

The Tragicomic Struggle for Selfhood, Language, and Alienation in Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*

Naomi Ngaomei¹, Dr. Nonie Lourembam², Dr. Harikumar Pallathadka³

¹Research scholar, MIU,

²Asst. Professor, Department of English literature, MIU

³Professor, Manipur International University

Abstract

V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) endures as a seminal postcolonial novel because it transforms the seemingly ordinary misadventures of Mohun Biswas into a tragicomic allegory of colonial existence. The protagonist's lifelong pursuit of a house, at once mundane and monumental, becomes a stage where identity, displacement, dignity, and belonging are enacted with both heartbreaking seriousness and comic futility. His humiliations, small victories, and persistent failures render the narrative a satire of colonial fragmentation as much as a lament for lost belonging. Scholars have approached the novel through diverse theoretical frameworks, postcolonialism, deconstruction, formalism, cultural history, existentialism, and religious criticism, yet converge on the view that Biswas's struggle epitomizes the broader condition of postcolonial subjects negotiating invisibility and fragmentation. Critical discussions emphasize themes of language and identity, homelessness, alienation, mimicry, cultural displacement, historical consciousness, and the symbolic resonance of the house. Together, these interpretations underscore Naipaul's achievement in elevating the ordinary into a tragicomic exploration of colonial history, cultural hybridity, and psychological liberation.

Keywords: Naipaul, Biswas, Postcolonial, Tragicomic, Colonial, Identity, Displacement, Hybridity, Symbolism, Satire, Language, Alienation, Rituals, Liberation

Introduction

Published in 1961, V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* has secured its place as one of the most influential postcolonial novels of the twentieth century. At its core, the narrative recounts the life of Mohun Biswas, a man whose lifelong pursuit of a house becomes both a personal ambition and a metaphor for identity, independence, and dignity in a colonial society marked by displacement and fragmentation. The house, simultaneously mundane and monumental, functions as a stage upon which the complexities of cultural hybridity, alienation, and belonging are enacted. Naipaul's tragicomic rendering of Biswas's misadventures His humiliations, small victories, and persistent failures- offers a satire of colonial fragmentation as well as a lament for lost belonging.

The novel's thematic richness has attracted extensive scholarly attention, with critics interpreting it through multiple theoretical lenses. Thorell Tsomondo emphasizes the centrality of language, arguing that Biswas's identity is constructed through his engagement with speech, writing, and journalism, which

reflect his struggle to assert visibility in a world that renders him invisible. Bijender Singh, by contrast, highlights Naipaul's satirical treatment of Hindu rituals, exposing their hollow spectacle and their role in suppressing individuality. These perspectives, alongside broader critical discussions of mimicry, cultural displacement, and historical consciousness, reveal the novel's layered interrogation of colonial existence. Ultimately, *A House for Mr Biswas* is not merely a narrative of property acquisition but a profound exploration of colonial history, cultural identity, and psychological liberation, situating Biswas's personal struggle within the broader condition of postcolonial subjects seeking individuality in fractured societies. Hanuman House emerges not simply as a family residence but as a symbol of a vanishing Indo-Trinidadian communal order shaped by indenture, migration, and cultural transformation. Kenneth Ramchand shifts the focus from literary theory to historical and social context, reading Mr Biswas's persistent attempts to escape the Tulsi household as emblematic of collapsing traditional structures and the uncertain rise of modern colonial society. Within this framework, Hanuman House looms as both fortress and farce: a crumbling monument to communal order, populated by domineering matriarchs and sycophantic relatives whose excesses verge on parody. Mr Biswas's desperate flights from the household resemble slapstick routines, yet beneath the humour lies the tragedy of a man suffocated by the weight of disintegrating traditions and the ambiguous promises of modernity.

Similarly, alienation, fragmentation, and homelessness are defining characteristics of postcolonial existence. Drawing upon Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, it is validated that colonial subjects remain trapped between cultures, unable to return to their ancestral roots while simultaneously denied complete acceptance within colonial society. Consequently, Mr Biswas's homelessness extends beyond physical shelter to encompass emotional, cultural, and psychological displacement. His search for a home therefore represents an existential search for wholeness and self-esteem.

