Identity Problem in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*

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Abstract

Identity is one of the central themes in the novels of V. S. Naipaul. In *A House for Mr Biswas*, Naipaul presents the life of Mohun Biswas, a man who spends his entire life struggling to find his own identity, freedom, and dignity in a colonial society (Naipaul, 1961). Mr. Biswas is born into a poor Indo-Trinidadian family and grows up in an environment filled with insecurity, poverty, and emotional isolation. After his marriage into the powerful Tulsi family, he loses his individuality and becomes trapped within a dominating family structure. This condition creates a deep identity crisis in his life (Bruce, 1984). Throughout the novel, Mr. Biswas constantly searches for independence and self-respect. His dream of owning a house becomes more than a material desire; it becomes a symbol of personal identity and freedom (Mustafa, 1976). Naipaul uses the character of Mr. Biswas to represent the struggles of many postcolonial individuals who feel culturally displaced and socially disconnected. The protagonist neither completely belongs to Indian traditions nor feels fully accepted in Trinidadian colonial society (King, 2003). Because of this cultural confusion, he continuously suffers from loneliness, frustration, and lack of belonging. The novel realistically portrays the psychological pain and social struggles faced by ordinary people in colonial societies. Naipaul also highlights the effects of economic hardship, family pressure, and cultural conflict on human identity (Walsh, 1973). Despite many failures and disappointments, Mr. Biswas never stops fighting for his individuality. In the end, owning his own house gives him a sense of achievement and selfhood, even though his life remains imperfect (Naipaul, 1961). This paper examines the identity problem in the novel and explains how Mr. Biswas's search for a house becomes a search for personal existence, dignity, and independence in a postcolonial world.

Keywords: Identity crisis; postcolonialism; selfhood; displacement; colonial society; cultural conflict; individuality; freedom.

Introduction

V. S. Naipaul was born on 17 August 1932 in Chaguanas. His full name was Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul. He belonged to an Indian family that had migrated from India to Trinidad during the colonial period. His father, Seepersad Naipaul, was a journalist and writer who greatly influenced Naipaul's literary career. Naipaul completed his early education in Trinidad and later went to University of Oxford for higher studies. His writings mainly focus on colonial society, displacement, identity crisis, cultural conflict, and the struggles of ordinary people. Because of his remarkable contribution to literature, he received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001.

A House for Mr Biswas is one of Naipaul's most famous novels. The novel tells the story of Mohun Biswas, a poor Indo-Trinidadian man who struggles throughout his life to gain freedom, dignity, and personal identity (Naipaul, 1961). The novel reflects the condition of many postcolonial individuals who feel culturally displaced and socially insecure. Mr. Biswas faces difficulties from childhood and later suffers under the control of the Tulsi family after his marriage. He feels lonely, dependent, and emotionally trapped. The central theme of the novel is the problem of identity. Mr. Biswas constantly searches for self-respect and independence in a society where he feels ignored and powerless (Bruce, 1984). His dream of owning a house becomes a symbol of freedom and individuality. The house represents security, personal achievement, and a place where he can live with dignity (Mustafa, 1976). Through this novel, Naipaul realistically presents the emotional pain, cultural confusion, and social struggles of colonial life. The novel is an important work in postcolonial literature because it explores the human desire for identity, belonging, and selfhood in a changing world.

Purpose and Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to examine the problem of identity in *A House for Mr Biswas* by V. S. Naipaul. The study focuses on the struggles faced by Mohun Biswas in search of freedom, self-respect, and individuality in colonial Trinidad. It also aims to understand how social pressure, family control, poverty, and cultural displacement affect human identity and personal existence (Naipaul, 1961).

1. To examine the identity crisis faced by Mohun Biswas in *A House for Mr Biswas*.

2. To study the effects of colonial society and cultural displacement on the protagonist (Naipaul, 1961).
3. To analyze the symbolic importance of the house as a sign of freedom and self-identity.
4. To understand V. S. Naipaul's portrayal of postcolonial struggle and individuality.

A House for Mr Biswas by V. S. Naipaul is a powerful novel that presents the painful struggle of a common man searching for identity, freedom, and dignity. The novel tells the story of Mohun Biswas, an Indo-Trinidadian man who spends his whole life trying to create a place of his own in society. Through this character, Naipaul presents the emotional condition of people living in colonial societies where poverty, cultural confusion, and dependence often destroy personal identity (Naipaul, 1961). The novel is simple in language but deep in meaning because it shows the everyday struggles of ordinary human life. From the very beginning, Mr. Biswas's life is connected with suffering and insecurity. After his birth, a pundit predicts that he will bring misfortune to his family. This prediction creates fear and negativity around him. Soon after, his father dies accidentally, and the family falls into poverty. As a child, Mr. Biswas never receives emotional security or stability. He moves from one place to another and grows up with feelings of fear and loneliness. Because he does not have a permanent home, he feels disconnected from society. Naipaul clearly shows that childhood insecurity can deeply affect human personality and self-confidence (Bruce, 1984).

