

Review

## Representation of postcolonial identity in Naipaul's works

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This paper attempts to explore representation of postcolonial identity in V. S. Naipaul's three works *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *A Bend in the River* and *An Enigma of Arrival*. This paper attempts to relate how these three works are replete with the theme of identity as the chief protagonists of all these three novels hanker after to find a place for them in the world to assert their identities. Their minds vacillate between two contradictory cultures existing in that time. Researcher attempts to analyze the different strands of identity to make the work more comprehensive and to radicalize its global demand. The origin of the word 'identity' and its literary importance has been projected through this paper along with the different meanings of identity having a slight difference in their meaning. Postcolonial Diasporic authors and their works have been mentioned in the paper to carry out further research on the theme of postcolonial identity. V. S. Naipaul's earned vacuity of female authors by challenging them and their rabble-rousing strengthened his identity in the world, has been assessed and analyzed. It has been studied how in these three novels, main protagonists try to claim their place in the world that is full of challenges in their real life and consequently, the environment of these novels poses a cultural-clash to make their journey of life more complicated and hard to live in antagonistic surroundings.

**Key words:** V. S. Naipaul, post-colony, identity, diaspora, home, place, Hinduism.

### INTRODUCTION

"A recurrent motif in the identity quest of Naipaul's characters is flight". (Gerhard Stilz, 2007 p.49). Through this paper, the researcher aims at exploring the scope of literary research on V. S. Naipaul focusing on the issue of identity in the most comprehensive sense in his three works: *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *A Bend in the River* and *An Enigma of Arrival* (1961, 1979, 1987). Identity can be classified in different ways as it is a broad field and it is needed to avoid it being saggy. It may be in the form of racial, individual, social, sociological, anthropological, philosophical, cultural, ethnical, national and interpersonal identity. Though the theme is one, the scope of this theme is unlimited. It is

the reason that the researcher intends to take identity as interdisciplinary where each type of identity is under review and not only personal and national identity. Benedict Anderson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Raymond Williams, Mathew Arnold, Heidegger, Camus Sartre etc. names are related to identity. They are the spokespersons of this theme, without them if one talk about identity, the issue will be incomplete. If we focus on fiction Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Alice Malsenior Walker, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Rai, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Thiango, Margaret Atwood, Bharti Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayana, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand,

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**ABBREVIATIONS:** HFMS, A House for Mr. Biswas; AD, An Area of Darkness; BR, A Bend in the River.

Rohinton Mistry, Vijay Tendulkar, Simon de Beauvoir, Girish Karnad etc. names stuck directly into readers' mind. The novels such as *Identity*, *The Road*, *The Spies*, *A Suitable Boy*, *A Suitable Girl*, *The Shadow Lines*, *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Some Inner Fury*, *A Silence of Desire*, *The Nowhere Man*, *Two Virgins*, *Cry*, *the Peacock*; *Fasting Feasting*, *The Village by the Sea*, *The Color Purple*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *The God of Small Things*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Surfacing*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, *Desirable Daughters*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Dark Room*, *The English Teacher*, *The Guide*, *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *A Fine Balance*, *Silence! The Court is in Session*; *Sakharam*, *the binder*, *Ghasiram Kotwal*, *The Second Sex*, *Hayavadava*, *Nagamandala* etc., directly or indirectly, are related to the one or the other aspect of identity. Issue of identity will be lopsided if the researcher does not peep into the pages of these works. Only with an in-depth study of all these works with their cultural contexts, a researcher can imbibe the true spirit of identity. Keeping all these novels and novelists in focus, the researcher intends to discover new vistas and avenues to give a broad view of the research on V. S. Naipaul. In 1950, he builds his reputation as a skilled writer on the strength of his early novels including *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) and *In a Free State* (1971). During 1960s and 1970s he stirred controversy for his essays and books on postcolonial cultures in the Caribbean, Africa and India. He won critical recognition with *A House for Mr. Biswas* about an immigrant's attempt to assert his identity and independence. Other novels also explain the same but though in harsh and critical tone. The disintegration and alienation, typical of postcolonial nations has been depicted in his *In a Free State* (1971), *Guerrillas* (1975) and *A Bend in the River* (1975). After a nervous breakdown, he tried to commit suicide, but luckily the gas meter ran out. While at oxford he met Patricia Hale. They married in 1995. She died in 1995 from cancer. Then Naipaul married Nadira Khanum Alvi, a divorced Pakistani journalist. *The Mystic Masseur* won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1958. His *Miguel Street* (1959), a collection of short stories won a Somerset Maugham Award. *Mr. Stone and the Knight's Companion* (1963) won the Hawthorn Prize. *The Mimic Men* (1963) is the winner of the 1968 W. H. Smith Literary Award. *In a Free State* (1971) won the Booker Prize for in fiction. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a story of struggle for identity and home by Mr. Mohun Biswas. *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River* are set in Africa. *The Enigma of Arrival* is a personal account of his life in England. *A Way in the World* (1994) is a formerly experimental narrative that combines fiction and non-fiction in a historical portrait of Caribbean. *Half a Life* follows the adventures of an Indian Willie Chandran in post-war Britain. His non-fiction work includes three books about India: *An Area of Darkness*, *India; A Wounded Civilization* and *India; A Million*

