John, *Postcolonialism*. Manchester University Press, Oxford Road.
Mohanty, Sankar Siba. *Indian West Indian through the Writings of V.S. Naipaul: Socio Cultural and Political Dimensions of Indian Diaspora*. (2009)
Naipaul, V.S. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Picador, Pan Macmillan, London, 2011.