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## THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY IN NAIPAUL'S A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS AND RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN: A STUDY IN COMPARISON

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### Abstract

Today, the whole world is suffering from 'Identity Crisis', the question of identity has become the most controversial issue of this time. The paper mainly focuses on the identity crisis that surged with immigration in colonized countries. For this purpose, V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* have been taken. Both the writers of the novels are products of post-imperialist society. "Forms of expression vary from artist to artist" is very true for the two writers. Both of them have got their own unique perspective on the crisis. In the first novel, it creates a desire for owning a house and in the second novel, it becomes an 'unhomely' space. The paper, relying on Homi Bhabha's concept of homelessness, tries to make a comparison between the two different trajectories of the identity crisis with the main focus being on the protagonists Mohun Biswas and Saleem Sinai of the two selected novels.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Diasporic consciousness, Ethnicity, Fragmented Identity, Hybridity.

### I. INTRODUCTION

No death, no doom, no anguish can arouse the surpassing despair which flows from a loss of identity.—H.P. Lovecraft

Ever since man became conscious of himself, he has been looking for his identity. Having a sense of identity is desirable, because it not only brings comfort and security but also determines one's position in society wherever one lives. However, its meaning has modified drastically over time. "Identity" as we now know it derives mainly the work of psychologist Erik Erikson who described it as something that shifts and grows throughout life as people confront new challenges and tackle different experiences. Someone feels identity crisis when he gets problem in making identity in his surroundings.

Identity crisis is a state of uncertainty and confusion during which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically owing to a change in his expected roles in the society. This paper focuses diasporic experience of immigrants. When people migrate to different countries or travel between adoptive countries and their motherland, they carry with them the burden of being displaced. It generally means that the displaced people feel that they are falling between two stools and are unable to find a sense of identity to recognize and to create a space for themselves in the new country. This leads to fractured identities. Many well-known writers and theorists such as Sam Selvon, Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Derek Walcott, Chinua Achebe etc. in postcolonial countries tried to assert their identity in society in

their own ways. The paper tries to explore V. S. Naipaul's West Indian epic, *A House for Mr Biswas*, which is "The Nobel Prize winner's first great novel" (Barack Obama) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* which is "Booker of Bookers". Regardless of whether the authors are Indians or not, discussing psychology of human nature affected by physical migration, and the socio-political, and cultural factors that result in the crisis of identity, would definitely be helpful to understand and analyze the contemporary issues.

A constant concern of diasporic writers is 'Identity'. There are so many sources available that deal with it. The two selected texts by Naipaul and Rushdie are used as primary resources. Apart from this, Dr. Veena Gupta's *The Quest for Identity* in the works V.S. Naipaul, Dr. Ram Sharma's *Theme of Identity Crisis in the Novels of Salman Rushdie* and other relevant journals, articles and books are used as secondary sources. The paper is a text based study and the work is conducted in an analytical way.

## II. COMPARISON STUDY

**V.S. Naipaul** is one of the best known writers in postcolonial literature. He himself is a product of post-imperialist society. His fictional work is concerned with the complex fate of individuals, societies and cultures seeking to define their identity. The novel '*A House for Mr. Biswas*' is considered as his masterpiece, which describes the story of the search of identity of Mr. Biswas as he struggles to preserve his own identity in an alien surroundings and tries to forge an authentic selfhood. It narrates the search for independence and identity of an Indian Brahmin who lives in Trinidad. The novel covers the story of three generations. It portrays Mr. Biswas's struggle to find relief from rootlessness and have a house of his own. This demonstrates the nostalgia of diaspora for his distant homelands and his quest to retain his racial and ethnic identity in the new land. He faces the problem of identity crisis in his very early phase of life. Mr. Biswas speaks to his mother Bipti - "I am going to get a job of my own. And I am getting to get my very own house too". He speaks these words even before he ever meets Shama and the Tulsis. These words of vow typify his longing for his

freedom, his own identity. But in the novel, "home" appears to be a shapeless structure. It gets a new definition, something very different one wherein one finds in a reluctant state of mind in order to do away with ones original home, at the same time not able to fully accept the new culture. Mr. Biswas has got many good things such as the success of his daughters, but has not got peace of mind. He suffers two heart-attacks, second finally takes his life as he doesn't find the new house for which he struggles 40 years of much help.

