

**CROSS-CULTURAL CURRENTS IN V.S.NAIPAUL'S
*A HOUSE OF MR. BISWAS***

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Abstract

V.S.Naipaul being a diasporic writer, has succeeded in bringing about the experiences of immigrants in the alien lands. Through his works he brings forth the changes that take place in the minority culture after coming into contact with dominant culture. He has attempted to show the plights of Indian diaspora. The immigrants after leaving their own homelands begin to learn the cultural behavior of the hostland culture. Through his characters such as Biswas, Mrs. Tulsi, Mrs. Seth, Ralph Singh, Willie Chandran, he explores the culture of East Indian communities. They all strive to attain a real cultural identity by fixing themselves with their heritage. In my selected works I observe the cultural changes that take place within the minority groups by coming into contact with dominant culture. These immigrants after a hard struggle try to assimilate into new culture. *A House for Mr. Biswas* shows clash between cultures and these cultures are of colonizers and colonized. Through clashes both cultures are affected. Native cultural identities are changed and new cultural identities are formed. With the help of the notion of cultural hybridity, the plight of immigrant Indian people is shown how after leaving their native country, they have to adopt the colonial and hybrid community of Trinidad. They

go through the transformation of their identity and cultural traditions to adjust themselves into the frames of the dominant culture. Novel depicts the story of three generations. These generations of Indian people are under the influence of Creole society. Each generation passes through the process of hybridization and come out as a new generation with new customs, beliefs, education and culture. Old generation has to abandon its significant elements such as culture, education, religion, traditions and ideology.

When Indians move to western countries, Africa, Asia and the Middle East striving for fulfill their dreams of success. Most of them fulfill their dreams and facing no trouble in assimilating into the native society. By accepting their values, beliefs and cultural behavior, they are accepted into host society. But this acceptance by dominant culture conceals tensions that are known to the members of the same society. They often experience that they have sacrificed their high valued Indian culture for the sake of inferior western ways.

Keywords: culture, acculturation, cultural imperialism, liminality, hybridity

Methodological approach

Two critical approaches - Postcolonial and historical have been used to critically examine V.S.Naipaul's text *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a postcolonial and historical book of Caribbean culture.

In general, Culture is the depiction of rituals, folkways, mores, celebration of festivals, spirit of brotherhood (liberty, equality and fraternity) with communication as an important part. Culture is a contested reality and it means different things for different groups. Whatever is practiced in society becomes culture. People try to dissociate by delimiting the sphere, relationships and then communication. Thus they like to live in solitude which in turn becomes their culture. Literature highlights the practice through literary works. Literature reflects culture of the times consider Rabindernath Tagore's *Geetangli*, an example of ancient Indian mysticism; that man is mortal and is replenished with life at the immortal touch of God. *Social interaction is a way to develop a culture. Social interaction is mutual and every member of the society acts according to the expectations of the other members. The outcome of group interaction is its culture. Parsons and Shils view that interaction is responsible for the development of culture on the human level, and they perceive, it further gives its significance in the determination of action.*¹ Culture is the “integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour”. Culture includes customs, beliefs, ideas, taboos, moral codes, tools, rituals, language and so on.(DMFA,2002) Culture of a place expresses the inhabitants' skills such as craft, design, music, dance, knowledge,traditional techniques, traditional natural resource management, pattern of social interaction that contributes in the welfare and identity of an individual.”²

In human nature nothing is expected to be independent from the culture. The term 'culture' came into vogue in the late 18th and 19th centuries with the western agenda of imperialism. This was a sort of reaction towards the horrible metamorphosis in the society due to the rise of industrialization. Culture is so large and a well known and confused concept as E.B. Taylor, a nineteenth century British anthropologist, defines in his treatise *Primitive Culture*:

“Culture or Civilization... [is] that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”³(1) It means that all societies have a culture and a civilization and it is a very intricate whole which includes abilities and behaviors acquired by a man as a social member of the society. Anthropologists take the concept of culture to define different forms of life and social expressions. The behavior of people while eating, talking, interacting at work, involving in social customs such as marriage, family get together all form a culture.

Therefore, culture is associated with practices, institutions and means of classification and through these modes various groups dominate other sectors of the society and regulate the dispersal of meanings and values. This cultural supremacy remains continuous with sustaining political and economic power over displaced and dis-empowered. Prior to 1960s and 1970s culture was connected with art, literature, aesthetic skills, and classical music, specially in 1960s and 1970s the word 'culture' acquired new meanings.

The comprehensive meaning of culture leads to cultural imperialism. This approach is of hybrid nature and of extremely intricate and problematic to define. Cultural imperialism is the use of political and economic powers to spread the ideology, values and habits of a foreign culture at the cost of a native culture. Thus it is a practice in which economic and political powers play an instrumental role. It means cultural elements are instruments in maintaining the political-economic dominance. In fact, it is a process of imperialists control and dominance is supported and promoted by importing encouraging forms of culture.

Williams asserts that in the modern context it is not sufficient to define only what does the culture mean but how this term is used in contemporary discourses. Thus he recognizes three broad divisions of contemporary usage of the term culture: first culture is an interpretation of “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”; second as an expression of “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general”; and third is as to mention “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.”⁴(90) Of these three definitions second and third fall into the discourse of cultural imperialism.

