

DISPLACEMENT AS A DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS*

Ram Prasad Rai (Nepal)

ABSTRACT

*The term 'displacement' has a strong connection with diaspora literature that studies the experiences of pain and pleasure of the people in the diaspora. People in the diaspora do not have comfortable life. Since they are away from their homeland, it is not easy for them to get integrated into the new main stream society. Because of several variations such as language, culture, custom, religion, belief etc., they are to face difficulties in the host-land. They come across the feeling of displacement through alienation, homelessness, identity crisis etc. that are interconnected in the diaspora. Being a generation of indentured labor immigrant family, V. S. Naipaul himself has gone through such paining experiences that are indirectly expressed through the life experiences of the characters in his writing. While reading about Naipaul's life story and of Mr. Biswas in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, it can be understood that they sound similar strongly. In the novel, Naipaul shows how Mr. Biswas more importantly along with other people as the generation of indentured labour immigrant parents in Trinidad suffer from homelessness, displacement, alienation etc. This paper mainly focuses on the experiences of displacement along with homelessness, alienation etc. faced by Mr. Biswas and other characters as they are from Indian diasporic community.*

KEYWORDS: Displacement; alienation; homelessness; diaspora; dispersion; immigrants

The term 'displacement' in general means a state of being out of one's own place. It is a situation when someone or something is displaced in new places away from his/her or its original place. The state of displacement is obviously not comfortable for immigrants as McLeod (2015) says: "They can be deemed not to belong there and disqualified from thinking of the new land as their home" (p. 212). The displaced subject loses his/her native language, culture, beliefs, religion, etc. It is really painful for him/her. Now, a question to be answered is – how does a state of 'displacement' occur?

In this modern era, people's movement from one place to another, from one country to another or from one continent to another has been a popular activity in the world. People do not want to remain in their own native land for a long time which is in Safran's (2005) perception: it is the fact that "millions of people do not live in the countries in which they were born and raised" (p. 39). They go to another place and it is usually the foreign land for job, trade, visit, further studies, etc. This has been made easy by the advancement in communication, transportation and technology. If they stay there for a short time, they may enjoy being in a new place and seeing a lot of new things there. But if they live there for a long time or settle down for their life long period, they feel displaced from their originalities such as home, families, relatives, language, cultures,

etc. that they have left behind. The particular description of 'displacement' up to now is only the general sense of it but specifically according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1998), it "occurs because of imperial occupation and the experiences associated with this event. The phenomenon may be a result of transportation from one country to another by slavery or imprisonment, by invasion and settlement, a consequence of willing or unwilling movement from a known to an unknown location" (p. 73) It is not easy for them to assimilate them into the new situations over there. They create a diaspora and their experiences are diasporic.

The term 'diaspora' is from Greek language and it means 'dispersion' as Galvan (2008) finds it linked to "the idea of 'dispersion,' 'scattering' derived from the Greek language *dia* 'through' and *speirein* 'to scatter' (p. 114). While talking about 'diaspora' and 'dispersion,' it is very significant to go back to the Jewish history of about eighth century BCE and the dispersion of Jews who were forced to leave their state Palestine as it was embedded to Babylonia and detained from 527-538 BCE. After about forty years, they were freed and made to immigrate and get dispersed around into the surrounding countries for security or survival. They were termed as 'Jewish diaspora.' They were helplessly displaced from their home land. They had to leave their language, culture, rituals, etc. back. They were in a completely new world or the host-land. It is Jewish diaspora and their experience of displacement, alienation, rootlessness, etc. is diasporic. However, in the present era, the old definition of 'diaspora' has been expanded "to accommodate a wide range of fluid spatial, cultural and political locations" (Walsh, 2003, p. 3) because of the mass movement of people either voluntarily or involuntarily into other countries. So, various diasporas such as African diaspora, Armenian diaspora, Indian diaspora, etc. have been established by now. In support of this idea, Galvan (2008) further writes:

Moreover, its initial metaphorical ascription to the dispersion of a particular people, the Jews, after the Babylonian captivity, and then later with the Jewish people being forced to leave Palestine, has been extended to other peoples and communities. Thus the classical, Jewish diaspora has carried over its meaning, extending it to other similar dispersions. We now view the African diaspora, the Asian diaspora, the Indian diaspora, and others, as equivalent to (similar to or like) the Jewish diaspora. (p. 114)

Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* depicts the migration of Indian people as indentured labourers in the Caribbean island especially during the colonial period. These immigrants into Caribbean island were not happy in reality because of the newness in everything in the new world. They were compelled to bear the pain of being displaced through dispossession, alienation, dislocation etc. So, this paper aims to examine closely how Mr. Biswas, the principal character and the generation of Indian immigrant into Caribbean island had the experience of displacement in the novel.

