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BETWEEN HOUSE AND HOME: SITUATING THE DIASPORIC SENSIBILITY OF V.S. NAIPAUL

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ABSTRACT



Dispersal of the diasporic individual from his original home/ homeland and subsequently his search for identity and a secured home in an alien land essentially forms an indispensable part of diasporic culture. Diasporic sensibility is grounded upon the postcolonial concept of home and space in the backdrop of migration and dislocation from the native land. In diasporic studies, dislocation and displacement of expatriates/migrants problematize the idea of home as an 'ideal stable place' as diasporic people have to negotiate with "memories of past homes as well as dreams of future homes" and "departure and return" (Blunt and Dowling, 198). The various issues of diaspora such as home and space, exile and immigration, displacement and alienation, nostalgia and trauma, trans-nationalism and cultural-mongrelization, crisis of identity and cultural shock, pluralism and multicultural consciousness have enriched the diasporic literature since the second half of the twentieth century and diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Stephen Gill, Bharati Mukharjee, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, Jhumpa Lahiri and M. G. Vassanji have successfully developed their diasporic consciousness in their literary creations.

Taking the above mentioned perspectives into consideration, the present paper is an attempt to trace the issue of search for home of the protagonists in the novels of V.S.Naipaul through an application the theories of home forwarded by researchers like Soja, Blunt and Dowling.

Key Words : Home, house, third space, identity, Naipaul

The concept of home constitutes a significant aspect of diaspora studies. This is precisely because the very dispersal of the diasporic individual from his original home/ homeland and subsequently his search for identity and a secured home in an alien land essentially forms an indispensable part of diasporic culture. Diasporic sensibility is grounded upon the postcolonial concept of home and space in the backdrop of migration and dislocation from the native land. As such, it involves three stages of development -----

from the loss of original home to the stage of an 'expatriate' and from the state of an 'expatriate' to the state of an 'unsettled' immigrant and from the state of an 'unsettled immigrant' to the state of a 'settled immigrant' with a consolation of what Uma Parameswaran says "home is there where your feet are"(Parameswaran 38). The immigrants desperately try to build up a third world for themselves in which they can find comfort and solace though nostalgic longing for going back home is inseparable from diasporic culture. The

immigrants maintain continuous contact with their homeland and other members of the dislocated group in order to ease their grief by cherishing the memories of the past.

To begin with traditional concept of home, it is a place related to religion and reality to which people link their culturally inherent notions. Mircea Eliade terms it 'a sacred place' (1959 : xiii). Similarly, Lee Rainwater (1966: 22) considers home a 'secure place' to which people are attached and are comfortable with. On the other hand, K. Dovey (1978: 27-30) terms it a place of certainty and stability. It is a principle by which we order our existence in space. Home is 'demarcated territory' with both physical and symbolic boundaries that ensure that dwellers can control access and behavior within. To be at home is to inhabit a secure center and to be oriented in space so as to live a peaceful life of security, sacredness and happiness.

This classical concept of home is preoccupied with the idea of 'domestic space' as the monopoly of women. The medieval home, on the other hand, is essentially characterized by a feudalistic structure which involves a hierarchy of order. It was grounded upon a hegemonic structure based on gradation. Medieval society in Europe was dominated by a hierarchical system of patriarchy which was manifested, among others, in the running of family life. In the colonial representation of home, the house is never presented as a site of intimate power contestation. The colonial representation of home as "fixed, rooted, stable" (R. George 2) was a strategy to obscure the fluidity of the home. It is precisely the order and metaphorical function of this home which is called into question by postcolonial representations. For, while colonial representation of the home obscures disorder and separates home from the public sphere/ spaces of politics, postcolonial representation foregrounds this disorder, and home's intrinsically political status. The postcolonial representation not only recognizes the role played by home in nationalist or colonial ideas, but also concedes home as a space with its own internal politics. Such re-visioning calls for reclamation of the home from colonial metaphor to establish the house as home rather than in the service of something larger such as nation or colony.