The Tulsi family operates as an internal colonial structure whose authority mirrors imperial domination. Rather than accepting submission, Mr Biswas continuously resists familial oppression through small yet significant acts of independence. His determination to own a house symbolizes resistance against all forms of domination, making personal autonomy inseparable from postcolonial liberation. The authors conclude that reclaiming personal space becomes essential for reconstructing fractured identities after colonialism. Bijender Singh offers a distinct cultural perspective by examining Naipaul's satire on Hindu rituals and social practices. Rather than criticizing Hinduism itself, Singh argues that Naipaul exposes the hypocrisy, rigidity, and superficiality of ritualistic traditions that have lost their ethical significance. Through characters such as Pundit Jairam and members of the Tulsi family, Naipaul questions inherited customs that often suppress individuality instead of nurturing moral responsibility. Consequently, religious satire complements the novel's broader critique of oppressive social institutions.

Collectively, these studies illuminate *A House for Mr Biswas* through complementary theoretical lenses. Postcolonial theory provides the dominant framework, examining colonial power, identity formation, migration, hybridity, and cultural resistance, with critics such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Robert J. C. Young underscoring the fractured identities of colonized subjects. Deconstruction, through Tsomondo's application of Derrida, highlights the instability of meaning and the perpetual deferral of identity. Formalist criticism, exemplified by Ghosh, redirects attention to literary form, showing how aesthetic structures are inseparable from historical and political contexts. Historical criticism, represented by Ramchand, situates the novel within Indo-Caribbean experience, where indenture and migration reshape communal traditions.

Taken together, these approaches reveal the novel's tragicomic genius: it is simultaneously a lament for fractured identities and a satire of the absurd mechanisms that perpetuate them. Postcolonial theory gives emphasis to the tragedy of domination and displacement; deconstruction exposes the comic instability of meaning; formalist and historical readings highlight the irony of colonial subjects grappling with borrowed forms and collapsing traditions. The enduring significance of Naipaul's work lies in its capacity to make readers laugh at the absurdity of colonial existence even as they mourn its devastating consequences.

Identity, Alienation, and the Search for Selfhood

The central concern is the construction of identity in a colonial society. Although each critic adopts a different methodology, they agree that Mr Biswas's lifelong struggle is fundamentally a struggle for selfhood. His desire to own a house symbolizes much more than economic success; it represents the achievement of individuality, autonomy, and human dignity within a fragmented colonial world.

Scholars argue that Mr Biswas's identity crisis emerges from multiple forms of domination. The Tulsi family functions as an internal colonial authority whose rigid hierarchy suppresses personal freedom. Their household mirrors imperial power by demanding conformity, obedience, and dependence. Consequently, every attempt by Mr Biswas to establish his own household becomes an act of resistance against institutional control. The house ultimately signifies liberation from psychological and cultural oppression rather than merely material ownership.

Deepak Kumar and Shagufta Naz extend the discussion by foregrounding alienation and homelessness as defining conditions of postcolonial existence. Mr Biswas is portrayed as an exile suspended between incompatible cultural worlds, belonging neither fully to ancestral Indian traditions nor to colonial Trinidadian society. This fragmented position produces loneliness, uncertainty, and emotional instability. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, the authors show how colonial subjects imitate dominant practices without ever achieving acceptance, leaving identity perpetually incomplete. In Biswas's case, mimicry becomes both laughable and pitiable, an endless rehearsal for a role he can never inhabit. Homelessness here is not merely physical but existential, a tragicomic condition in which every attempt at belonging collapses into comic misfit and tragic incompleteness.

The Tulsi household is read as an internal colonial empire, embodying both terror and absurdity, a parody of imperial domination enacted through domestic squabbles and petty tyrannies. Mr Biswas's resistance, his stubborn insistence on owning a house, is comic in its futility yet heroic in its defiance, transforming precarious autonomy into a fragile triumph of spirit. Kenneth Ramchand situates this struggle within Indo-Trinidadian history, where Hanuman House represents the waning authority of communal tradition and the colonial city signals uncertain modernity. Biswas inhabits the unstable space between these worlds, dissatisfied because neither offers genuine belonging.

At its core, *A House for Mr Biswas* dramatizes the tragicomic struggle for identity. The house functions as both punch line and prayer: a symbol of autonomy that collapses at the very moment it seems secure. Encounters with the Tulsi family resemble farcical battles against an empire of domestic tyranny, yet each act of resistance carries the tragic weight of a man clawing for dignity. Alienation, mimicry, and historical dislocation render him a comic outsider, but persistence turns failure into a paradoxical victory. In the end, the house stands not as a monument to success but as a fragile joke against the crushing seriousness of colonial oppression, a laugh that reverberates through tragedy.