The novel has an entire world in it. Every cultural artifact, the food, the way of speaking, the houses, is describes in a family, on an island, where nothing is left out. No modern novel has an entire world in it. Nothing is needed to know more than that because the book starts with of Mr. Biswas and ends with his death. These features make this the book anyone can relate to. The daydreamer protagonist of the novel is the everyman of the modern world F.G. Rohelehr states - "Biswas is everyman, wavering between identity and non-identity, and claiming his acquaintance with the rest of men." He depicts the normalcy of every individual by showing his desire to have his house, although he struggles to have one. He has his own wishes, ambitions and desires. He is a man who prefers self-respect to clutches. He struggles against the forces that raise questions to his freedom throughout his life. Thus, it can be said that idea of home in this novel is not only a physical entity but also a spiritual one.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* is a powerful and faithful expression of indentured labourers in the Caribbean Island. When someone gets exposed to an entirely new situation, he feels uncomfortable, ultimately leads to the feelings of dispersion, dislocation and alienation. As a result, he stays in the state of limbo. The novel explores Mr. Biswas' dangling position between his root culture and new culture in the society of colonial Trinidad. Sometimes, Mr. Biswas seems indifferent to all the customs observed in both the West and the East. It is very much clear in his own remark - "To be a good Hindu you must be a good Roman Catholic first". He makes a failed attempt to adopt the lifestyle of colonizers; his own cultural past haunts him. He even

makes an attempt to try to move beyond his depression and to live each moment to its fullest. He vows "Time would never be dismissed again". But this strategy does not work and he sinks deeper and deeper into a depression. He spends his time fearing the future and lamenting the present and past. But he is aware of his loneliness and dilemma, he tells his son – "I am just somebody, nobody at all". All the incidents occur in Mr. Biswas's life only because of his longing for his separate identity. Cooke remarks – "Therefore, Mr. Biswas relentless fight to process his own house and steer clear of the grip of the Tuli's household is seen to parallel man's need to develop a way of life which is uniquely his". Kumar Parag also remarks - "a house is not just a matter getting a shelter from heat, cold or rain. In fact, it is both an imposition of order and a carving-out of authentic selfhood within the heterogeneous and fragmented society of Trinidad". In this novel, Naipaul main focus is on individual's struggle against the forces that try to subdue his individuality.

**Salman Rushdie** is an Indian-born British American novelist and essayist. He examines the life of the migrant and explores the mystery of being born and the puzzle regarding one's identity. Even his life has quest for identity. He is a migrant who has got a unique perspective from rather unique life. He focuses on the theme of 'double identity', 'fragmented vision of life', and 'divided selves'. His novel *Midnight's Children* has the back drop of the political upheaval and constant threat of violence that marked the first three decades of independence. In this novel, Saleem's identity is complicated and conflicted. The events and dates muddled up as Rushdie tries to convince readers that he is at the centre of India's history. Actually, Rushdie's life is very much similar to the protagonist's life. Rushdie was born in India, schooled in England and then forced by his parent to move Pakistan. He finally exiled back in England. But unfortunately, he has never been accepted in any of his homes. The problem with him in England was that he was considered very foreign. And in India, he was ridiculed for his perfect British accent. The novel depicts the protagonist's journeys through India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. But he gets no certain place to settle down. The other characters of

the novel are part of the journeys. All the events of Saleem's life run parallel to the events in the development of both India and Pakistan. For Saleem, even the cracks in his own body are caused by personal upheavals that occur in tandem with conflicts across the subcontinent. He wants to establish his identity with every ups and downs in the Indian subcontinent. This appears in his own words when he says "I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done to me. I am everyone everything whose being in the world affected was affected by mine". Saleem and India both are on suffering from their fragmented identities. Actually, In this novel, Saleem's identity represents the identity of the entire nation. Saleem is India.