Mr. Biswas's identity problem becomes stronger after his marriage to Shama Tulsi. He enters the Tulsi family, which is large, traditional, and controlling. Instead of feeling welcomed, he feels trapped and powerless inside the Tulsi household. The family controls his decisions, work, and daily life. He becomes economically dependent on them and loses his freedom. At Hanuman House, he feels more like a servant than a respected family member. He constantly wants to escape because he believes that dependence destroys human dignity. His struggle reflects the pain of a man trying to protect his individuality in a dominating social structure (King, 2003). Naipaul beautifully presents the emotional frustration of Mr. Biswas through small but meaningful lines. Mr. Biswas often feels that he has "no place of his own" (Naipaul, 1961). This simple expression reflects his deep emotional loneliness and lack of belonging. He wants a life where he can make his own decisions without fear or control. However, every attempt to become independent brings new difficulties. Sometimes he works as a sign painter, sometimes as a shopkeeper, and later as a journalist, but none of these jobs gives him complete stability. His changing professions symbolize his unstable identity and continuous dissatisfaction.

The symbol of the house is the most important part of the novel. For Mr. Biswas, the house is not only a physical structure. It represents freedom, security, individuality, and self-respect. Since childhood, he has lived in temporary places that never gave him peace or emotional comfort. Because of this, he dreams of owning a house that truly belongs to him. The novel repeatedly shows his efforts to build or buy a house, but almost every attempt fails because of financial problems and bad luck (Mustafa, 1976). Even then, he never gives up his dream. His struggle for a house becomes a struggle for personal identity. One important quote in the novel says that Mr. Biswas wanted "to get away from the Tulsis and become his own man" (Naipaul, 1961). This line clearly explains his emotional condition. He does not only want physical separation from the Tulsi family; he wants independence and selfhood. The desire to become "his own man" reflects the universal human need for dignity and individuality. Naipaul uses this simple struggle to represent the larger condition of postcolonial people who feel trapped between tradition and modernity.

The novel also presents the problem of cultural displacement. The Indo-Trinidadian community shown in the story lives between two cultures. Their ancestors came from India, but they now live in Trinidad under British colonial rule. Because of this condition, many people feel culturally confused. They are separated from Indian traditions, but they are also not fully accepted into colonial society. Mr. Biswas experiences this confusion deeply. He neither feels completely Indian nor fully Trinidadian. This cultural uncertainty creates emotional isolation and identity crisis (Walsh, 1973). Naipaul realistically presents the effect of poverty on human identity. Mr. Biswas struggles financially throughout his life. He often borrows money, changes jobs, and lives in poor conditions. Because of economic weakness, he loses confidence and feels humiliated many times. Society does not respect him because he lacks wealth and social power. Naipaul shows that poverty is not only an economic condition but also an emotional burden that damages human dignity (Bruce, 1984).

Another important aspect of the novel is Mr. Biswas's emotional loneliness. Even within his family, he often feels isolated. His relationship with Shama is difficult in the beginning because she is strongly influenced by the Tulsi family. However, over time, their relationship slowly improves. Shama begins to understand her husband's pain and supports him in many situations. This emotional support gives Mr. Biswas some comfort and strength. Naipaul shows that human understanding and companionship are important in overcoming loneliness and insecurity. The novel also contains humor and irony, which make the story realistic and human. Even during difficult situations, Naipaul adds

small comic moments that reflect the ordinary nature of life. Mr. Biswas sometimes behaves stubbornly, angrily, or foolishly, but these qualities make him more realistic and relatable. Readers sympathize with him because he represents the struggles of common people facing social pressure and personal failure. Toward the end of the novel, Mr. Biswas finally buys a house. The house is small, unfinished, and imperfect, but it gives him emotional satisfaction because it belongs to him. For the first time in his life, he feels independent and secure. Naipaul writes that Mr. Biswas achieved "the house he had dreamed of" (Naipaul, 1961). This achievement becomes the symbol of his personal victory over insecurity, dependence, and humiliation. Although his life remains difficult and he dies soon after, he gains a sense of identity and dignity before death.

