The 'Otherization' of Diaspora Community in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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V. S. Naipaul is considered to be one of the most prominent expatriate novelists having first hand colonial experience in English literature. His novels deal with the colonial as well as postcolonial societies with an explicit account of the common complexities inherent among the marginalized societies. Naipaul's work is commonly regarded as an implicit biography of his departure from the narrow background of the Caribbean island to the open cosmopolitan culture of the world at large. He carries three conflicting, at a time, interacting components in his personality of being a Trinidadian colonial, an English metropolitan, and a person of Indian ancestry.

The worldwide culture, economic and political changes resulted in the emergence of Diaspora writing by the prominent writers such as Derek Wolcott, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and V. S. Naipaul. These writers represented the generation that had to encounter the struggle that resulted from the withdrawal of imperial order and the resultant cultural confusion. Although all the diasporic writers mentioned above hold a sway over the perceptive reader, Naipaul seems outstanding among the popular postcolonial novelists because of his exceptional treatment of common diasporic experiences. Because of his family and Trinidadian circumstances he is an expatriate who has started with no other recourses than his steadfastness and the elegance that he has developed through hard work. For his twenty first year of staying in England, he has never felt at home and still recognizes himself as an outsider.

Conceptually, otherization has two levels, one social, one political. On the social level, otherization of any person by a group based upon class, race, ethnicity, gender or religion, is to differentiate the group from another so as to exclude the latter, whom one wants to subordinate or subjugate. On the political level, the otherization of non-Western people and culture by Western people and culture is meant to show the superiority of Western people and culture. In conventional circumstances, the Western treat non-Western people as 'other' in order to show themselves as different from and superior to latter.

Naipaul regards himself as a former colonial who has become a homeless cosmopolitan. Owing to his ability to write more about himself and his past, he can be seen as someone who has projected much of his personal experiences of the contemporary world into literature. His unique experience is representative of the major social, psychological, political and cultural change of our time. The novel taken up for study represents East-Indian Trinidadian communities into which he was born and brought up. The historical experiences of the multicultural Trinidadian community employed almost exclusively in agricultural labor under indenture system. They carry with them mainly rural experiences of British India, their inherent differences and their native cultural contexts through the migratory process. Their fondness of home culture and its associated implications are integral parts of their being.

Gradually, the emigrant communities that settled as labor class multiplied, and by the mid-twentieth century these expatriates claimed the major portion of the population of Trinidad. Nasser Mustapha has given a data-based account of the Indian immigrants when he observes:

> The majority of Indian immigrants coming to the Caribbean were from the United Provinces (UP) and Bihar … .The Indians who came to the Carebbean tried to recapture their religion as they knew it back in India, and to establish it under the new and challenging circumstances. They viewed the wider Creole society … with suspicion …. Being separated from their families back in India, religion served as a bond with their homeland during their supposedly temporary sojourn in this strange land. Religion gave their lives direction and a sense of completeness … . (133-134)

With the passage of time the concept of acculturation affected the overseas communities in due course, and East-Indian communities of Trinidad underwent a sort of osmosis. In their deliberate effort to preserve their customs, rites, traditions, religion, languages, caste beliefs and their family patterns, they got themselves transformed so as to familiarize themselves to the colonial setting of creolized society of Trinidad. It was impossible for the East-Indian expatiate in Trinidad to maintain their homogenous cultural identity.

In his early fictions, V. S. Naipaul captures twice-torn and displaced immigrants oscillating between home culture and alien culture on the one hand and obviously fascinated by the sophisticated culture of the Westerners on the other hand. The novel exposes the essential ambivalence of East-Indian emigrants at Trinidad seeking belongingness and affiliation in the West. To present the apparent cultural confusion has been the obsession of diasporic writing, but Naipaul's account of these dispossessed is based on his first hand experiences and thus seems quite authentic. Jasbir Jain elucidates:

> There is need to realize the significance of the cultural encounter which takes place in diasporic writing, the bi-cultural pulls and creation of a new culture which finally emerges … Diasporic writing has developed … a double vision … The expatriate as he moves from one culture to another may need to locate … in relation to the centre.(15-16)

A House for Mr. Biswas traces the story of a man's struggle to claim his position in a confined and restricted environment. Although the novel primarily focuses on the community of Hindus from India, this society is seen as a part of the larger society of a colonial Caribbean island. The constant struggle to claim *a portion of the earth* in a colonial setting as a pertinent question linked with the question of survival.