Mohun Biswas belongs to Indian immigrant's generation in Caribbean island. It means he was born in the family of Indian immigrants. Like him, there were many other Indian immigrants trying to adjust there but always had "precarious and fragile existence" (Nandan, 2008, p. 83) in Trinidad. So, in the novel the struggle of Biswas for independence away from the original homeland represents the struggles of all of the Indian immigrants there. The author has presented Mr. Biswas as his own representative character since he was born in the family of Indian immigrants or of others who were like Mr. Biswas there as Leela (2012) considers: "The life of Mr. Biswas resembles the life of Naipaul himself, whose series of experiences of exile and alienation while living

in Trinidad seem to be portrayed through the character of protagonist, Mr. Biswas” (p. 36). In fact, Naipaul’s life story is reflected especially in the diasporic experiences of Mr. Biswas.

The novel presents Mr. Biswas’s life-long pain for being displaced and rootless in the Caribbean island away from his ancestral land, India. It is a deep “separation from origins and essences” with always a sense of “un-homeliness” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 120). He has to fight for independence since he loses his father Raghu when he was a child. Because of superstitious belief of Pandit and the society, Mr. Biswas is blamed to bring death to his father as he is once dismissed from his job by Pandit Jairam with his bitter scolding:

You will never make a Pundit. I was talking the other day to Sitaram, who read your horoscope. You killed your father. I am not going to let you destroy me. Sitaram particularly warned me to keep you away from trees. Go on, pack your bundle. (p. 56)

So, in a way, he becomes the subject of social hatred. He lives with his mother bearing all these accusations. He shares his pain with his mother saying: “You see, Ma, I have no father to look after me and people can treat me how they want” (p. 67). His father Raghu also did not have a house and was working hard for the family’s survival. Now, he dies leaving all responsibilities on the shoulder of Mr. Biswas.

Mr. Biswas suffers from placelessness. He is a displaced person “a man without a home” (Leela, 2012, p. 36) and has no place to call his own. He has been a houseless person in Trinidad. He fights for the existence of his family and himself in the place away from his original homeland. His family faces the problem of accommodation. So, he dreams to have a house of his own for his family. It becomes his “restless quest for the dream house” (Garebian, 1984, p. 494). He thinks that he becomes independent only when he owns a house there because “Home can only have meaning once on experience a level of displacement from it” (Leela, 2012, p. 36). In fact, this is the general concept of those who are in host-land away from their homeland. Mr. Biswas wishes to make a house to keep the pain of being displaced at bay.

Living in the Hanuman House does not give him satisfaction. He does not enjoy living with many people there. All people are like Mr. Biswas, having no place of their own to live in which is viewed by Leela (2012): “The condition of the dislocated and dispossessed is especially poignant and complicated because they cannot find a ‘home’ of their own” (p. 35). Mr. Biswas suffers from alienation. In search of peace, he leaves for a village, The Chase and looks after a Tulsi food shop. Because of the accommodation problem, he moves to another place, The Green Vale. He carries all his furniture into a room given to him at the barracks. He hopes to have a nice time there but he feels more alienated there, too. He thinks to build a house of his own. He seems to be excited for this thought, “As soon as he saw the barracks Mr. Biswas decided that the time had come for him to build his own house, by whatever means” (p. 214). With his all savings by the time, he purchases second hand materials and starts making a house, but the house is not complete. He starts living in one room that is only the complete one. Despite his ownership to the house, he cannot stay there long because the angry labourers set it in fire. The labourers have no good relation with him. Now, he is homeless again. Problems of displacement do not leave him free.