*Mutinies Now* and two books about Islamic societies: *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981) and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions* (1998). He was awarded the British Cohen Literature Prize by the Arts Council of England 1993. He holds honorary doctorate from Cambridge University and Colombia universities in New York; and honorary degrees from the universities of Cambridge, London and Oxford. He is best known for his controversial work *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990).

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is, unsurprisingly, highly acclaimed name in the history of the postcolonial Indian Diasporic literature. Though the question of identity is not new, and much work has been done on this theme of identity but still a few very important strands of identity are still untouched in Naipaul's works. Before discussing it extensively, it is necessary to explain what actually identity means. According to Merriam Webster's Dictionary, identity means 'sameness of essential or generic character in different instances', 'the distinguishing character or personality of an individual', 'the condition of being the same with something described or asserted'. According to Free Online Dictionary, 'The identity is the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity'. The origin of identity is Middle French word 'Identite', from Late Latin 'Identiate'. 'Identitas' probably from Latin 'Identidem', repeatedly contradiction of 'idem et idem' literally 'same as same'. The first known use of identity is considered in 1570. According to Marx, 'Identity is sense of self, a social, economic location.' One other source reads, 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousnesses. (From Preface and Introduction to a critique of political economy). Freud says, 'Identity is not stable or rational but ever conflicted tension between id and ego, conscious and subconscious mind'. Id, ego and superego are the three operations defined in Sigmund Freud's structural model of psyche. Nietzsche opines, 'There is no truth, only interpretations of the truth. The ethical self must be shown through 'genealogy' to be a historical construction. The self is a Dionysian will to power'. A Fiji Indian academic writer and former politician, Dr. Satendra Pratap Nandan, writes of a 'yearning this longing/for a place that is/no more' (Dr. S. P. Nandan 74) in his poem; *The Lonliness of Island*. In this poem modernity, loss, identity and deception are closely associated. John Locke added his chapter *Of Identity and Diversity* which gives his account of identity and personal identity to the second edition of the essay. His account of personal identity is embedded in a general account of identity. In this general account of identity Locke distinguishes between 'the identity of atoms, masses of atoms and living things'. Descartes' self-concept reflects modernity's idea of self identity and insofar as Sartre's self concept reflects the nature of post modern self, exploring the similarities and contrasts between

Descartes and Sartre. He illustrates how self-identity in the post-modern milieu can be understood paradoxically. In his attempt to break down binary thought structures that characterize interactions between different cultures in his 1994 work *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha defines the term of third space as a place where identities can be negotiated.