A House for Mr. Biswas tells a personal story and an ethnic, social history. At the same time, however, it also tells a story informed by the author's exile, and the ethnic communities and society of the novel are constructed out of that exile and a need to justify it. As Kenneth Ramchand has observed insightfully that one suspects that the world of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is one modeled upon a society from which the author has himself wished to escape, and that this attitude is the source of some of the over-emphasis in the construct.

The novel depicts a social history of the community of indentured laborers from India who have replaced the emancipated Black slaves after the abolition of slavery by England in 1833. There never-ending isolation, adherence to traditional culture and reverence for Hindu norms of life, form the pivot of the story. S. L. Sharma rightly puts the pathetic condition of the expatriate Indians abroad:

> Overseas Indians tend to recreate Indian social structure wherever they go. The second is that they tend to hold fast to their nativity culture in their lands of adoption. The third is that their mode of adaptation is marked by a clear preference for economic integration more than cultural assimilation. (Sharma 43)

Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* depicts house as the predominant metaphor signifying the universal diasporic disorder. The hero of the novel Mohun Biswas represents the psychology of every East-Indian colonial at Trinidad. He endeavors to create something significant and substantial out of "unimportant, uncreative and cynical Trinidad" (124). The life of Biswas is a complex tale of an expatriate Indian's ambivalence presenting the typical expatriate sensibility. Mr. Biswas whose life-long ambition is the ownership of a house, finds himself caught in an inescapable trap. The symbol of house embodies Naipaul's personal diasporic predicament.

Biswas's dying for accommodation at the age of forty-six is shown as the big question in the novel. His individual quest for selfhood identity and coherence in his life terminates with the owning of a house of his own. Though the multiple defects and drawbacks of the house lessen his charm, he is excited because he has now found some meaning in his existence in the world. He exclaims: "How terrible it would have been … to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated."(54)

The darkness, decay, death, horror and disasters recurrent in Biswas's life represent his nothingness and also the nothingness of his surroundings. The unsettled life of an expatriate poses a serious challenge before the nomads like Biswas. In the epilogue, Naipaul shows the depth of this inherent darkness: "This was a darkness that seemed to come from within, as though the skin was murky but transparent film and the flesh below it had been bruised and become diseased and its corruption was rising" (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 587-88) .

Mohun Biswas's continual acceptance and condemnation in his own family, in Tulsi family, Sentinel Office, Community Welfare Department and in Trinidadian society as a whole mark the typical dilemma of an unhoused and uprooted expatriate. His constant encounter with oddity, adversity and misfortune make the reader witness the outline history of Trinidad in the first half of the twentieth century. Certain economic changes, global wars, introduction of cinema and motor cars, brain-drain, arrival of Americans in bulk, urbanization, etc. have made an impact on the social scenario of Trinidad considerably.

If we go through the social and historical context of Mohun Biswas' life , their family came into being through the migration of indentured workers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Biswas's whole family has been an indentured labour in Trinidad. Thus Biswas and his brothers inherit the social identity of worker-labourer and socioeconomic limitations only marginally less constraining than indenture. Due

to this much of his life Mohun must depend on others for his food and shelter, first on his uncle Bhandat and later on the Tulsi family After leaving Bhandat's store, the young Mohun finds a job painting signs at the Tulsi store in Arwacas; there he meets Shama, a Tulsi daughter, whom he marries chiefly because he is persuaded by the domineering Mrs. Tulsi.

