

THE HOUSE AND THE WORLD IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS*

A House for Mr Biswas, a novel by Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, is regarded as his most significant achievement. The novel traces Mohun Biswas's effort to define his postcolonial, hybrid identity and to establish himself in an imitative, peripheral postcolonial society. Such half-made society has been presented through the experience of displacement and blurring of the borders between private and public space. Mr Biswas's symbolic quest for meaningful independence and his endeavor to claim his portion of the earth contain pathos and humor. On a larger scale, the novel reflects Trinidadian Indian social history and the transition of Trinidad from a colonial to an independent status. Naipaul, however, elevates the issue even further, to the category of the universal, that is, to the eternal identity dilemma and man's struggle for survival and sense of belonging.

Keywords: Indo-Caribbean, postcolonial society, mimicry, hybrid identity, displacement, universal implications.

Introduction

A House for Mr Biswas (1961), Naipaul's epic and autobiographical novel is set in his Trinidad hometown. Therefore, it is vital to mention the author's somewhat peculiar background. Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is a writer of Indian descent, originating from the West Indian island of Trinidad and Tobago. In other words, an Indian from Trinidad who has lived in England since the age of 18. Thus, in the same way as his native island, which is not strictly of South America, and not strictly of the Caribbean, the Nobel Laureate has been located between worlds: "The East Indian-West Indian boy whose Oxford education left him what French calls a double exile, a deracinated Colonial" (PRITCHARD 2008: 436). In the eyes of the critics, this fact raises different issues and questions like whether Naipaul's works display critical consciousness, whether he reflects a writing culture in the style of Western tradition, or maybe his writings are emblematic of a different

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type of mimicked postcolonial mentality. Probably the best answer to those questions would be somewhere, again, in-between.

In this lyrical novel, by writing about creole and colonial Trinidad, about the complexity of a diverse, diasporic and changing society, the outcome reaches beyond local boundaries. As the recorder of human experience, Naipaul evokes concepts that are universal in their human implications. Mohun Biswas's desperate fight to gain his own house, examined against the background of creole society, is symbolic of man's need to develop an authentic identity. For that reason, calling the novel an epic and its protagonist an Everyman might not be too pretentious.

Half-way house

But the writer, particularly one with a colonial background, is always a kind of mimic man. (RAHIM 2007: 7)

In his essay "Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse", Homi Bhabha, an eminent postcolonial theorist, argues that the main mode of colonial discourse is, what he calls, mimicry. Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference, of another history and another culture. According to Bhabha colonial mimicry "is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*... consequently, the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (BHABHA 1994: 86). In Bhabha's opinion, mimicry represents an ironic compromise between the demand for identity and the pressure of change. How true this is of the character of Mr Biswas! An outsider in the family into which he married, the Tulsis, who refuses to follow the family in their habitual devotions; he does not want to be recruited and he has a terror of being enslaved. On the other hand, Biswas's unaccommodated state and his search to belong is also influenced by the "crisis of signification in the changing social ethos of colonial Trinidad" (RAHIM 2007: 4).

As such mimicry comes out as one of the most effective strategies of colonial power. Bhabha further states that the menace of mimicry is its double vision, as a result of the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object. The repetition of partial presence is the basis of mimicry. This partial vision of the colonizer's presence "shatters the unity of

man's being" (BHABHA 1994: 89). Almost the same but not quite, almost the same but not white – such form of difference – that is *mimicry*. Those people's faith is decided by their mixed and split origin. According to Bhabha, mimicry is like camouflage, it is a form of resemblance, "and that form of resemblance is the most terrifying thing to behold" (BHABHA 1994: 90). That is a difference between being English and being Anglicized, Bhabha points out. This kind of ambivalence brings about contradictory articulations of reality and desire, so that, as Bhabha puts it "identity-effects are always split so that two attitudes towards external reality persist" (BHABHA 1994: 91). This problem of postcolonial identity, of half-made society of the dependent people, of wandering and displacement, of physical and psychological deprivations, is what can be clearly seen in the character of Mohun Biswas.