Language as the Foundation of Identity

Among the selected studies, Tsomondo provides the most sophisticated analysis of language. Rather than considering language as a simple means of communication, the article demonstrates that language determines social existence itself. Mr Biswas repeatedly seeks recognition through acts of writing, whether as a sign painter, journalist, or aspiring author. These occupations symbolize his effort to inscribe himself into a society that frequently denies his existence. One of the earliest critical discussions presented by Thorell Tsomondo argues that language constitutes the central foundation of identity in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Rather than viewing the house solely as an emblem of personal independence, Tsomondo demonstrates that language, particularly the relationship between speech and writing, plays an equally significant role in constructing Mr Biswas's identity. According to this interpretation, the protagonist exists between multiple linguistic and cultural systems, where neither traditional Indian culture nor colonial English culture provides complete stability. His involvement with writing, journalism, and sign painting reflects his continual attempt to establish an authentic presence within a world that repeatedly renders him invisible. Critics have long recognized that Mr Biswas's struggle is but the absurdity of carving out individuality in a world that insists on rendering him invisible.

Thorell Tsomondo situates *A House for Mr Biswas* within Jacques Derrida's theory of language, arguing that identity rests on a slippery foundation. Mr Biswas's ventures into sign-painting and journalism become heroic gestures toward selfhood, yet they resemble comic inscriptions on a collapsing wall. Derrida's notion of *différance* haunts him like a trickster: each attempt at presence is deferred, each declaration of identity unsettled by the instability of meaning. His voice, like his house, remains perpetually half-built, never secure. Tsomondo gives emphasis to the way Western philosophy has long privileged speech as authentic presence while relegating writing to absence and alienation. In Naipaul's novel, however, writing becomes the very site of Biswas's struggle, dramatizing how identity is never fixed but continually negotiated through unstable linguistic and social exchanges. His search for selfhood thus mirrors the tragicomic instability of language itself.

This interpretation also explains why literacy occupies such an important position throughout the novel. Mr Biswas's fascination with books, newspapers, magazines, and journalism reflects his desire to participate in a broader intellectual world. His movement from reading signboards to reading literature parallels his intellectual development and his growing awareness of himself as an independent individual.

Literary Form and Colonial Reading

Debates over literary form, rather than postcolonial identity alone, provide the lens through which William Ghosh situates *A House for Mr Biswas*. By contrasting Edward Kamau Brathwaite's and Homi Bhabha's readings, he shows how the novel became a site where colonial and metropolitan audiences interpreted form differently, making literary structure itself historically and politically charged. Mr Biswas's reading habits dramatize this encounter: his fascination with painted letters evolves into an earnest devotion to imported British novels, yet these texts fail to reflect his Caribbean reality. The result is both parody and critique; his mimicry of metropolitan models exposes the gulf between colonial life and European traditions. In this sense, Naipaul's novel becomes a tragicomic experiment in criticism: Biswas's misplaced devotion is comic in its futility, but tragic in the cultural dissonance that leaves him perpetually unmoored. William Ghosh contributes another important dimension by demonstrating that *A House for Mr Biswas* should be understood not only through its themes but also through its literary form. According

to Ghosh, Naipaul deliberately employs the European realist novel while simultaneously exposing its limitations within colonial society.

Mr Biswas's fascination with imported British novels illustrates this contradiction. Initially, he imagines that European narratives offer models for success and personal advancement. However, colonial realities repeatedly frustrate these expectations. The optimistic assumptions underlying Victorian realism cannot adequately explain Caribbean social conditions shaped by displacement, poverty, and colonial dependency. Consequently, Naipaul transforms the inherited realist tradition into a distinctly postcolonial narrative capable of representing fractured historical experiences.

Ghosh further argues that this formal experimentation influenced later developments in postcolonial literary criticism. The novel therefore occupies a foundational position within debates concerning literary form, history, and postcolonial identity. Rather than separating aesthetics from politics, Naipaul demonstrates that literary form itself possesses historical and ideological significance.

Tragicomic Allegories of Identity in Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*

Critical readings of *A House for Mr Biswas* converge on its peculiar blend of heartbreak and farce, showing how the text transforms a seemingly ordinary quest for a house into a tragicomic allegory of colonial displacement, autonomy, and cultural transformation. The protagonist's life unfolds as a comedy of errors staged against empire, where each triumph collapses into futility, and each act of resistance carries both comic misfit and tragic weight.