As a complex and multi-layered concept, home encompasses two areas, as a 'place'/a site in which we live and as an 'idea', or an imaginary which is associated with feelings. These feelings include not only the feelings of belonging, desire and intimacy, but also those of fear, violence and alienation. The feelings are related to context/ place extending across spatial scales. Keeping in view the complex nuances of home, it can be contrasted with another close concept called 'house' or 'household'. However they do not contain the complex socio-spatial relations and emotions that characterize home. Though home is undeniably connected to a built form or a physical structure like that of a house, home is not necessarily a house. While living in a house, one may not feel at home, whereas one can feel at home even while he/she is not living in a house. Home is at once material and imaginative and so it is not simply a physical structure, but an emotional space where personal and social meanings are grounded.

Highlighting on the place and physical space of the house, Bill Ashcroft points out that the colonizer's notion of place is dominated by "the idea of enclosure, or property" (162). He tries to assert that the physical structure of the home is central to colonial settlement and to subsequent political control. J. K. Noyes emphasizes the fact that the "strategy of surveillance and classification" of the specific way of constructing the dwellings to be used in a specific way reveals colonial spatial divisions and hierarchies based on racial and class distinctions (274). McClintock rightly states that the hierarchical division of the domestic space is reminiscent of colonial division of territories (168).

A house is different from a home because personal relations within the limits of home extend to the larger spectrum of the social, political and cultural space. In this regard, Blunt and Dowling recommend that rather than viewing the home as a 'private space' separated from the 'public world' of politics, it should be considered as "intensely political both in its internal relationships and through its interfaces with the wider world over domestic, national and imperial scales" (142). Amy Kaplan also expands the concept of home from the periphery of domestic space to the idea of the

nation as home and its association with the political, economic, and cultural implications of nation and empire which witness “the ever-shifting boundaries between the domestic and the foreign, between ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’”(1- 3).

The transnational nature of imperial homes, aimed at a wider project of nation-building is based on territorial expansion, resettlement and the displacement of indigenous people, ultimately highlights the multi-scalarity of home. Transnational home-making across diasporic space challenges the notion of stability and fixity of home, thereby foregrounding the relational character of home across space and time. In diasporic studies, dislocation and displacement of expatriates/migrants problematize the idea of home as an ‘ideal stable place’ as diasporic people have to negotiate with “memories of past homes as well as dreams of future homes” and “departure and return” (Blunt and Dowling 198). For the transnational migrants, home encapsulates a varied range of spatial imaginaries such as “the relationships between home and homeland, the existence of multiple homes, diverse home-making practices, and the intersections of home, memory, identity and belonging” (Blunt and Dowling 199).

At present, recent researches have explored the spatial politics of home. Alison Blunt presents home as “a contested site shaped by different axes of power and over a range of scales” (4). Instead of viewing the home as a single, stable place where identity is grounded, this approach unsettles such ideas by focusing on the complex and politicized interplay of home and identity over space and time. This approach also shows the ways in which the intimate and personal spaces of home are closely bound up with, rather than separated from, ‘wider power relations’.

In popular discourse, ‘space’ and ‘place’ are often regarded as synonymous with terms including region, area and landscape. The notion of space encapsulates not only physical location, but also abstract conceptual space. For the postmodern geographers, space is shifting and indeterminate. The locations chosen for focus are also widely divergent, ranging from the very physical space of the nation and the human body, to the conceptual

status of the text itself as a spatial entity. Through a critique of the traditional privileging of time, and the study of history, over space, postmodern geographers such as Edward Soja assert equal status for space. In *Thirdspace*, Soja propounds his ‘trialectics of being’, which reprivileges space only as part of an experience that includes both ‘historicality’ and ‘sociality’ (71).

The various issues of diaspora such as home and space, exile and immigration, displacement and alienation, nostalgia and trauma, trans-nationalism and cultural-mongrelization, crisis of identity and cultural shock, pluralism and multicultural consciousness have enriched the diasporic literature since the second half of the twentieth century and diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Stephen Gill, Bharati Mukharjee, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, Jhumpa Lahiri and M. G. Vassanji have successfully developed their diasporic consciousness in their literary creations. For example, Bharati Mukherjee poignantly expresses expatriate sensibility in her novel *Wife* (1976) bringing to the fore the trauma of dislocation and the urge for relocation finally culminating in the melting pot theory. Uma Parameswaran in her *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* (1987) and *Trishanku and other Writings* (1998) provides sufficient scope for critiquing home and cultural space. In his *Midnight’s Children*(1981), Rushdie mythologizes history by creating imaginary homelands, whereas Naipaul expresses his trauma of perpetual homelessness in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961).