The novel comments on the dilemmas of colonial dispossession and puts focus on the struggle of an insignificant West Indian to find fulfillment in life. As background to Mr Biswas's striving for the need for a "portion of the earth" (NAIPAUL 1985: 8) to call his own, the novel also recounts the experience of the Indian immigrant community in colonial Trinidad before and after the Second World War. They are forever in transition between languages, between classes, between castes. Those Indo-Trinidadians will always be inadequate and inferior to the Englishmen. Theirs is "a society that had no rules and patterns, and classifications were a chaotic business" (NAIPAUL 1985: 510). Such form of multicultural environment of creole and colonial Trinidad, as well as the complexity of this diverse society is depicted in Naipaul's work.

The mimicry also reflects itself in the destabilization of Indo-Caribbean masculinity. East-Indian men in the British Caribbean are constantly trying to make meaning of their hybrid Trinidadian identity. In this respect, in a colonized, creolized society, masculinity becomes a "battleground for achieving respectability for oneself and one's culture" (CERASO, CONNOLLY 2009: 114). That makes masculinity interwoven with questions of race, class and nation as it can be seen in the case of Indo-Trinidadian men who feel subordinate to the Englishmen and can only copy or mimic their British counterparts, their "hegemonic" or "true" masculinity. Their masculinity is vulnerable: "As individuals disempowered by their race and class in their representative colonial and postcolonial societies, their masculinity is frequently destabilized

through competing cultural representations of manhood” (CERASO, CONNOLLY 2009: 113). It becomes an imitation of masculinity, a struggle for power in a culture of domination. Consequently, Mohun Biswas’s masculinity is threatened too, he feels powerless.

In the novel, the complexity of the diverse and diasporic society is presented through the experience of displacement. The term that Bhabha uses is *unhomely*. Bhabha’s interpretation points to the novel’s “tragic-comic failure to create a dwelling place” for the protagonist as evidence of “the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world” (BHABHA 1994: 141). He calls the blurring of the borders between private and public space, past and present time, inside and outside positions, “the unhomely moment” which “creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow” (BHABHA 1994: 141). In this relocation of the home and the world, in this displacement, the border between home and world becomes confused. The home is no longer just a place of domestic life, nor is the world its social counterpart. According to Bhabha, such vision is disorienting. Even further, Bhabha paraphrases Iris Murdoch’s statement that a novel must be a house for a free people to live in. In that sense, Bhabha asks whether a novel can also be a place where the unhomely can live.

Mohun Biswas’s unsettled and unaccommodated life is clearly an example of it as well as is Hanuman House. Biswas is caught in an “in-between” reality. He feels the pain of cultural displacement, of the imposition of foreign ideas. The house is in the world, the world is in the house. It becomes a half-way house, “a hybridity, a difference ‘within’” (BHABHA 1994: 148). Such people in such divided, dispossessed post-colonial societies do not belong: “They are of the world but not fully in it; they represent the outsideness of the inside that is too painful to remember” (BHABHA 1994: 152). Those people, then, feel invaded, they feel alarmed. That is why the image of the house is the symbolic identification between inner and outer. However, in another essay²² Bhabha writes that *A House for Mr Biswas* becomes the first of Naipaul’s novels to reach beyond Trinidad, that it is a novel that deals with human problems of universal application. The value of the narrative, Bhabha argues, consists in its “ability to transcend and resolve the colonial con-

²² Bhabha, Homi : “Representation and the Colonial text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism“ (1984).

traditions of cultural heterogeneity, racial mixedness, historical and social anomie²³. Thus, the novel heals the break between colonial content and literary value. It achieves universality. Change, growth, choice, will – all these terms mark the progress of the narrative and give fiction its value and resolution. The themes of destabilizing processes of change and the struggle to make a place for oneself in an uncertain world have been clearly manifested in the novel. The slow disintegration of the Tulsi dynasty and Biswas's sense of existential displacement are evidence of a new changing world which he tries to understand and locate himself in. Social ethos of colonial Trinidad is being altered. The Tulsi fortress and its thick walls and windowless rooms cannot keep away the advance of an encroaching world: "The trauma of change is displayed in the uneasy disparity between the internal life of Hanuman House and the reality of the world outside" (RAHIM 2007: 5). In that sense, Mr Biswas is ambivalently situated between "the old assurances of the disintegrating feudal law of the Tulsi clan and the attractions of independence offered by the emerging modern nation" (RAHIM 2007: 5).