One fact thing about diasporic life is that people cannot remain free from being in a state of displacement, alienation, rootlessness, identity crisis, etc. Mr. Biswas also happens to experience the similar conditions of “out-of-placeness” (Nandan, 2008, p. 85). In

the quest of happiness, he has to move to different places that Leela (2012) comments: “In search of his own identity, Mohun Biswas shifts from village to town and from joint family to nuclear family but fails to find his own roots amidst socio-cultural change” (p. 36). He goes to Port of Spain and starts living with his family on rent in Mrs. Tulsi’s house. He has a good job now as a reporter for ‘Trinidad Sentinel’ and has good salary, too. He has a good relation with Mrs. Tulsi as well. To be more satisfied and independent, he builds a house in Tulsi Estate in Short hills. He has happiness living in his own house but this happiness does not last long again because this house also catches fire and gets destroyed. Mr. Biswas becomes placeless with the “sense of displacement” (Leela, 2012, p. 36) again and again.

Now, Mr. Biswas and his family shift into Mrs. Tulsi’s house in Port of Spain again. Along with him, other many people have been into the house. It is a crowded house. Since peace is disturbed totally in the house, he cannot tolerate the discomfort in the house. Moreover, his wife Shama and children also can not enjoy living there. At the same moment, he has some quarrels with Mrs. Tulsi and her son Owad, too. His son Anand is slapped by Owad. So, Anand requests his father that “(they) must move. (He) cannot bear to live here another day” (p. 551). Because of all these problems, he is to look for another place to reside in. His wife Shama also agrees to leave Mrs. Tulsi’s house when she would previously say: “I do not want anything bigger. This is just right for me. Something small and nice” (p. 580). Mr. Biswas is in continuous torture of his condition of displacement, hopelessness, alienation, etc. He is not getting a permanent place for settlement in Trinidad. His search for a place of his own is still going on.

Once, Mr. Biswas comes across with a solicitor’s clerk in a cafe all of a sudden. While talking, he shares his interest and problem with him. The clerk knows that Mr. Biswas is in need of buying a house. It becomes a good chance for the clerk to sell his house to Mr. Biswas. They negotiate the price in \$ 5,500. He fails to examine each and every corner of the house before buying in the excitement of going to have a house of his own. He borrows \$ 4,000 from Ajhodha and pays the clerk. The family of him moves into the house in Sikkim Street. He and his family start living there. They are happy owning a house as “The Sun came through the open window on the ground floor and struck the kitchen wall. Wood work and frosted glass were hot to the touch. The inside brick wall was warm. The Sun went through the home and laid dazzling strips on the exposed staircase” (p. 572). But as time passes, they happen to discover several weaknesses with the house. The house happens to have no door. It has two wooden pillars rotten that support the staircase. The house requires a wide repair. They do not have money to make all these repairs. The clerk has actually cheated them badly. Nevertheless, Mr. Biswas borrows some money from Basdai. They become happy that they have left Mrs. Tulsi’s house. In this achievement, they forget about the weaknesses of the house. After all, this is his own house for his family as Leela (2012) asserts: “His struggle is long and tiresome, but in the end he is successful in having a space he can call his own imaginary homeland” (p. 36). There is independence in him now. But unfortunately, he is on a debt heavily. His worries increase one after another. He suffers from heart attack and dies leaving a house for his family at least to get sheltered.

Though Mr. Biswas and his family have been made the main focus on in the novel, other characters such as Seth, Mrs. Tulsi, Govind, W. C. Tuttle, widows of Hanuman House, etc. are also there to experience displacement, alienation, rootlessness, etc. in the world other than their own original homeland, India. Their parents or grandparents had

reached there as indentured labourer immigrants. Most of them have no house of their own which is in Bruce King's (1995) close analysis:

Naipaul examined the difficulties of the Trinidadian Asian Indians in finding the economic means to become independent individuals. Yet without such independence, symbolized by Biswas's need for a home or his own place in society, they could not really be part of the New World and would remain homeless, angry exiles dependent on a decaying past. (p. 212)

They have been suffering from being displaced and dispossessed since the time of their parents and grandparents. In order to reduce the pain of being displaced, they have established an Indian community and continued Hindu culture, beliefs, rituals, etc. in Trinidad. This is a diaspora and an Indian diaspora in Trinidad. There is dispersion of Indian people and all are struggling to establish a house of their own as an identity despite several difficulties in the host-land. Moreover, they are continuing their Hindu cultural activities in respect and memory of their ancestral homeland, India.