Edward Waid Said defines that culture is not limited upto the customary traditions, customs and language of a society but it has gone the beyond the margins of a community. According to him culture has played a significant role in completing the meaning of imperialism. All functions of a culture – institutional, political and economic are dependent upon culture. In *Cultural and Imperialism* Said takes culture as “all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and the representation that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms.”⁵(xii).

Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*(1994) uses concepts such as mimicry, interstice, hybridity and liminality to argue that cultural production is always fruitful when ambivalence lies. He sees colonialism as direct suppression, exploitation and domination but also a span of intricate cultural interaction and connection. In his view, Western tradition is not distinctive and others should not accept its supremacy in the presence of other cultures and civilizations. Bhabha explores the concept of cultural hybridity means mixing of cultures points out that no culture is fixed, pure and stable. Every form of identity is a product of mixedness of cultures. He states that cultures are not isolated and detached entities but always remain in flow and contact with one another thus reflect mixedness.

In the diasporic studies the cultural aspect of both colonizer and colonized has been debated overly. V.S.Naipaul being a product of native and western cultural encounter, has

reflected cultural changes in native culture due to encounter of different culture in all his novels. Through his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* the theme of cultural encounter of Indian and Trinidadian culture has brought into light.

This novel is the history of three generations living in the hybrid society of Trinidad. Mr. Biswas views three generations and he is the protagonist. As the novel progresses cultural changes are viewed in the customs of the Indian people of the novel. Due to this a huge change comes in their identities and cultural values. The major change is the decline of Hindu culture and customs due to the process of hybridity and creolization. A remarkable change also comes in outlook and attitudes. The cultural changes assist in forming their mixed identities when they come into contact with the colonizer or other. These cultural changes are psychological, religious, spiritual and educational. These changes come only with the changes in the Creole society which is a mixture of different cultures. This society is a meeting point of different cultures. Different cultures clash and adopt themselves according to the conventions of dominant culture.

The journey of immigrants from India to Trinidad deracinated them from their homelands, but they carried the vision of India in their consciousness. This India was imaginary. On arrival in Trinidadian land they experience acculturation. In the part second of *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) acculturation can be seen clearly. A strongly and compactly built Hindu family produces devastating forces of changing conditions. Mrs. Tulsi's son Owad and Biswas's children Anand and Savi move to abroad. Shekhar marries a girl who belongs to Presbyterian family. Govind and Tuttle are influenced by American culture. They transform themselves according to the American principles. All these changes depict that unrestrained motives in life always bring instability and uncertainty. Everything remains unchanged for sometime and after a while the Indian named are replaced with Anglican names which are not easily identifiable by the Indian people. This happens due to the adoption of the cultural traits of majority groups by minority groups. Indian names as 'Shama' 'coolbal' and 'Premesar' are transformed by the 'Shyama' 'Khooblal' and 'Premeshwar', are indications of increasing length of space and distance from the native Indian culture.

In this novel, all characters are pulled away from their homes and they have to accept the norms and regulations of the governing culture. In find themselves into a new culture, they do not know to which culture they belong, to their Indian culture or British culture. They shuttle in between two cultures and do not know which culture they should value more. Due to this confusion their personalities become uncertain and doubtful.

The immigrant (colonized) in the Creole society of Trinidad experience a change of language spoken by the Indian people. Here language acts as a site of multiple negotiations, where bilingual or multi-lingual practices can be supported and borrowed words can be identified precisely because language is a living evidence of civilization, ethnic group and culture. Here Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital becomes relevant, claims that, "If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital"⁶ (p.17) So when immigrants invest in a target language it enhances their cultural identity which regularly change with time and space. As the story proceeds, the changes in native language are experienced by the Indian people. They replace their native language with the colonizers's language. The most interesting thing about the characters of the novel is they use native and English language according to their convenience and needs. Language is a significant aspect of one's culture. It is maker of cultural identity and losing one's native language means

losing one's cultural identity. This crisis is faced by three generations of Indian family in Trinidad.

Biswas belongs to a Hindu family. His native language is Hindi but as he lives in a hybrid society of mixed cultures. Biswas begins to speak English in place of Hindi. Tara, Biswas' aunt also speaks English. She speaks in English with photographer while performing last rites during the funeral of his father. Thus English has become a common language of Trinidad. She says to photographer : "Leave them, the photographer said in English. Is a nice little touch. Flowers on the ground" . . .Five people all together," the photographer said to Tara. Hard to know just how to arrange them. It look to me that it would have to be two one side and three the other side. You sure you want all five?"⁷(HB p.30). It conveys the idea that the dominant culture is so powerful that it can transform one's identity and culture that the natives begin to use English language in place of Hindi even in public places. People use Hindi language as a secret language. Formally and publically they like to use English language. Group of widows come to Tulsi's house : "the women . . . heedless of stares, they stared; and made comments in Hindi, unusually loud, unusually ribald, because in the city Hindi was a secret language, and they were in holiday mood"⁸(HB p.172). This extract shows that the Hindi language which is their native language has become secret language. As their language changes, it leads to change in their identities which in turn bring change in the upcoming generations.