Hanuman House is the symbol of discomfiting change, it is a house where worlds intersect. In this new, changed socio-political and cultural reality, Naipaul offers no simple resolutions. Even though Hanuman House and the Tulsi household have undergone some sort of transformation, Mr Biswas cannot return to stability with triumph. He moves from one imperfect, partially completed house to the next. Anxiety about change in the multicultural environment of colonial and postcolonial Trinidad is constant. So is the struggle for power in a culture of domination.

Paddling your own canoe

Naipaul has made the following point about the novel:

It is something that people in my culture have borrowed from other people and the danger is that we tend...to create an alien form, an alien novel, the whole form and concept of life is totally alien to the society. We impose one on the other. My attempt has been, in a way, to dredge down a little deeper to the truth about one's own situation. (RAHIM 2007: 1)

Mr Biswas's situation at the time of a heart attack at the age of forty-six, is that he is living in his own home, but he is unemployed, his

²³ Ibid.

house is an architectural disaster, and he cannot afford to pay for the mortgage. This might be a dubious victory, but it is still better than the death in the house of the Tulsis:

But bigger than them all was the house, his house.

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 portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (NAIPAUL 1985: 13-14)

The protagonist's life-long struggle to get a place of his own, his need to find himself, is actually a fight against an unaccommodating society which denies Mr Biswas his dignity and independence. Mr Biswas makes an effort to make a living and secure his independence, to win free of his wife's family, the dynasty of the Tulsis. He is from a poor class and half-accidentally marries one of the Tulsi girls before he has a steady job. He feels imprisoned: "Catch him. Marry him. Throw him in a coal barrel. That is the philosophy of your family", says Mr Biswas (NAIPAUL 1985: 517). He moves a lot. First, he minds a Tulsi store in the country, but fails to prosper. Then, he goes to one of the Tulsi estates and builds a little house, which is destroyed in a storm. Another house that he tried to build is caught in fire. He keeps coming back to the Tulsi household. Eventually, he arrives in Port of Spain, the capital city, and at long last he manages to have a house built. He buys it, that is, with all its faults, that they have not seen upon purchasing, although its drawbacks are soon forgotten: "And how quickly they forgot the inconveniences of the house and saw it with the eyes of the visitors!" (NAIPAUL 1985: 580). Soon after, he falls ill and dies.

Biswas's search of a house, of his independence has both tragic and comic aspects. Irony is present as well. Being from a low class, he longs for security, but it is evident that he is marrying into an oppressive family. His mother-in-law and Seth, the overseer, rule the Tulsi dynasty with rigid authority. Hanuman House, the house of the Tulsis, resembles a prison, darkness prevails, it is gloomy and without light. It is a large household with "shifting, tangled, multifarious relationship in [that] crowded house..." (NAIPAUL 1985: 462). Mr Biswas feels alienated from the hierarchy of the family. He accepts the role of the Hindu wife in the Tulsi household. He marries into the Tulsi family and finds himself trapped: "...That's what you and your family do to me. Trap me in this hole" (NAIPAUL 1985: 223). He feels powerless, and wants to break free from the Tulsi rule: "Mr Biswas had no money or position. He

was expected to become a Tulsi. At once he rebelled. [...] And at least once a week he thought of leaving the shop, leaving Shama, leaving the children, and taking that road” (NAIPAUL 1985: 97, 183). He finds the extended Tulsi family so oppressive. He is forced to become a rebel.

