

ALIENATION, NAIPAUL AND MR BISWAS

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Abstract

*V.S.Naipaul is one of the most controversial postcolonial writer who is known to have generated controversy and to be the mouthpiece of a Eurocentric view. He is blamed and even hated for 'having no loyalty', as it is claimed, to his home country and his ethnicity. Additionally, it is claimed that he doesn't seem to show sympathy for the oppressed, as he generally looks at them 'with contempt', and criticize them with a severe language. In this article, taking Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* into consideration relying on Homi Bhabha's notion of 'unhomeliness' and Melvin Seeman's highly influential five-fold classification of the theme of alienation, and considering Hegelian, and existentialist theories as regards the notion of alienation as well, I will argue that while, at first glance, he is likely to be blamed for having no loyalty for his culture, in fact; he is one of the postcolonial writers who has been trying to lead the people of once-colonized cultures to overcome the problems they have been entangled in by narrating and portraying their situations in an objective manner. He tries to instill a sense of alienation in the psyches of once colonized people first; in the form of 'normlessness' (one of Melvin Seeman's fivefold classification of the concept of alienation), and then in the form of which Hegel termed as "alienation as separation" which also resembles to the existential concept of alienation.*

Key Words: Naipaul, alienation, postcolonial, Mr Biswas, normlessness

Born in the West Indian Trinidad to a family descended from the East India, educated, married, and mostly resided in England, Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is regarded as a mouthpiece of displacement and rootlessness by the critics and scholars of the field. Speaking in an interview, Naipaul confirms the above idea saying "When I speak about being an exile or a refugee, I am not just using a metaphor, I am speaking literally" (Evans, 1972: 62). It is clear that even after having lived in England for many years, he, still, has not had the sense of belonging, as he says: "I still had that nervousness in a new place, that rawness of response, still felt myself to be in the other man's country, felt my strangeness, my solitude" (EOA 1987: 7). He is, as Mohit K. Ray articulates, "an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England, and a nomadic intellectual in a postcolonial world" (2005: 208).

Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* is a tragicomic novel set in Trinidad in 1950s, and was published in 1961. It deals with an East Indian's struggle for a place to strike his deracinated root afresh. It also attacks the Indian society's segregated, traditional way of life which contents to live in its shell and preserve its own special religious identity. Naipaul based *A House for Mr. Biswas* on his own experiences in Trinidad. Mr. Biswas is the prototype for Naipaul's father, Seepersad. And Anand, Mr Biswas's son for Naipaul. In his book, *Letters Between Father and Son: Family Letters* (1999), Naipaul says that the relationship between him and his father is similar to that of Anand and his father Mr. Biswas. Reading the novel in light of Naipaul's biography, one can clearly recognize similarities between the real and fictional fathers and sons. For example, Both Naipaul's father and Mr Biswas were born in a village. Both of them changes many houses until they have one of their own. Living with wealthy relatives, working as a sign painters, getting married with the daughters of conservative, wealthy Hindu families; holding a series of jobs are some of the other similarities.

Further more, Seepersad Naipaul, too, finds work on a newspaper after moving to Port of Spain, as Mohun Biswas does. The events in the life of Mr. Biswas's son Anand reflect those of Naipaul's himself. Anand, like Naipaul, is instilled with the idea of reading, being incited to be one of those students who achieve to win a scholarship at school and to share his father's involvement with writing. Naipaul, mentioning *A House for Mr. Biswas* says that it was "very much my father's book. It was written out of his journalism and stories, out of his knowledge he had got from the way of looking MacGowen had trained him in. It was written out of his writing" (FC 1984: XIII). The novel takes its subject matter from the excluded peoples who have been alienated from societies to which they apparently belong, and who are in search of an identity.