Saleem Sinai who is the supposed son of Ahmed and Amina, is legally the son of poor singer Wee Willie Winkie. The singer's wife Vanita had an illicit relation with an English land lord, William Methwold. The midwife Mary Pereira changed the name tags of Vanita and Amina's babies and thus he became an offspring of Sinai household. Almost all the characters of the novel have entangled identities. At the beginning of the novel, Aadam, Saleem's grandfather, falls in love with his future wife only by seeing her through a perforated sheet. Even midnight's children, especially Saleem and Shiva has downright hostility, one is jealous of the other. Saleem Sinai who has double parents represent the then India. The impact of British Imperialism was prevailing in the Indian society of that time. When India Got its Independence, some people were trying to reestablish the traditional cultural heritage and some were happy with the new changes that happened because of the impact of the Britishers. Like Saleem, India too had dual identities. For this purpose, he presents a series of fragmented characters. The crisis of identity is something that Saleem has not merely to live with but is born with. Saleem Sinai is a self-conscious, self-aware narrator. This helps him to convey his innermost thoughts and emotions even. It becomes clear when he speaks his mind - "How many things, people, notions we bring with us into the world, how many possibilities and also restrictions of possibility, Because of the child born that midnight, and for every one of the

midnight children there were as many more. Among the parents of the midnight: the failure of the Cabinet Scheme; chicken-breast-eater of a wife; and more and his Red Fort and Old Fort, To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world."

Saleem Sinai considers himself to be a mixture of so many factors. There is a sense of alienation and quest for self in him. His inner thoughts depicts the way in which the self and the other is being related in an exceptionally hybrid society. Bounse says -

"Hybridity plays an important role in *Midnight's Children* because every aspect of the novel is filled by blending different elements and characteristics. "Besides the use of hybridity, the novel also uses humor which allows exploration of Indian history and postcoloniality".

### III. CONCLUSION-

A house for Mr. Biswas is an impeccable writing about identity crisis of a man. The depiction of the issue of 'home' is grappling and captivating at the same time. Mr. Biswas, the protagonist of the novel, is an unaccommodated man who suffers the conditions of the unhomely. Tyson states about it 'being unhomed' is to feel not at home even in one's own home because you are not at home at yourself; that is, your cultural identity crisis has changed you into a psychological refuge. The same case is with Mr. Biswas, he searches his identity his whole life like a psychological refuge. He shifts from village to town and from joint family to nuclear family but his search goes on. He attempts to overcome "homelessness" by getting his own house. He struggles a lot but ultimately he gets it. But even after becoming a proud owner of his own house he seems unhappy. His search for belonging appears to him an unsolvable problem, and his sense of not belonging at home continues. This happens because his desperate struggle for a house of his own is actually his search for creativity relying on his own originality to find his lost identity. His efforts to get a house of his own are symbolic of his need to develop an authentic identity. It is the identity crisis which stands as a threat to his existence. Therefore, he

struggles against the forces that try to subdue his identity.

*Midnight's Children* portrays India's transition from British colonial rule to independence and the partition of India. Saleem, who is the central figure of the novel, struggles for his identity. He gets a new identity every time when he identifies a new parent. It is very much clear when he says "I have had more mothers than most mothers have children, giving birth to parents has been one of my stranger talents". This sort of fragmentation of identity is applicable to the then India too. Saleem struggles for personal identity is actually a symbolic counterpart to India. Then, India was struggling to reunite its multiple nationhoods. India also has experienced double parentage in the form of native and colonial forces that have shaped the nation. The novel seeks to portray the interaction between these forces. Saleem's story is lost in the mixed voices of the numerous characters that have story of their own to say, this becomes a microcosm of post-independent India. The novel discusses the interaction between self and the society and the way in which they intact results in tension that further leads to the quest for a united identity and wholeness.

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