V.S.Naipaul presents complex contents of diasporic consciousness in a simple existential way and examines in his novels, the motifs of loss of identity, culture conflict, psychological crisis, alienation and rootlessness caused by displacement. Even though he himself lived in exile, Naipaul did never celebrate the state of exile. He considers his lifelong uprootedness more in terms of a personal trauma than a source of positive liberation. He regards the Trinidad of his childhood as an absurd society, where Africans and Indians had been moved by force or persuasion to work on sugar plantations. Torn away from their homes epitomizing their traditions and cultural root, they were fooled into

believing that they were a kind of Britons through colonial schooling. And subsequently, they were forced to know the reality. Naipaul always felt uneasy at his sense of rootlessness which revived in him a consciousness of the Hindu origins and beliefs of his Indian ancestors. As he himself was an expatriate, he could capture the texture of the lives of the people of both the cultures – Indian and Caribbean. He explores the fate of the doomed individuals from the point of view of a comic outsider. He views the disturbance, instability and anxiety prevailing in both the societies. In his novels, Naipaul, along with his own dilemmas as an exile about self and home and the psychological and political aspects of alienation, depicts the issues of identity, rootlessness, cultural difference and assimilation brought about by migration.

The story of Indian immigrant's desire to strike roots and attain an authentic home is poignantly presented by Naipaul in his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* wherein his diasporic consciousness is prominently authenticised. Through the dilemma faced by the Indian Diaspora, Naipaul depicts the ethnic and social history of a community showing how communities are shaped by larger socio-cultural forces. He also shows how the idea of dislocation has strengthened the dichotomy between house and home in the novel. For Mohun Biswas, the protagonist, the highest achievement in life is associated with owning a 'house'. The orthodox and authoritarian arrangement in the Tulsi household creates in him an obsession to have a house of his own which he considered to be a symbol of true independence.

Naipaul presents the protagonist with minor disasters in life, each of which can be thought of his angry rebuttal of an uncongenial society. Mr Biswas cannot think of a bright future because of birth in an inauspicious moment of midnight, that too in a family of Indian origin labourer of Trinidad. Added to it, he was born in a wrong manner with six fingers. His misfortune is doubled at the death of his father while trying to retrieve his supposedly drowned body from the village pond at the time when he is hiding under the bed at home. Mr Biswas became homeless and emotionally bewildered at the untimely death of his father. His mother always

hesitates to show her affection in the presence of strangers. To his relief, he had his issueless aunt, Tara who treats him very kindly and helps him in every way and becomes a substitute of his mother. But at Tara's house in Pagotes too, the unaccommodative condition forces him to search for a job and a house of his own and he promises not to let himself victimized any more by the people after facing humiliation. He expresses his deep sense of willingness to his 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 (HFMB, 67)."

Circumstances take a turn after he is caught red-handed while passing a love-note to Shama, one of the daughters of the Tulsi family staying in the Hanuman House where he goes to paint signs. As a result of this incident, Mr Biswas gets trapped by Shama's mother and her uncle to marry her. He enjoys the physical security resulting from his marriage into the Tulsi family, but refuses to submit to the orthodox and authoritarian arrangement. Like an indentured servant, he is indebted because they have taken him in, "penniless, a stranger" and given him their daughter, a home, food and shelter. 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).

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).

Though he remains tied to the Tulsi household for shelter and sustenance during his illness and when he was unemployed, yet he manages in establishing areas of independence for himself. These experiences develop an obsession of owning a house

of his own in the mind of Mr. Biswas, which he considers to be a symbol of true independence. He succeeds in buying a house for himself on Sikkim Street in Port of Spain and finally remains contented while living there independently with his family. He dies at the age of forty-six when he had a heart-attack, but he leaves his family with a place to belong and so the independence.