The novelist also tries to focus on how East-Indian immigrants in Trinidad have been left with nothing but to seek refuge in fatalism. When Biswas's mother complains to her father about the ill-treatment meted out to her by husband, Raghu, he consoles her uttering: "Fate. Threr is nothing we can do about it" (15) The plight of immigrant-indentured labourers from India is the pivot of the novel suggesting their unavoidable helplessness and alienation as they are left with no other option but to curse their destiny.

The first generation of indentured labourers at Parrot Trace seems to have established a community life that is in no way different from an Indian village. Naipaul vividly describes the agony of such unwelcomed expatriates missing their past and native culture but now they feel entrapped and experience a common loss.The old Indian-born homesick people gather in the arcade of Tulsis in the evenings only to talk about their retreat to their homeland. Their pile-dreaming tendency and otherization is portrayed by Naipual when the narrator elaborates:

> They could not speak English and were not interested in the land when 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. (194)

Naipaul's diasporic ambivalence gets projected when on the one hand he finds these changes inevitable and, on the other hand, he regrets the loss of an ancient Indian way of life in a hybrid and alien world. The multicultural colonial society offers no stability in the present and no hope for the future. The Indian left there, are left with no alternative except blind imitation of the imposing imperial culture. In his popular non-fiction *An Area of Darkness*, his ambivalence is more evident: "we knew there had been change, gain, loss. We knew that something which was once whole had been washed away. What was the whole was the idea of India."(46)

The gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees, gathering on the edge of 'foreign cultures, gathering at the frontier: gathering in the ghettos or cafes of city centre is a sort of movement from nationalhood to culture and from exclusion from origins and essence leading these immigrants to an essential creolization of identity. Comparing the expatriates to a banyan tree, Huge Tinker clarifies:

> The banyan tree has thrust down roots in soil which is stony, sandy, and marshy — and has somehow drawn sustenance from diverse unpromising conditions. Yet the banyan tree itself has changed; its similarity to the original growth is still there, but it has changed in response to its different environment (19)

Mohun wants to get rid of the sense of othering so he decides to get a job and a house of his own and promises not to let himself be victimized any more by the people

after facing humiliation at Bhandat's rum-shop. He announces to his forlorn mother: "I am going to get a job on my own. And I am going to get my own house too. I am finished with this". (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 67)

A big part of his life Biswas lived in Hanuman House which being a symbol of imperialsm in its miniature form, a mechanical hierarchy is maintained in the house with Tulsi at the top of the ladder to rule over the daughters and sons-in-law giving special privileges to her sons Shekhar and Owad.Her treatment revives Orwell's popular dictum— — all are equal but some are more equal than others. The organization of Hanuman House is typical colonial one:

> The organization of the Tulsi House was simple. Mrs. Tulsi had only one servant, a Negro woman … .The daughters and their children swept and washed and cooked and served in the store. The husbands, under Seth's supervision, worked on the Tulsi land, looked after Tulse animals, and served in the store. In return they were given food, shelter and a little money; their children were looked after, and they were treated with respect by people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis. (*A House for Mr. Biswas 97)*

Biswas is bound to be condemned in such a circumscribing system for his insistence upon his recognition as a unique member and not as a cog in the wheel. His marriage in Tulsi family compels him to be loyal to it but his real self keeps on asserting at regular intervals. Bruse King adds:

> Biswas's condition is that of the colony, his own attempts at independence are limited by the condition of the society into which he is born; frustrated self-assertion turns into self-destructive rage, the tempest that temporarily disorders Biswas's mind. (37)

The Tulsis do not treat him accordingly, assigning him instead to a low rung in the family hierarchy because he is the "son of a labourer" and because he does not contribute financially to the family enterprise. The hierarchy of peop;e and space at Hanuman House, the Tulsi store-residence in Arwacas, reflects the lingering caste attitude of the rural East Indian community. In that community the Tulsi are "haves" and Biswas is a "have-not" ; their position gives them dignity, whereas his designation as laborer, his landlessness and landlessness and joblessness make him a nobody.