The Tulsi family is allegorical of colonialism itself. “Tulsidom” depends for its existence on the maintenance of men’s sense of inferiority. But it is also representative of an Indo-Trinidadian family that has become a part of creole culture by adopting Christian beliefs. Naipaul’s depiction of the Tulsi family life is one based on an accepted ritual and feeling, on traditionalism, rigidity and hierarchy. Mrs Tulsi and Seth built a slave society inside “Tulsidom” in order to keep their unsteady empire. They have established patterns. Although these established patterns are decaying, the larger family ties disappear. The clan functions on the psychology of a slave system. Men are needed only as husbands for the Tulsi daughters and labourers on the Tulsi estates. Mrs Tulsi, a powerful Mother-Figure, rules through an understanding of this psychology of slavery. She and Seth together fulfill the psychology of rulership. Any sign of individualism is punished, they try to destroy the individual personality. Mr Biswas is a *bad slave*, he does not want to join the system. He constantly defies it, although sometimes he is forced to conform. At moments he returns to Hanuman House for comfort: “He remained in the Blue Room, feeling secure to be only a part of Hanuman House, an organism that possessed a life, strength and power to comfort which was quite separate from the individuals who composed it” (NAIPAUL 1985: 302). So, Biswas tries to be an individual, he tries to make a break with Tulsidom. The Tulsis regard his rebellion a joke and him a buffoon. Nevertheless, Mr Biswas refuses to feel inferior to the Tulsis. He becomes a misfit.

Gradually, because of various influences, Tulsidom is exposed to change. This change is inevitable. Tulsidom disintegrates, its hierarchy begins to crumble, the autocracy collapses. In this way rebellion against the Tulsi standards becomes possible. The Tulsi family declines, their self-sufficiency and family ties break down and they absorb into a larger community. Mr Biswas’s struggle is actually with society but in the form of the Tulsi family. It continues and is never really resolved. He tries to adjust himself to the profound change in his society and is eventually worn out trying to do it. Even before he is forty, he considers his career closed and puts his ambition on his children: “Living had always been

a preparation, a waiting. And so the years had passed; and now there was nothing to wait for. Except the children” (NAIPAUL 1985: 586). This passive attitude is a trait he bequeathed from his ancestors. Mr Biswas feels temporary about his life and cannot accept any condition as permanent. So do the old men who came from India to Trinidad. Such is the Indian experience of the West Indies:

They could not speak English and were not interested in the land where they lived; it was a place where they had come for a short time and stayed longer than they expected. They continually talked of going back to India, but when the opportunity came, many refused, afraid of the unknown, afraid to leave the familiar temporariness. (NAIPAUL 1985: 194)

Nevertheless, how does Mr Biswas rebel? What kind of *l'home revolte* is he? Even though his rebellion seems the one of a mediocre, ridiculous man, he refuses to give in, he struggles to find his personal identity, to find a place he can call his own. He lives his whole life in the state of semi-permanency, regards every situation as temporary. He has moved from one house to another, none of them belonging to him:

He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him!...In none of these places he was being missed because in none of these places had he ever been more than a visitor, an upsetter of routine...There was nothing to speak of him. (NAIPAUL 1985: 131-132)

Naipaul's hero is an uprooted man, feeling and being alienated and estranged. That is why he has to break away from an oppressively traditional society. In his case, it is in the form of the Tulsi family. He refuses to feel inferior to the Tulsis. He fights for his individuality, he fights a system which tends to destroy his true personality. He wants to build a house of his own, also a symbolic house of his independence. His is a rebellion against humiliation, against nonentity. He feels imprisoned, trapped. But he will not accommodate himself to the pattern, he wants to *paddle his own canoe*. Mr Biswas refuses to give up his dream of becoming a self-made man and owning a house of his own – a house as a constant symbol of his quest for meaningful independence, of his search for order, for stability and permanence, as well as, for an achievement in life. Thus, he is torn between India and Western values as is this repeated desire for the independent home: “In a society that can offer no unity of religion or culture, the house takes on a function of ritual which the individual needs in order to give significance to his actions” (Mac Donald in HAMNER 1997: 247). Mr Biswas finally settles in his house in Sikkim Street. He has found his home after a life of searching:

He thought of the house as his own, though for years it had been irretrievably mortgaged. And during these months of illness and despair he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it...As a boy he had moved from one house of strangers to another...And now at the end he found himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth. That he should have been responsible for this seemed to him, in these last months, stupendous. (NAIPAUL 1985: 8)

However, the conclusion is somewhat ambivalent. It seems as if there is no solution to the problem. The beginning of the novel rewrites the end and in that sense it never really begins or ends. The irony lies in the fact that when Mr Biswas does gain the house it is mortgaged, it is an architectural disaster and he dies. But it is still a victory, even if it is a pathetic one. He dared to be an individual, he developed as a person. He has the house, he has his home and has faith in his son Anand and his future. He finally finds happiness in the things like his plants, his insecure house and his immediate family. His quest for the house is his victory over the chaos and anonymity into which he was born. The novel is the answer to the refrain: "There was nothing to speak of him" (NAIPAUL 1985: 132). His is a story of human perseverance.