V. S. Naipaul is unique in the history of English literature. He contributed many works which, more or less, are related to Indian identity. *A House for Mr. Biswas, India: A Wounded Civilization, A Bend in the River, The Enigma of Arrival, Half a Life, The Mimic Men, In a Free State, A Way in the World, Magic Seeds* etc. works are related to one or the other type of identity. Naipaul is a very meticulous artist, aware of the importance of past into the artistic whole. His focus is exclusively on the various types of identity. He originally designs the web of identity through different characters in different situations. His way of depicting Indianism is equally indispensable. Another significant aspect of his structural framework of his plays is the coherence by contrast – contrast of characters principally. He is regarded, incontrovertibly, a harbinger of Indian identity. He is a most significant practitioner of art of fiction where he blends myth, reality, multiculturalism, Hinduism, modernism, traditionalism and much more to give a full vent to his emotions which crave for identity. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a story about a Mr. Mohun Biswas who experiences various forms of oppressions and misfortune. To Champa Rao Mohan, 'V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a beautiful work which deals with the theme of isolation, frustration and negation in a colonized society- a society that turn cruel and callous to the aspiration of the protagonist Mr. Mohun Biswas' (Champa Rao Mohan, 2004; 01). The house can be seen as a central symbol for freedom from oppression or humiliation and a representation of desire for self-fulfillment and self-actualization. Mr. Biswas is married not only to Shama alone but her whole family along with her house— a house where the names of daughters' husbands are forgotten and they are expected to become Tulsis. Mr. Biswas is the centre of the novel and the themes are closely linked with him. The protagonist Mr. Biswas is a rather tragic figure and traces his life from his inauspicious birth with an extra finger. He suffers many ignominies. His education is hardly, what could be called complete. His father's death, the splitting up the family, his mother's poverty and his own penniless childhood paint a very grim picture of deprivation, despair and depression. When he meets and falls in love with Shama, he is assimilated into the rumbling household losing their identities in the murky undergrowth of a joint family. But Mr. Biswas a most unlikely rebel rejects this assimilation. His professional life is equally tumultuous. In a conversation with Govind, one of the son-in-laws, he is advised by Govind to work on the Tulsi estate, and then Mr. Biswas instantly rebels, 'Give up sign painting? And

my independence? No boy. My Motto is: paddle your own canoe...So you say. But these people are bloodsuckers, man. Rather than work for them, I would catch crab or sell coconut' (HFMB108). That's why Mr. Biswas feels much alienated with the society in which he is living. Mr. Biswas hold many jobs including a driver, sub-overseer, a government clerk and a journalist among other things.

Naipaul remembers his own life with his mother's joint family and then writes this novel. As Champa Rao Mohan contends, "Many incidents and events in *A House for Mr. Biswas* have an exact parallel in Naipaul's own life. The character of Mr. Biswas is modeled on Naipaul's father" (Champa Rao Mohan, 2004;14).

"In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the story is portrayed through a series of homes which symbolize Mr. Biswas' personal identity. Mr. Biswas was trapped in the clutches of Tulsidom. He has dream of his own house. The house of his dream is highly symbolic. It is an archetypal symbol, which connotes stability and permanence, something solid in life" (2004, p.05). Mohun Biswas continually meets obstacles and challenges and even failures in his endeavors. His life is difficult and traumatic from the very beginning. After his father drowns, Mohun and his family have to live with wealthy relatives. To Cudjoe, "Mr. Biswas entered the world of Tulsis unaware that his romantic ego would be crushed by a hierarchical order that did not allow for the expression of the individuality" (Cudjoe 1988; 54). This again emphasizes the theme of loss of freedom and humiliation. It should also be taken into account that the society and culture in which the novel takes place is much big issue of caste and class-conscious. Mr. Biswas never has an opportunity to develop a sense of self. He himself finds himself in situations that made him feel powerless. He is always in situations where he is having people tell him what to do. He never has any personal power. Mr. Biswas realizes that with money and possession a person tends to have more power in society. In fact, a house is a symbol of which illustrates his ability to realize a self identity and gain personal power to take control of his personal life. Although Mr. Biswas is an ordinary man with no outstanding features, Naipaul succeeds in giving him a heroic status. He is, in many ways, an archetypal figure in that he embodies a universal theme—the search for identity and meaning in life. Mr. Biswas fights to maintain his independence and feels confident that life will eventually yield to him its sweetness and romance. The effort to achieve the ownership of the house, reflected in the very little of the novel becomes his passion and motive of life. The element of vulnerability and lack of certainty help to take Mr. Biswas into a human and sympathetic person as well as a kind of everyman whose identity crisis is never ending story. During his forty six short years, Mr. Biswas has always struggled to seek and define his sense of self but to no avail. *A House for Mr. Biswas* masterfully evokes a man's