Diasporic interpretations highlight alienation and homelessness as defining conditions of postcolonial existence. Biswas emerges as a clownish yet heroic figure, suspended between incompatible cultural worlds, his house both fortress and folly—a Sisyphean comedy of belonging undone by colonial absurdity. Gender-focused readings sharpen the satire by portraying women such as Mrs. Tulsi and Shama not as passive victims but as formidable agents within the farce of colonial patriarchy. Their authority is comic in its excess yet tragic in its consequences, turning domestic squabbles into both satire and lament.

Bijender Singh approaches the novel from a cultural perspective by examining Naipaul's treatment of Hindu customs and rituals. His study argues that the novel criticizes not Hinduism as a religion but the mechanical observance of traditions emptied of ethical meaning. Characters who claim religious superiority frequently behave hypocritically, revealing contradictions between ritual performance and moral conduct. Institutions represented by figures such as Pundit Jairam and the Tulsi family demonstrate how rigid social traditions may suppress individuality instead of nurturing genuine spirituality. Consequently, Mr Biswas's struggle against oppressive customs parallels his resistance to colonial authority. Both colonial power and rigid traditional structures deny individual freedom and encourage unquestioning conformity.

Other perspectives emphasize rebellion against tradition and the instability of colonial identity. Biswas's quarrels with Hindu customs and Tulsi domination resemble a tragicomic duel between autonomy and oppressive structures, his dream house a shaky metaphor for independence. Studies of creolization and language further underscore the comic absurdities of colonial education and mimicry, where identity fractures into ambivalence and double consciousness. His experiments with sign-painting, journalism, and storytelling become comic performances haunted by tragic incompleteness.

Taken together, these approaches reveal the novel's tragicomic genius: identity is staged as both parody and lament, a fragile joke against the crushing seriousness of colonial oppression. The house, at once

punchline and prayer, dramatizes the paradox of autonomy in a world where belonging is perpetually deferred.

Conclusion

V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* has been recognized as one of the most intellectually rich and critically significant novels in postcolonial literature. While scholars approach the text through diverse theoretical frameworks, they converge in identifying identity as its central concern. Mr Biswas's lifelong pursuit of a house symbolizes the universal human desire for independence, dignity, recognition, and belonging within a society fractured by colonialism and cultural displacement.

Deconstructive readings emphasize the instability of language, showing how writing enables Biswas to assert presence in a world that repeatedly denies his existence. Formalist criticism highlights Naipaul's transformation of inherited European realist traditions into a uniquely postcolonial form, demonstrating that literary structures themselves carry historical and political meaning. Historical approaches situate the novel within Indo-Trinidadian experience, where indenture and migration reshape communal traditions and modern colonial society. Other perspectives underscore alienation, mimicry, and homelessness as defining conditions of postcolonial existence, while studies of religion and domestic power reveal how rigid customs and patriarchal hierarchies suppress individuality yet also generate comic excess. Together, these readings affirm that the novel dramatizes identity as a precarious, fractured, and continually negotiated process.

The symbolic importance of the house becomes increasingly complex across these interpretations. It represents physical shelter, economic independence, psychological stability, cultural identity, and existential fulfillment simultaneously. More than a material possession, the house functions as a metaphor for recovering agency within a colonial world where identity is destabilized. Biswas's eventual ownership of a modest dwelling signifies not success alone but the affirmation of his humanity.

The interdisciplinary richness of the novel is equally striking. It invites analysis through postcolonial theory, deconstruction, formalism, historical criticism, sociology, cultural studies, and religious critique. This diversity confirms its continuing relevance to contemporary literary studies. More than six decades after publication, *A House for Mr Biswas* continues to inspire new interpretations because it addresses enduring questions of identity, migration, belonging, language, memory, and freedom.

At its core, the novel is a consummate work of tragicomedy. It is not merely the chronicle of one man's quest for a house but a satire of colonial absurdities and a lament for fractured identities. Its humor lies in depictions of everyday failures, petty quarrels, and comic mimics; its tragedy lies in the unrelenting weight of displacement, domination, and cultural alienation. The house itself becomes both punchline and prayer—a fragile joke whispered against oppression, a symbol of autonomy that resists erasure, and a testament to the persistence of human dignity.

Ultimately, Naipaul portrays identity not as a fixed condition but as a continuous negotiation shaped by history, culture, language, and personal determination. Mr Biswas's perseverance despite repeated failures reflects the resilience of postcolonial subjects who seek dignity in societies marked by displacement and inequality. His journey reminds readers that genuine freedom begins with the ability to define oneself independently of oppressive structures. The enduring scholarly interest in *A House for Mr Biswas* confirms its position as a landmark achievement in world literature and an indispensable text for understanding postcolonial identity and human resilience.

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