

Home as Discursive Post-Colonial Tension: Analytical Study of a House for Mr. Biswas

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Abstract: *If an individual makes an attempt to make a list of things indispensable to his daily life, a place to live in, irrespective of the size, will, without a second thought, tops the list. There goes the undeniable saying, “Man is a social animal.” The social animal, in order to socialize, needs shelter. No one can argue the fact that human beings can live without a permanent ‘home.’ The concept of home, in post-colonial studies, attains a heightened sensation, in the sense, the very schema of ‘home’ is utter vague in this field of study. It is something which needs redressal, a redressal which will blur the blot of colonialism. V.S. Naipaul stands as a towering colossus of post-colonial literature who has given masterpieces of his kind. His depiction of the issue of ‘home’ in his magnum opus “A House for Mr. Biswas is grappling and captivating at the same time. This paper is an attempt in order to make a schematic study of the very idea of home through Mr. Biswas. Doing so, it also wrestles with the theory of post-colonialism and touches upon its ramifications like identity crisis, hybridity etc. The **hypothesis** it argues is that ‘home’ appears to be a formless structure in the novel, something distorted in nature. This very distortion sort of prevents the novel from attaining a coherent structure which lends a parallel dimension to the fragmented identity of the central character.*

Keywords: *home, identity, post-colonial, shelter, social,*

Introduction: Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too!

-Uma Parameswaran

The term ‘post-colonial’ can be said to have emerged during the 1980’s as a literary, cultural, anthropological, political, economic, and also historical enquiry of the then prevailing scenario. Without a second thought, it can be said that post colonialism emphasizes the tension between the metropolis and the former colonies. Doing this, it, assumes at the same time, a common ground between the cultural products of the former colonies and the culture of the metropolis there are many issues which are serious concerns of post-colonial studies, but lies at the heart, the critique of “Eurocentrism”, in other words, the so called placing or rather ‘construction’ of Europe to be the superior one. Critiquing this very idea of Europe at the center, post-colonialism as a movement, in a way negates basic Eurocentric thoughts like “universalism.” Moreover, this particular field also extends its concern for the various victims of Eurocentric thoughts, attitudes, politics, explorations and other unwarranted intrusions, core of which lies the concern for one’s home.

Shelter has been one of the indispensable organs of human existence since time immemorable. But colonialism left an undeniable mark on this very notion of ‘home’ of an individual.

“Post-colonial criticism has embraced a number of aims to reexamine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized; to determine the economic, political, and also cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized peoples and the colonizing powers”(Young, 22).

There lies the subtle process of interaction of two different groups which plays a vital role in giving the very idea of home different meaning. If minutely observed, one can very clearly find that the very notion of home becomes a ‘hybrid’ one, which is not the concept of ‘hybridity’ by Bhabha but in general, something which is not pertaining to indigenous ways. Imperialist practices and attitudes in a way shaped the very living of the people during the period of colonialism. The definition given by Edward Said in this regard is very apt.

“Colonialism is the necessary consequence of imperialist practices and attitudes, thereby suggesting a causal relationship” (Said, 6).

Research Methodology: 1. Theoretical analysis of the novel in order to evaluate the fragmented notion of the concept of home.

2. Making the well-known concept by Homi Bhabha, “Hybridity” creep in and pave way to prove the idea of home to be a hybridized one.

3. Using the assertion that the very way of living of human beings in a way lend meanings to the nature of home.

Theoretical deliberations:

The so called ‘casual’ relationship as suggested by Said involves not only power play but also hegemonic impositions which make people drown in the deep sea of “meaninglessness”. It is the meaningless of one’s identity, meaningless of the very way of living, meaningless of a life which renders different meaning to the basic idea of ‘home’ of an individual. Post-colonialism studies present a home which is at the very outset a ‘distorted’ one, distorted here, is not the implication of something being shattered but, is an indication of the destruction of native culture by the British.

In this regard, *Things Fall Apart* by one of the stalwarts of African literature, Chinua Achebe, appears to be one significant example because there is the glaring depiction of the dynamics of power play which shattered the native Nigerian tradition to pieces. In this novel, one can find the very notion of ‘home’ to be adorned with hegemony, power-relations, manipulations. “If one finger brought oil, it soiled the others” (89) - it clearly indicates the anarchy which prevailed among the natives after the advent of the British.

Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty is a matchless rival in the domain of post-colonial studies. In her influential essay, “Can the Subalterns Speak?” she deliberates upon the very vice of the people who are under hegemonic subjugation. She draws at length about the very idea of whether the marginalized people have a say in a subordinated position. The subordinated position in a way becomes a representation of how people find themselves in a situation where embracing a new land culture becomes difficult, The idea of home here to appears to be getting new definition of a ‘strange’ one wherein an individual finds in a reluctant state of mind in order to do away with all the ties of the native ‘home’, at the same time not able to fully embrace the foreign culture.