One significant question is there – To what extent is Mr. Biswas successful to accomplish his goal of making a house of his own? Is he fully settled in the foreign land? He has worked hard and faced a lot of ups and downs to have a house like this though it is not of quite good condition. He has succeeded to give a house to his wife Shama and children. It should be taken as his great achievement after “the desperate struggle of Mr. Biswas” (Leela, 2012, p. 36). However, he has left his family on a huge debt after his sudden death at the age of 46 “a tragedy” (Leela, 2012, p. 36). He inherited the state of displacement from his father Raghu who died when Mr. Biswas was small. Now, Mr. Biswas has put his children into similar condition of displacement as it is interpreted by Nandan (2008):

Inheritance is thus shown to be patriarchal as Biswas's struggles are passed down to the son as his were passed down by the father. Biswas inherits from his indentured father, Raghu Biswas, the congenital trauma of the experience of displacement from the original center, the geographical and illusory homeland, India, which contributes to his sense of displacement in the present home. (p.80)

He has made a tremendous struggle to provide himself and his family with a complete independence but he is not fully successful. The family has to go with a lot of hard efforts in order to be free from the debt that symbolizes displacement as well as identity crisis.

In conclusion, the novel has established a world of lives of the people who have been into another country especially in Caribbean island as immigrants. In addition to this, it has pictured the painful experiences of Mr. Biswas and other Indian indentured labour immigrants suffering from displacement through homelessness, alienation etc. in the new world away from their original homeland. He belongs to the generation of Indian indentured immigrants' family in Caribbean island. During colonialism, many Indians immigrated into Caribbean island as indentured labourers. They were first generation Indian immigrants there. They were compelled to have a lot of hardships to manage daily meals in the world of everything new such as language, culture, tradition, beliefs etc. They were unable to make their own homes to maintain their permanent settlement despite their strong desire to do so. Now, he is there to inherit the state of placelessness of his previous generation immigrants. Though he dies succeeding to build a house for his family, he has left his family on a heavy debt to pay for this. So, he, his family and other generations of Indian indentured laborers are in the state of displacement, dispossession, alienation etc. After all, in the diasporic experiences of him and others in Trinidad, there

Crossing the Border: International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

is the extreme reflection of the life experiences of Naipaul himself as he was born in the family of Indian indentured immigrants in Trinidad.

REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. (1998). eds. *Key concepts in postcolonial studies*. London: Routledge.
- Bhabha, Homi. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Galvan, Fernando. (2008). Metaphors of diaspora: English literature at the turn of the century. *As You Write It: Issues in Literature, Language, and Translation in the Context of Europe in the 21st Century*. Madrid: University of Ljubljani, 1(2), 113-123.
- Garebian, Keith. (1984). The grotesque satire of *A house for Mr. Biswas*. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 30, 487-496.
- King, Bruce. (1995). V. S. Naipaul. *West-Indian Literature*. London: Mcmillan Education, 209-221.
- Leela, S. (2012). Homeland through diasporic judgement in V. S. Naipaul's *A house for Mr. Biswas*. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR- JHSS)*, 35-37.
- McLeod, John. (2015). *Postcolonialism*. Manchester University Press, Oxford Road.
- Naipaul, V. S. (1992). *A House for Mr. Biswas*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Nandan, Kavita. (2008). V. S. Naipaul: A diasporic vision. *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 5(2), 75-88.
- Safran, William. (2005). The Jewish diaspora in a comparative and theoretical perspective. *Israel Studies*, 10 (1), 36-60.
- Walsh, Rebecca. (2003). Global diasporas: Introduction. *Interventions.*, 5(1), 1-11.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ram Prasad Rai received his Bachelor's degree from Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus in Kathmandu and completed his Master's degree in English literature in 1997 from the University Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur. He took his M. Phil. degree from the Institute of Advanced Communication, Education, and Research (IACER), Pokhara University, Kathmandu in 2015. Currently, he is a Lecturer of English at Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. He has also taught English language and literature at KIST College and Prasadi Academy for six and nine years respectively. Email: ram_rai31@yahoo.com