quest of autonomy against the backdrop of postcolonial Trinidad. Mr. Biswas is no comic buffoon. Despite being buffeted by economic, social and cultural forces. He tries to emerge from the trauma of life. He explains his words to his son during the breakdown of Green Vale when Anand asks him in a bewildered way, "Who are you?" Mr. Biswas replies, "I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know" (HFMB 291). Gerhard Stiliz argues, "Singh desires, like Biswas, a house that he cannot obtain, since he only has a birthright to the ground of his father but not to that of his mother...Singh spends a lot of time with his mother's family but, in scenes like this, his cousin lets him know that he will never be accepted by this part of family" (Gerhard Stiliz 49).

Mr. Biswas made repeated attempts to build a house—place which gives solace, comfort and satisfaction to the dweller. In the book the house also symbolizes status and property. It is somewhat sign of success. The house symbolizes the aspirations, sweet desires and it is related with Mohun Biswas' future prospects which keep him alive till his death.

Hinduism is the central motif of the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Amongst the five major castes Brahmin or priestly caste is considered the highest caste and this is the caste to which Mohun Biswas belongs. Different types of Hindus are depicted in the novel where Mr. Biswas and his family eat non-vegetarian food at the time of his father's death, "The food was unsalted and as soon as he began to chew Mr. Biswas felt he was eating raw flesh and the nauseous saliva filled his mouth again" (HFMB 33). On the other side, Hindu Brahmins are considered pure vegetarian and eating flesh is against the Hindu customs. Being Brahmin is a sign of great status. This is seen in the novel where Mr. Biswas goes to a boy to Tara's house and is respected as a Brahmin and pampered. He is dressed in a clean dhoti and a gift of money and dhoti is offered to him. To Cudjoe, "A House for Mr. Biswas must also be seen as a product of Naipaul's Hindu sensibility. The Hindu epic the Ramayana adds a philosophical dimension to the text. (Cudjoe 51). The shrine, vessels and instruments of worship such as bowls and lamps are the symbols of religious activities performed at home. Household worship makes use of fire for purification (a symbol of the sun), water also for purification, food offerings, incense flowers and other — materials also are used for purifications. It is carried out at a certain fixed times that is, sunshine, midday and sunset. Traditional Hindu dresses, sacred thread, caste or sects marks on the forehead and sometimes on the arms and other parts of the body—all tell about Hinduism. Certain sacraments also take place and are usually four in number: birth, initiation, marriage and death. The village is surrounded by ill - omens. Even taking birth of Mr. Biswas, the wrong way round, at midnight, with six fingers, prediction of his being lecher and spendthrift because of his widely spaced teeth

all enumerates some traditional and astronomical beliefs of Hindus' who are not only caste and class conscious for being Hindu but also future conscious of their children. It is interesting to note that Naipaul has developed his own conception about fiction. His approach to novel is a bit different from that of Conrad who seeks only to explain, to theorize and moralize about an event rather than to allow a situation to describe the happenings. Conrad is so much pre-occupied with the facts that there is a little room for the readers to enter into the action. (Dr. S. P. Nandan 06)

In his brilliant novel *A Bend in the River* V. S. Naipaul tells the story of an Indian name Salim, a shopkeeper and a Muslim by caste. The novel is set in Zaire, currently in Democratic Republic of the Congo during the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko in the late 1960s and 1970s. The novel takes such topics such as cultural independence of Africa and Europe, the influence of ideology and ethnicity on an individual's identity and a complexities of African nationhood following independence from Belgium colonial rule, "The world is what it is; men who are nothing who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (BR, p.01). The novel grapples with weighty postcolonial themes in an undaunted manner for which Naipaul has been both praised and bitterly criticized. The novel starts in the colonized regions and days of Africa where novelist is aggressively perusing his way socially and financially. Tribe war terrorize and attempt to liberate Africa in every aspect. Africa is being broken and built again in a similar fashion to the antagonist. One can watch Africa lose its property value and the violence of war envelops the coastal region where the book is set.