This very aspect is vividly evident in the first novel of one of the budding Indian writers, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Namesake*. The alienated state of living in a foreign land (America in the novel) became so troublesome for the Ganguli family that it was compared to “a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts... something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect”(Namesake 27).

Discussions and interpretations:

When it comes to Indian context, V.S. Naipaul is a remarkable figure for his clear deliberations on various issues dealing with the identity and home of an individual. *A House for Mr. Biswas* chronicles the life Mr. Biswas, born as an unlucky child who was not able to establish an identity for himself in an environment which was hostile to him (England)... “he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it; to walk in through his front gate...”(8). Hybridized to the core, the life of Biswas, who although has had enough in his life including the success of his daughters, was not able to achieve the peace of mind, suffering two heart-attacks, second one finally leading to his death as the ‘new’ house too was not of much help.

“The new house imprisoned them in silence and bush. They had no pleasures, no cinema shows, no walks, no games even, for the land around the house still smelled of snakes.”(424)

Franz Fanon, very well known for his “Self/Other” dichotomy in post- colonial studies was a leading third world intellectual whose work inspired the struggle against colonialism and influenced the growth of post- colonial culture. The ‘power-based’ notion of home becomes very clear in the concept of the ‘Other’ and the ‘Absolute’ because it’s the British who rendered the “East” inferior and as a result the so called “Other”. Basically what lies at the heart of this statement is the subtle manipulation of the “West” who very well “constructed” the “East” giving ‘new’ name and dimensions to the very ideas of ‘homes’ and ‘identity.’

Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*, remarks,

“The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony”(Said, 6).

Mr. Biswas can rightly be said to be the everyman of the modern world having his own wishes, ambitions and desires. He depicts the normalcy of each and every individual in this world by showing his desire to have his own house, although struggling to have one. Every individual longs to breathe his last under his own roof and Mr. Biswas thus appears to be a common man having his own identity which in a way elevates his position to a greater level because he strongly opposes the clutch of the Tulsi family. In the words of F.G. Rohelehr,

"Biswas is everyman, wavering between identity and non-entity, and claiming his acquaintance with the rest of men." (137)

Identity has always appeared to be one of the pivotal issues of post-colonial studies and in this novel home becomes the ladder to establishing the self-identity of Mr. Biswas. He is portrayed to be a man who prefers freedom to tyranny, self-respect to clutches, identity to slavery which possess a sharp contrary to other characters shown in the novel who become the scapegoats of Mrs. Tulsi. Thus, the quest of Mr. Biswas to have his own house can safely be interpreted to assert his own identity. Moving ahead a step further, it can be said that the idea of home in the novel is not only a physical entity but also something dealing with spirituality.

Mr. Biswas was not able to have his own house in the very beginning and this incompleteness or his lack of own shelter becomes the very representation of a life which itself is incomplete. However, even after owning his house he was deprived of mental peace and happiness by debt. House in the novel appears to be a broken structure, something distorted, fragmented indicating the very structure of life led by Mr. Biswas which was devoid of any concrete structure. Thus, the search to belong runs an eternity in the novel. V.S. Naipaul remarked,

"The act of writing is not merely a matter of self-expression, but also an instrument of an awareness seeking to modify social reality" (1972:29).

No matter wherever people go, the traces or the imprints of the parent land and culture remain and they always appear to haunt people in the new land as they find themselves in a caught between situation. The people, after moving to a new land are never able to embrace the new culture at ease and also, at the same time, are not able to do away with the native culture. Naipaul captivately comments,

"When (my grandfather) built his house, he ignored every colonial style. He might have found in Trinidad and put up a heavy, flat roofed oddity, whose image I was to again and again in the small, ramshackle town of Uttar Pradesh"(32).

Conclusion:

The caught between state of an individual associated with his origins and the constant struggle of the individual in order to come out of it remains a key trait of the novel. Devoid of any kind of social role or mental peace, what Mr. Biswas finds is loneliness, despondency and a fragmented meaningless life. His remark to his son is heavily loaded with meaning, “I am just somebody. Nobody at all” (279).

Hanuman house, the final shelter of Mr. Biswas, also does not appear to be the perfect house for Mr. Biswas as it was to be traded with his identity. The house has been described in the following lines, an alien white fortress. The concrete walls looked as thick as they were and when the narrow doors of the Tulsi Store on the ground floor were closed the House became bulky, impregnable and blank. The side walls were windowless and on the upper floors the windows were mere slits in the facade. The balustrade which hedged the flat roof was crowned with a concrete statue of the benevolent Monkey God Hanuman. (80-81)

Nevertheless, A House for Mr. Biswas remains a canon of post-colonial literature and also the footstep of Naipaul, in order to search his own place in the world during his initial stages. His own lines sum up the idea,

“Most imaginative writers discover themselves, and their word, through their work” (Naipaul, *Return* 211).

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