Biswas seeks solace and escape through reading and creative writing though it could not be his only obsession. Landeg White presents the mockery of Biswas's condition when he says: He reads Samuel Smiles and tries to see himself as young and poor struggling. But the romantic sagas of self-help make sense only in countries where ambitions are credible, where heroes can propel themselves up ladders already in existence. (13)

Throughout the novel, Mohun Biswas's search for a house of his own is an attempt to find both independence and a meaning for his life, and the often chaotic account of petty island life is marked with a deeper sense of the essential loneliness of the human state. His is a search for a sense of self and place. He identifies his highest achievement with the possession of a house of his own. In his campaign to possess a house, he is made to encounter a series of exhausting disasters.

Naipaul aims at presenting the frustration of Mohun by showing his ambiguous attitude to his past. Amitav Kumar does not condemn Mohun Biswas as a fractured and uprooted being. He finds a progressive positive metamorphosis through changes that mark Biswas's life. For him, the imposed disintegration leads the hero to certain assimilation in the main stream of Trinidad life. He puts it thus:

> The single line that comes to Biswas every time he wishes to test a new ribbon in the typewriter is the following one: 'At the age of thirty-three, when he was already the father of four children… .'The half-finished sentence lights up momentarily a whole dark universe of desire and futility. And yet, despite the terrible isolation of his ambition, it is also true that Biswas's haphazard, incomplete actions carry him from the plantation to a life in writing. It is a supreme achievement. (38)

The novelist highlights various intrinsic ambiguities in the observance of customs and rituals by East-Indian Trinidadian. In Hanuman House, the Hindu deities seem irreverent and Hindi books are hardly taken seriously. Shekhar and Owad worship Hindu gods wearing crucifixes. The marriage of Owad and Shekhar with Christian Presbyterian girls marks the acceptance of creolization by Indian Hindus at Trinidad. Naipaul shows the predicament of those with a divided culture heritage with excellence.

Biswas's struggle to assert himself in the suffocating colonial world is unique. Being a destined derelict man in a derelict land he has remained neglected for more than two-third of his lifetime. Indeed he is at times, insignificant, gutless, and disgraceful. But the triumph of *A House for Mr. Biswas* lies in Naipaul's presentation of a hero in all his littleness, and still preserves a sense of the man's inner dignity. He presents the fate of an average man who can master the risk and danger of cultural dereliction. He stands for rootless colonial entrapped in an alien society. Ultimate realization of the long-cherished dream and Biswas's charm of a winning champion get eclipsed with his loss of position, his ageing, his bad health, and his inopportune death. His agony gets reflected through the description: "His complexion grew dark … this was a darkness that seemed to come from within , as though the skin was a murky but transparent film and the flesh below it had been bruised and become diseased and corruption was rising." (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 587-88)

Expatriate are perhaps experiencing the fatal ambivalence because they are living in an interstitial luminal zone, on the margins of two worlds, belonging to neither. Chandra B. Joshi makes an interesting observation:

> Exile has been the spur as well as subject of his writing. The early work is to a large extent an attempt at defining his own situation and seeking an answer to the problem that hampered him at the start- I did not know who I was. With the epic House behind him he knew at last who he was and how he came to be on the tiny island of Trinidad. (58)

The anguish and ambivalence of the creator becomes the basis of his early novels. His novel is ever-evolving though with the very attempt to explore the many sides of his anxiety over his missing past. This nervousness has been elaborated by Akash

Kapur when he remarks, "It is by the trauma of his own migration at 18 to England, where, cut off from home and fanily, he suffered a nervous breakdown."(76)

It is in this sense that Mohun Biswas in *A House for Mr. Biswas* appears to be a man who is always on tenterhooks as the roots of the family and home are severed with callous brutality in the wake of the cultural chaos witnessed by the protagonist and the thousands of others like him during the period of cultural upheavals. Biswas emerges as the spokesperson for the multitude of the dispossessed and deprived who grope for a security both in the physical as well as in the metaphorical sense in the times of such cultural tumult. His magnum opus *A House for Mr. Biswas* marks a remarkable paradigmatic shift in the treatment of the theme concerning diasporic ambivalence and loss.

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