Mohun Biswas is somewhat similar to Saleem Sinai, Salman Rushdie's protagonist in *Midnight's Children* (1981). Viewed in a comparative perspective, both of them were born at midnight, were victims of circumstances and narrators of the stories. They were isolated and struggled for self assertion and died at the end of the novels. The significant difference between them was that Saleem Sinai was a political creation and Mohun Biswas was above politics, religion and even history. Mr. Biswas can also be compared to the character of Willy Loman, an aging salesman in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*. Both Naipaul and Miller address the issue of the loss of identity and a man's inability to accept change within himself and society in their works. Both Mohun Biswas and Willy Loman had painful deaths after being psychologically tortured. Both were dreamers, Biswas had diasporic dream of a settled 'home', whereas Willy nourished the American dream of success. However, Biswas was free from the illusions that Willy had framed. Biswas did not have a peaceful death. For Willy Loman, suicide was inevitable because his American dream was shattered and his identity as a responsible father and husband was exposed by his son, Biff who discovers his affair with a woman in a hotel room in Boston.

In his novel *Half a Life* (2001), Naipaul presents the oscillations between house and home through characters who are offspring of a racial and cultural mix. He shows how his diasporic persons face identity crisis in the multi-cultural society they live in. In general, these characters have the tendency to reject one or more racial characteristics in order to become more respectable in their estimation. However, they eventually discover that they have unfixed identity because they are the products of multiple

cultures. All through the novel, Willie struggles for a solid and fixed identity. His identity is multiple, unfixed and changing, just like the concept of identity expounded upon by Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, etc. He cannot try to achieve one fixed identity because of his multi-faceted background. The novel has three settings: first there is post-independence India, then London, and finally pre-independence Africa. All the three are places that Naipaul can identify himself with. However, the three locations seem to signify different meanings in the novel. India and Africa are inexact and vague, while the representation of London is clearer. In the narrative Willie's preconceived notion is proved false. Willie initially thinks of London as a solid place, but finds himself as a marginalized wanderer in the big city. Such dispossessed people as the colonial, the exile, the immigrant, the marginal, and the uprooted must confront their being in an indefinite state of suspension. Caught up in this dilemma, Willie the Indian immigrant loses not only his native cultural heritage but also his sense of place. He identifies neither with his homeland, an old world, nor with the new world he desires. In the 1950s, Willie moves to London and drifts into bohemian circles; Willie feels himself lost and half-heartedly faces his English education at school:

"The learning he was being given was like the food he was eating, without savour. The two were inseparable in his mind. And just as he ate without pleasure, so, with a kind of blindness, he did what the lecturers and tutors asked of him, read the books and articles and did the essays. He was unanchored, with no idea of what lay ahead." (*Half a Life* 58)

Worst of all, Willie cannot face his real ancestral history, his true genealogy. He employs his imagination to shape a make-believe identity and tries to live at the imagined home behind its mask:

"[...] [H]e adapted certain things he had read, and he spoke of his mother as belonging to an ancient Christian community of the subcontinent, a community almost as old as Christianity itself. He kept his father as a Brahmin. He

made his father's father a 'courtier.' So playing with words, he began to re-make himself. It excited him and began to give him a feeling of power." (*Half a Life* 61)

A migrant is forced to adjust to a new society and a new world, Willie frequently faces racism and discrimination and he is separated from his closest people. Such experiences change a person a lot: it is almost like mutation. In England, Willie is continually in a state of flux : "[h]e was unanchored, with no idea of what lay ahead. He still had no idea of the scale of things, no idea of historical time or even of distance" (*Half a Life* 58). He intends to discover his own identity and feel at home. Finally, he apprehends that the construction of subjectivity can be created freely:

"Willie began to understand that he was free to present himself as he wished. He could, as it were, write his own revolution. The possibilities were dizzying. He could, within reason, re-make himself and his past and his ancestry" (*Half a Life* 60).

His condition justifies Stuart Hall's assertion that the process of identity making is unstable and that it can even be created. Willie's identity is "in-between", subject to "change" in order to position himself at home, in his process of remaking himself through the inclusion of his past heritage.

Thus, we notice that negotiating between home and identity is a major concern for the diasporic writers moving to new sites for social, political and economic intentions because of their inability to shed off their love of original home. Mohun Biswas and Willie Chandran, the protagonists of V.S.Naipaul's novels *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *Half a Life* are representative individuals in quest of home in order to have a separate identity and secured belonging.

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