On a larger scale this story is a microcosm for the society as a whole, for Trinidadian Indian social history and the country's transition from a colonial to an independent status. The abrupt introduction of democratic processes in a largely illiterate society brings ironic contrasts. Naipaul portrays the society in which the change is inevitable, where Hindu tradition is decaying, disintegrating and the old system of values is passing away. There is a gap between the old and the new. Nonetheless, beneath the story of the Trinidad Hindus, of being an Indian in Trinidad, of those people who cannot take root, of the theme of East Indian acculturation, displacement, isolation and non-identification lies *bare humanity* and the constant *dilemma of identity*. Biswas's rebellion is an affirmation of universal values. He is an alienated modern man courageously fighting a system that denies. He kept going and his faith is admirable. Naipaul lifted the West Indian experience onto a broader scale of values. In this novel he managed to transcend colonial concerns and achieve universality.

Conclusion

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage...It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare. (Lacan in BHABHA 1994: 85)

Colonial mimicry as the mode of colonial discourse, as the representation of “a difference that is almost the same but not quite”, as the tension between the demand for identity and the pressure of change – is an ironic compromise. It is a form of difference and at the same time a form of resemblance. Such men are Indian by blood and colour, but their tastes, intellect and opinions are English. This is a position of East Indian men in the British Caribbean. Restricted by their social positioning under colonialism, East Indian Caribbean men in a (former) colony only “mimic” the British. This condition also brings about the term of *unhomely* – as “the relocation of the home and the world”, where there is no distinct border between the private and the public. The character of Mohun Biswas and his unaccommodated figure is a clear example of it. This displacement, this half-way house brings anguish, this displacement brings disorientation. In that sense Naipaul explores rootlessness and estrangement as well as the pursuit of the sense of belonging.

The problem reaches even deeper into the issue of the widespread contemporary experience of alienation and gives universality to the theme. The universality lies in Biswas’s ambitions for home, security, status, independence, although at the same time he remains an individual. That is the artistry of this novel. Mohun Biswas’s quest for the house, however flawed in its realization, is a victory over the chaos and anonymity into which he was born. He proclaimed his existence. All this makes his quest and his struggle to impress himself upon society through achievement, his effort to extract order from the chaos of everyday existence – similar to every common man’s in everyday life. In this sense, Naipaul’s oeuvre “reveals a painful struggle to adhere to this attachment to the artist’s only nourishing subject-matter, the human condition, despite all that would undermine it. This struggle has ensured his continuing vitality and appeal to those who might say: “Now we are *all* ‘colonials’” (THORPE 1976: 8).

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КУЋА И СВЕТ У РОМАНУ *КУЋА ЗА ГОСПОДИНА БИЗВАЗА* В. С. НАЈПОЛА

Резиме

Кућа за господина Бизваза, роман Видиадхара Сурајпрасада Најпола, се сматра његовим најбољим остварењем. Роман прати борбу Мохуна Бизваса у намери да пронађе свој постколонијални, хибридни идентитет и себе дефинише и оствари у периферном, имитативном постколонијалном друштву. Овакво недовршено друштво, представљено је кроз појам измештености и нестајања границе између приватног и јавног простора. Бизвазова симболична потрага за смисленом независношћу и настојање да избори право на своје парче земље и место под сунцем садржи елементе и патоса и хумора. Шире посматрано, роман одражава друштвену историју Индијаца са Тринадада и транзицију земље од колоније ка независној држави. Најпол, међутим, подиже ову тематику на још виши ниво - ниво универзалног, односно, вечиту дилему о идентитету, борби за опстанак и осећају припадања.

Кључне речи: индо-карипски, постколонијално друштво, мимикрија, хибридни идентитет, измештеност, универзалне импликације.