Naipaul portrays the West Indians lives, the reality of descendants of indentured servants by presenting his familial experiences as a miniature sample of the larger truths about the general colonial predicament in Trinidad. In his book *Reading and Writing*, he says that he began to see what his material might be: "the city street from whose mixed life they had held aloof, and the country life before that, with the ways and manners of a remembered India" (Naipaul in Schmitt, 1998: 132). The state of one's feeling of having been deracinated and displaced is called 'unhomeliness', a term coined by Homi Bhabba and other theorists of postcolonialism. It is the sense of being inbetween of two or more cultures. An unhomed person does not have the feeling of belonging since s/he is in a psychological limbo which generally ends in some psychological disorders and cultural displacement. Here, being "unhomed" does not mean being homeless. To be unhomed, as Lois Tyson states in *Critical Theory Today*, "is to feel not at home even in one's own home because you are not at home in yourself; that is, your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee" (2006: 421). In this regard, anyone who scrutinizes Naipaul's works, consisted of both fiction and nonfiction, can realize that Naipaul has a strong feeling of unhomeliness, although he has a home in Wiltshire, England.

Being a person brought up by a culture that has been deracinated from East India to Trinidad in West India as indentured labourers who have been colonized long before, and having had a leap (due to being educated first in Trinidad by a colonial, namely, British education system and later in Oxford, England) from a culture which had no self-determination to one which was a world power that initiated reason, science, and logic, (the corner stones of modernism) Naipaul seems to be in a psychological limbo, having been alienated from the culture of his people. Alienation and exile are the concepts which the writers of postcolonial literature mainly discuss and treat in their works. Because the writers or intellectuals from once colonized countries encountering the distortments that the colonizer has left on their culture, eventually establish discrete responses. This sense of not belonging to a significant country or culture results either in its rejection by the writer through criticism and satire, or by his physical or psychological withdrawals in the form of various kinds of alienation, as it has been the case with Naipaul at the very beginning of his adolescence and later in his matured life. Nevertheless, before the novel in question, it is of great importance to deliberate the concept of alienation on which I will try to proof my assertion.

Alienation is usually considered as a concept associated with minorities, the poor, the unemployed, and other groups of periphery who have limited power to bring about changes in society. Alienation is defined "as a feeling of separation or isolation which results problems stemmed from rapid social changes such as industrialization and urbanization which has broken down traditional relationships among individuals and groups and the goods and services they produce" (alienation." The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy). However, this definition does not give a comprehensive delineation of the term. The concept of alienation has intrigued and troubled many sociologists and philosophers and consequently enjoyed a turbulent history which stretches to Hegel. Due to its widespread usage through various disciplines, there hasn't been an agreement on even its most basic aspects yet. As Iain Williamson and Cedric Cullingford highlight "There is disagreement about the definition, debate over whether the phenomenon is a sociological process or a psychological state, or both, and confusion over the inevitability of the experience" (1997: 263). The concept has been used widely in the contemporary literature, sociology and philosophy. Melvin Seeman underlines that "It is a central theme in the classics of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim; and in contemporary work, the consequences that have been said to flow from the fact of alienation have been diverse, indeed"(1959: 783).

Hegel uses two distinct German words *entausserung* (surrender) and *entfremdung* (a state of separation) for describing the theme of alienation. He, as Williamson and Cullingford assert, was much influenced by Schiller's theological use of the term as a state of separation, and also by Rousseau's discussion of alienation as a surrender of personal self and control. According to Williamson and Cullingford, Hegel's discussion of alienation (or *entfremdung*) can be drawn out in two major senses: alienation-as-separation, and alienation-as-surrender. The first sense echoes Schiller's writings, and the second those of the social contract philosophers (Williamson 1997: 265). Hegel, as they claim, argues that "through self analysis and contemplation, the human moves from an immature sense of universality to a powerful sense of his/her own individuality, but as universality is essential to all things spiritual, this process leads to an acute sense of self-alienation from one's inner nature and the extremity of discord"(1997: 265). This is alienation-as-separation. They go on saying "recognition of this leads the individual to a second alienation process where this particularity is yielded back to the universality of the social substance. This sense of universality is mature and the experience is one of actualisation, although Hegel remains vague on how this occurs" (1997: 265). This is alienation as surrender. To sum up, the issue that must be underlined in Hegel's understanding of the theme of alienation is that for Hegel the theme of alienation has a positive nature.