Salim, an Indian Muslim shopkeeper, living on the east coast of Africa, sets out to make a life at a small village at a bend in the river in the interior of Africa. He arrives there following the old slave trails, shortly after the town has won its independence in 1963. Salim calls Africa his home in this way, "Africa was my home, had been the home of my family for centuries" (BR 12). The town is in shambles with a poor economy and harshly enough food to feed its people. Yet Salim stays and builds a business. At one occasion Indar says to him, "We're washed up here, you know. To be in Africa you have to be strong. We are not strong" (BR 12). He is joined by a family servant named Metty and befriends a couple named Shobha and Mahesh. He also attempts to mentor a Bush woman's young son, Ferdinand. Salim though born in Africa feels the tension of an outsider inside a divided castes system in part due to his Arabic background which comprises a large distinctive part of Africa. Salim is indifferent to the struggles of slavery. He keeps slaves yet gives them the choice to be free yet they stay with him. He takes no part in any slavery uprising. It is not his hate for Africans that he keeps slaves but his love for what he feels that they are his people and gives him chances to progress. Finally slavery is abolished and a

black man, part military, part tribal becomes the president. Property value goes up and Salim finds himself gaining the success he dreamt of. As the years rolled the new president of the nation dumped money into building a university and domains where the rich white people live. In the background are the soldiers and the rumings of the war. Salim has a brief passionate yet violent affair with a white married woman and at one point is arrested for dealing in black market ivory. Ferdinand, in the last part of the novel, says to Salim when he asks about his mother, "She's given up the business. And you must do that too. You must go. You must go right away. There is nothing here for you. They've taken you into jail now" (BR 319). Finally it can be concluded that Salim is a personal outsider in all communities, he inhabits. As an onlooker, Salim is in position to notice and analyze the identity related issues better than others. This capacity however results in his marginalization.

The *Enigma of Arrival* is a study of a man, a writer from Trinidad, named Jack, who goes to live, as Naipaul did, in a secluded valley in Wiltshire. It is an autobiographical novel and the title page bears the words 'a novel'. It offers a portrait of the intellectual landscape of one who has long elevated the life of the mind above all other forms of life. Its subject is the narrator's consciousness, its reformation by the act of migration. The story of Jack and his garden are portrayed in an interesting way. The story of Brenda, the country wife who expected too much from her beauty and Les, her husband who murdered her after she returned, is told in an oddly manner. In *The Enigma of Arrival* Naipaul describes the period when he lived in a cottage on the Wiltshire estate, "I felt the coming together of England and India as a violation" (AD 201).

Naipaul describes Stephen Tennant, sunset scene over Stonehenge. He watches the changes in the landscape, and the moment of the seasons with an innocent eye, seeing as a child might for the first time. His presence in this haunted landscape is part of a larger historical process which has carried him from Trinidad to this remote corner of Wiltshire. So, in this novel Naipaul's own identity is reflected by him when he lived as a tenant in Wiltshire.

Naipaul is a gigantic giant who has numerous fictions and non-fiction works in his credit which made him famous overnight. These days also Naipaul's magic is working and like *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990)

became a centre of controversy. In an interview on Tuesday (June 02, 2011) Naipaul was asked if he considered any living writer his match, he replied, "I don't think so". He felt that women writers were quite different. He also added that he is far better than any female writer who ever lived. "Female writers", he said, "are handicapped by sentimentality—to a narrow view of the world". Even Jane Austin was not spared by him. About her Naipaul said, "She could not possibly share her sentimental ambitions of the world". He added further that I will read a passage or two and I will easily tell whether it is written by a male or female writer. That's why Naipaul is talk of the town across the world these days too as he was in 2001 when he became Nobel Laureate. The women writers' rage has made him noticeable again. In brief, to work on such a renowned writer is really a wonderful and fantastic experience as he is, at least, different from the other writers, if not the best.

## CONCLUSION

Conclusively, it can be said that it is V. S. Naipaul's serendipity and his writing skills which make him the prominent author across the world. It is worthwhile to reconsider his stance on postcolonial identity while reading his texts. His works, more or less, are nothing but a struggle for self, a fight for right and a voice against suppression and exploitation. He has stashed his legacy inside him and poured it in the form of brilliant works where house has more significance than only a place as Gerhard Stilz contends, "A house is a place in space but also in society" (Gerhard Stilz 47).

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