With the shift in generation a change in their language is noticed. In the first generation, Biswas's parents, Rahgu and Bipti speak pure Hindi. In the second generation Biswas and his wide Shama and other people use both languages English and Hindi and during third generation, Anand and Savi English has taken the whole place and Hindi is almost disappearing. Both cannot communicate in Hindi with their parents and grandparents:

"Though the children understood Hindi they could no longer speak it and it shows this limited communication between them and Bipti"⁹(p.204)

With the change in language, the identity of each generation changes. Language speaks about the personality of a person. It defines one's identity. Loss of one's native language means the loss of one's native identity. As the members of the next generation adopts another language, their identity automatically changes. By doing this they lose their ancestral identity which has been preserved by their older generation.

The members of a particular culture follow the conventions and customs of that culture. It is seen in the Trinidadian Creole community. In this hybrid society the identity of people is affected due to cultural change. In the speech of Tara this change can be seen: "Tara said, "Fashions are changing all the time these days. I am just old fashioned, that is all." She stroked her gold nose-flower. "It is expensive to be old fashioned"¹⁰(HB p.15) . Tara represents the first generation. She is a strict follower of customs and rituals of her culture though she talks about the changes occurring in fashion. The representatives of the first generation are Mr. Biswas' aunt- Tara, Mrs. Tulsi, Seth, Biswas' uncle Ajodha, all follow the rules and regulations of their culture. They do not tolerate change and diversions. The first generation members are Indian born and members of next generations are born in Trinidad. They obey their strict cultural rules and these rules deny them to mix with the members of other castes and races. They also show resistance to mix with the Indian low caste. An example shows this resistance when Ajodha's brother Bhandat has a relationship with a lady of other caste, he is banished from the family. Tara does not want to mention his name in her family : "Bbhandat had left his sons and gone to live with his mistress in Port of Spain. The boys were taken in by Tara, who added Bhandat's name to those never mentioned by her again"¹¹(HB p.34-35). This example shows that first

generation always remain strict in following the cultural rules. For them getting married to a lady of another caste is a matter of shame for family. It is a total disgrace. When Biswas' sister elopes with Tara's workers, Tara full of contempt swears not to mention her name in the family. But Biswas does not feel any anger of disgrace. It concludes that first generation is rigorous and ultra-careful about their traditions and caste while second generation does not bothered about customs.

Shekhar is a member of second generation and he stands against the traditional ways of finding a wife for him. He disapproves all the conventional ways. He expresses his anger by shouting and even gives threats of suicide. He does not accept the old norms. He threatens to commit suicide if his family pressurizes him to marry. From his disapproval it proves that the second generation does not approve the traditional ways of finding their wives. According to old custom a bride after marriage always goes to his husband's house, but Shekhar after his marriage goes to his bride's house and does not follow this cultural norm. He does not bring his wife to Hanuman House, which is an epitome of old established traditions and beliefs:

“The elder god, contrary to Hindu custom and the traditions of his family, did not bring home, but left Hanuman House for good, no longer talking of suicide to look after the lorries, cinema, land and filling station of his wife's family”¹²(HB p.240)

In traditional Hindu family, male dominant system was prevalent and men had the authority to use their power as they wished. The women had the old way of thinking and for them beaten by their husbands was a sign of honor. As the time changes, the way of thinking and mindset of the people changes. In the novel, in the later generations, the status and perception of women changes.

Culture is mixture of various aspects. It expresses one's traditions, customs, rituals and particular identities. Religion is a central element of culture. Culture is an expression of religious beliefs. Religion offers an opportunity to discover beliefs and notions, philosophies and mythologies, rituals and symbols that mould the cultures and civilizations of the universe. In Trinidad, Hindu religion is common. People are religious minded and they are strict follower of Hindu deities. With the shift in generation, a change in the religious outlook is noticed. The first generation has a strong hold over their religious rites. For instance at Hanuman House religious puja is done regularly for paying respect to gods. The name of the house 'Hanuman House' is the reflection of the ancient time. This religious faith declines with the emergence of the new religious thought of next generation.

Conclusion

The Caribbean is a multicultural, postcolonial and mercilessly combative and hostile immigrant society where different cultures get intermingled with Western culture. But rather than balanced intermixing of cultures, the minority cultures seemed to be dislodged, rejected and fragmented under the dominance of Western powers. A house for Mr. Biswas is perceived as the outstanding specimen of cross-cultural currents. Naipaul through his novel depicts Tulsi household as Indian diaspora in Trinidad, (a Caribbean island), its continuity and its fragmentation and encounter with the waves of Western culture. Naipaul contemptuously presents the picture of fragmented and inorganic society. A House for Mr. Biswas sheds light on the issues of clashes of old and new cultures. The dominant theme of the novel is Biswas's inability to adjust in Tulsidom(colonizers' terrain) and his constant struggle to free himself from the clutches of Tulsi

family. Naipaul's main concern is to focus on the failure of the postcolonial societies and to bring forth the destructive effects of colonialism on culture, language, geology and history.

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