Thus; Hegel puts forward two different processes, 'alienation-as-separation' being distressing but necessary for maturity, and 'alienation-as-surrender' being positively peaceful and free from worry due to the fact that "it involves a conscious relinquishment or surrender with the intention of securing a desired end: namely, unity with the social substance" (Schacht, 1970: 36). Meanwhile, during those interpretations on the concept of alienation, as Williamson and Cullingford put it: "Seeman and other American sociologists and social-psychologists began to pay close attention to the concept, and it was this work that was to provide a valid paradigm for researches around the concept" (1997: 269). Melvin Seeman, in his paper *On the Meaning of Alienation*, tries to put this complex structure of alienation into an order by a five-fold classification: Powerlessness, Meaninglessness, Normlessness, Social Isolation and Self- Estrangement (1959: 783). Seeman defines normlessness, the third variant of the alienation theme, as having been derived from Durkheim's description of 'anomie'. He asserts that "in the traditional usage, anomie denotes a situation in which the social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules for behavior" (1959: 787). In other words, normlessness refers to a situation lacking effective norms or in which individuals assume that unacceptable behaviors are required for success.

A House for Mr Biswas, metaphorically, is a miniature world which symbolizes the colonial world. Mr. Biswas's personal battle with the stronghold of the Tulsi household (the symbol of the colonial world) is a quest for existential freedom and the struggle for personality. As Singh underlines; "Mr. Biswas is the unaccommodated man representing the outcast's symbolic quest for a place in the hostile universe" (1998: 126). The Tulsis are running a sort of mimic world of colonialism and the important thing is that the Hanuman House too is run on the traditional Hindu familial lines and protocols. On the surface, the Tulsis have made an admirable reconstruction of the clan in strange and hostile conditions. It has its own schemes, leaders, duties, law and order, religious rituals and provides jobs and help to men of their community on merits. Mr. Biswas is repeatedly accused of not being grateful to the Tulsis despite the fact, as Mrs. Tulsi says, "Coming to us with no more clothes you could hang up on a nail" (AHFB, 1982: 557). At first glance, Mr. Biswas's rebellion may appear meaningless and unfair. Because one is likely to think that the Tulsi family provides shelter and job for Mr Biswas whenever he needs, but nevertheless, he ungratefully reject their help propounding the idea that the Hanuman House is like a prison.

But beneath the surface, one can see that the Hanuman House is not a coherent or benevolent entity of the traditional Hindu joint family. It is more a slave society where Mrs Tulsi and Seth need workers to boost their sinking influence and economy. They exploit the homelessness and poverty of men like Biswas and others. The acceptance of Hanuman House and its dubious claims is the submission of slavery. By such a picture, Naipaul tries to portray that subjugation is not something peculiar to the West, or to the whites. He satirises the Indians' insistence on carrying out their older caste system within themselves while they resent white colonialism. Naipaul's protagonist is alienated from the Hindu community in Trinidad, and is fighting out a personal battle for freedom and recognition. For him, to built a house of his own means freedom and recognition. And by the end of the novel, in spite of all its deficiencies, he manages to buy this house which eventually brings him his wife's respect, and saves him from his sense of being rootless and alienated. He does not regard the Tulsi's way of life which was consisted of the old traditions of the East India. The feeling of deracination and displacement and lack of a national community in Trinidad are the fundamental themes in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, as they were for Naipaul personally. Both Mr. Biswas and Naipaul are in search of a home by which they will be able to find their identities.