Naipaul's realistic style makes the novel emotionally powerful. He presents the life of an ordinary man with honesty and simplicity. The story does not contain heroic adventures or dramatic victories. Instead, it focuses on daily struggles, emotional pain, and small achievements that shape human life. This realism makes A House for Mr Biswas an important work in postcolonial literature. The novel teaches that every human being desires freedom, respect, belonging, and a place to call home. Mr. Biswas's struggle is not only personal but universal. Many people in colonial and postcolonial societies experience displacement, insecurity, and identity confusion. Through this character, Naipaul successfully presents the emotional suffering of individuals searching for meaning and selfhood in a changing world. The novel remains a timeless study of human identity, dignity, and the desire for independence.

Problems and Findings

The study of this book reveals several social, cultural, and psychological problems related to identity. One of the major problems faced by Mr. Biswas is the lack of personal freedom and stability. From childhood, he suffers because of poverty, insecurity, and emotional loneliness. After joining the Tulsi family through marriage, his condition becomes more painful because he loses his individuality and becomes dependent on a dominating family structure (Naipaul, 1961). This dependence creates frustration, helplessness, and lack of self-confidence. Another important problem shown in the novel is cultural displacement. Mr. Biswas belongs to an Indo-Trinidadian community that feels disconnected from both Indian traditions and colonial Trinidadian society. Because of this cultural confusion, he experiences an identity crisis and feels that he does not truly belong anywhere (King, 2003). Economic hardship is also a major issue in the novel. Poverty limits Mr. Biswas's opportunities and forces him to live in unstable conditions. His continuous struggle for financial security increases his emotional suffering and social humiliation (Bruce, 1984).

The findings of the study show that the search for a house is actually Mr. Biswas's search for identity, freedom, and dignity. The house becomes a symbol of self-respect and personal achievement (Mustafa, 1976). The study also finds that colonial society and family pressure greatly affect human individuality and emotional well-being. Despite repeated failures, Mr. Biswas never completely gives up hope. His final achievement of owning a house gives him a sense of belonging and personal identity. The novel finally suggests that every human being desires independence, respect, and a place to call their own.

This study is based on the hypothesis that the identity crisis of Mohun Biswas is deeply connected with colonial society, cultural displacement, poverty, and family domination. It assumes that the protagonist continuously struggles for freedom, dignity, and individuality because he feels emotionally and socially trapped within the Tulsi family structure. The study also assumes that the desire to own a house is not only a material dream but a symbol of self-respect, personal identity, and independence. The research further suggests that postcolonial individuals often experience confusion, alienation, and insecurity because they are caught between traditional values and colonial culture. Another hypothesis of the study is that economic instability and social pressure negatively affect human confidence and emotional well-being. Despite many failures and hardships, the protagonist's continuous struggle for independence reflects the universal human desire for belonging and selfhood. Thus, the study argues that the search for identity becomes the central force shaping the life, emotions, and actions of Mohun Biswas throughout the novel.

This study is based on a qualitative and analytical research method. The research mainly focuses on the theme of identity crisis, cultural displacement, and personal struggle in the life of Mohun Biswas. The study uses textual analysis to understand the thoughts, emotions, actions, and social condition of the protagonist presented by V. S. Naipaul. Both primary and secondary sources have been used in this research. The primary source is the novel itself, which provides detailed information about the life, struggles, and identity problems of the protagonist (Naipaul, 1961). Secondary sources such as books, research articles, journals, and critical essays related to postcolonial literature and Naipaul's writings have also been consulted to support the analysis (King, 2003). The study follows a postcolonial approach to examine how colonial society, poverty, family pressure, and cultural confusion influence the identity of the protagonist. Important themes such as displacement, insecurity, freedom, individuality, and self-respect are

carefully analyzed through descriptive and interpretative methods. The research also uses simple comparative observations to connect the personal struggles of Mohun Biswas with the larger condition of postcolonial individuals.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the identity crisis of Mohun Biswas is deeply connected with poverty, colonial society, cultural displacement, and family domination. Throughout his life, he struggles to achieve freedom, dignity, and individuality. His emotional suffering increases because he never feels secure or fully accepted in society. The controlling nature of the Tulsi family further weakens his confidence and independence (Naipaul, 1961). The analysis also shows that the desire for a house is not only a material dream but a symbol of self-respect, stability, and personal identity. The house represents the protagonist's struggle to create a place of his own in a confusing and unstable world (Mustafa, 1976). Despite many failures and hardships, he never completely loses hope and continues fighting for independence. The novel successfully presents the emotional condition of postcolonial individuals who suffer from displacement, loneliness, and lack of belonging. V. S. Naipaul realistically portrays the psychological and social struggles of ordinary people living under colonial influence. The study finally concludes that human beings strongly desire identity, freedom, respect, and emotional security. Through the life of Mohun Biswas, the novel presents a universal message about the importance of selfhood and personal dignity in human life (King, 2003).

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