A sense of place and self which, at the time, was difficult for East Indians in Trinidad to have. Being an East Indian descendent in West Indies, a colony of England, Mr. Biswas is physically in one place (West Indies) and culturally in another (East India), and searches to find a genuine identity. Analysing the sense of alienation and the agony of exile experienced by the characters, *A House for Mr. Biswas* delineates the problems of a distorted and troubled past and tries to find a purpose in life. Alienated from his folk, family and from the Tulsi's Hanuman House, for Mr. Biswas, a house of his own symbolizes freedom and a place to strike a root. Mr Biswas is an alien even in his own family since he was born with six fingers and feet first, signs for bad luck. Being considered as an unlucky baby, he stays as an outsider, a lonely individual in his own family. When one reads *A House for Mr Biswas*, one can easily observe that the sense of alienation that the protagonists Mohun Biswas experiences in his fictional life is the very sense that Naipaul has experienced in his real life. Thus, both Naipaul and Mr Biswas, the protagonist of *A House for Mr Biswas*, experience a sense of alienation first in the form of normlessness which eventually leads them to an existential sense of alienation which also is likely to be considered as having common qualities with Hegel's concept of 'alienation as separation'. Melvin Seeman, in his paper *On the Meaning of Alienation*, classified the theme of alienation in five categories one of which is normlessness.

Normlessness, as Seeman states, is said to have been derived from Durkheim's description of 'anomie' (1959: 787) (breakdown of social structure) which is considered as "a condition of instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values or from a lack of purpose or ideals"¹. As for normlessness, as Seeman defines, it refers to a situation lacking effective norms or in which individuals assume that unacceptable behaviors are required for success (1959: 787). Naipaul's protagonist Mohun Biswas, as well as Naipaul himself, struggles for their individuality through a realization that the entanglements they are in stem from the immature (uncivilized) structure of their community. For Mohun Biswas, the Hindu folk of the Hanuman House represent this structure, as for Naipaul it is all communities that form the West Indies and the Third world. Having been alienated in the form of normlessness, both Mr Biswas and Naipaul improve a reaction relying on their creativity. They do not remain inactive in the face of their encounter with familial or societal norms. Thus; Naipaul became a writer and Mr Biswas built a house struggling with the drawbacks of their society. Hence, it is likely to assert that their alienation from their society leads them to a condition of existential standpoint. Existentialist, as Singh asserts, propound that alienation occurs when someone is constrained to become other than what he is. Being a constant feature of the human situation which can not be eliminated, they regard alienation as an unavoidable state in the course of creativity (Singh 1998: 25).

Because, as they propound, if one wants to have new ideas and visions, s/he has to cancel her/his previous ones. In this process of taking one role and giving up another, s/he constantly faces this sense of alienation. In this respect, an existentialist's understanding of the theme of alienation resembles to Hegel's concept of 'alienation as separation' which reads "through self analysis and contemplation, the human moves from an immature sense of universality to a powerful sense of his/her own individuality" (Williamson and Cullingford, 1997: 265). But it differs from Hegel's concept of 'alienation as surrender' being positively peaceful and free from worry due to the fact that "it involves a conscious relinquishment or surrender with the intention of securing a desired end: namely, unity with the social substance" (Schacht, 1970: 36) or any other entities like the state or religion. Because existentialists, rejecting all forms of authority, believe in the self-authority. They abstain from all forms of power because authoritarianism or power conflicts with their basic views of life. They believe in one's own self-actualization and self-determination. A self-determined one, according to the existentialists, is capable of comprehending his/her problems without relying on any religious or political dogmas and ideology, and s/he can overcome these problems by bringing about realistic solutions that serve to him.

In this respect, one can assert that, since they do not submit the authoritative and exploitive rules of the Tulsis and the Third World, Naipaul and his protagonist Mohun Biswas have experienced the sense of alienation first in the form of normlessness, then in an existential form which also can be considered to denote the same points as Hegel's concept of 'alienation as separation' does. They never give up struggling for their existence and identity relying on their own capabilities which eventually lead them to be an eminent writer in the case of Naipaul, and to create or own the house that he longed for in the case of Mr Biswas which they consider essential for their authenticity and freedom. To conclude, for alienated and displaced people of the colonized countries, Naipaul seems to suggest that searching for creativity (as Mr Biswas does and never gives up) relying on their own originality is one of the basic means to find their lost and alienated identity. As Kumar Parag also underlines "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" (2008: 139). Naipaul, through satire and irony, tries to instill in the psyches of the once colonized people a sense of alienation in the form of normlessness and 'alienation as separation'. Thus, he thinks, they will be able to leap into a phase of creativity which will consequently supply them with original and authentic identities of their own.

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