

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture 54

Lecture 54: Displacement and Alienation in V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr Biswas

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, today we are going to discuss displacement and alienation through our reading of V.S. Naipaul's novel, A House for Mr. Biswas. Modernization has increased the movement of people across the world.



It has made the globe a smaller place. However, displacement, whether involuntary or voluntary, has been taking place even before the phase of modernization. It is an older phenomenon. So, displacement and the movement of human groups have been taking place long before the modern period or modernization began.

The indenture system, also known as the Girmitya system of forced migration of Indian laborers to other colonies of the British Empire, is one of the prominent examples in history of mass migration from India, and it started mainly in the 19th century. In this process of displacement, people would carry their old cultural traditions and values to new places, which not only affected migrants but also the cultures of the host society. Indentured labor or servitude is a contract-based labor system where a person is employed for a specific number of years without pay or until the debt is paid. After the


Parliament of the United Kingdom passed the Slavery Abolition Act in the year 1833, it caused an acute labor shortage across the British colonies. Indentured labor supplied cheap laborers and substituted for slavery under the British government.



So, as many as 1.6 million Indians were sent to the different colonies to work as indentured laborers in Africa, the Caribbean, as well as the Pacific. The conditions in the indentured system were severe enough to resemble slavery. Most of the indentured laborers worked for more than five years and remained in these colonies because they could not afford to return. Some of these laborers were even kidnapped and forced to travel abroad and work as indentured laborer. According to scholar and critic Hugh Tinker, Mauritius was the first colony that imported indentured labour from India in 1834, followed by British Guyana in 1838,

Trinidad and Jamaica in 1845, Grenada Suriname in 1873 and Fiji in 1879. When these indentured laborers arrived in the colonies in places such as Fiji, Grenada, Malaysia, Trinidad and Tobago, Kempa as well as Guyana, they brought their own culture along with them. So even a laborer who is considered as someone coming from the most impoverished section of a given society is not an empty individual. He or she carries her or his culture, knowledge system along with them to the place where they are made to work, where they are allocated for working.

Indentured Labour

- When these indentured labourers arrived in colonies – including Fiji, Grenada, Malaysia, Trinidad and Tobago, Kempa, and Guyana – they brought their culture along with them. The impact of it can also be felt today as a large part of the **descendants of these migrants constitute a significant part of the Indian diaspora**. As the indentured labour included an agreement of the terms of labour, these migrants also came to be known as “Girmitiyas” – “girmit” being a colloquial term for agreement
- The Indian diaspora in Caribbean islands has produced various notable writers, whose writings dwell in the past and often deal with the issues related to migration, including **V. S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, Wilson Harris, Earl Lovelace, Ramabai Espinet and David Dabydeen**.



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So they carry their own knowledge system and culture to the place where they are allocated for working. The impact of a population of Indian laborers bringing their own culture along with them to a new land can also be felt today, as a large part of the descendants of these migrants constitute a significant part of the Indian diaspora. As indentured labor included an agreement of the terms of labor, these migrants would be

known as girmityas, like I already mentioned. So, girmitya is... a word you know coming from girmit.

Girmit is a colloquial or corrupt version of agreement. So, agreement would have a colloquial term, girmit, and from that, girmitya. The Indian diaspora in the Caribbean islands has produced various notable writers whose writings dwell on the past and often deal with issues related to migration. And these authors include V.S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, Wilson Harris, Earl Lovelace, Ramabai Espinet, and David Dabydeen.


Brij V. Lal in 1996 observes that these indentured laborers lived in a state of crisis. They were caught between the demands of two worlds. On the one hand, the one they had left and to which they could not return, and on the other, where they had come for a short time but overstayed or stayed longer than they had expected or wanted. It is ironic that even a century later, the tension between alienation and attachment still hovers over and haunts the lives of their descendants. So, these descendants of indentured laborers face many cultural and psychological difficulties or challenges regarding their livelihood,

equivocal identity. As Vijay Mishra, who is an academic and scholar of Indian descent, rightly points out, they adopt many postures and make gestures toward things Western and Eastern. But when these momentary infatuations wear off, these descendants of indentured laborers come face to face with the void, with a sense of emptiness compounded by helplessness, which is also reflected in the writings of the authors from these communities. So, when they write about their own experiences as indentured laborers, they are talking about this sense of not belonging anywhere or partially belonging both here and there, their sense of helplessness, their sense of void and lacuna.


and a state of... a constant state of equivocal identity and identity crisis that they suffer. So, it is important to note that Indians came after the Africans in the Caribbean, such that it became difficult for the former to shake off the sense of transience and homelessness. The Indians, in other words, could not settle in the land the way the Africans did, and they remained dislocated and ambivalent or unsure, and along with the sense of insecurity and uncertainty, a feeling of alienation would dawn on them. So, coming to author V.S.

Indentured Labour

- It is important to note that Indians came long after the Africans in the Caribbean, so it became **difficult for the former to shake off the sense of transience and homelessness**. They could not settle in the land the way Africans did, and remained dislocated and ambivalent along with the feeling of alienation



Indian community organised prayers 150 years since the first indentured labour arrived in South Africa.
Image source: Britannica.com



Naipaul, Sir Vidyadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, who lived between 1932 and 2018, was a prominent Trinidadian author of the Indian diaspora. He is credited for extensively working on and illustrating the suppressed histories, for which he won the Nobel Prize. This author's satirical works include *The Mystic Masseur*, published in 1957, and *Miguel Street*, published in 1961, and these works are set in the Caribbean.

His notable non-fiction accounts, such as *An Area of Darkness*, published in 1965, and *India: A Wounded Civilization*, published in 1977. And *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, published in 1990, are all based on the study of India's history and culture. So, this author V.S. Naipaul boasts experiences from different lands, and his writings are reflections

From his, you know, perspectives coming from different legacies or the different roots that he connects with. He connects with the Caribbean as well as with Indian roots. Naipaul is associated with many countries, not only because of his Indian ancestry and birth but also because of his education, career, and travels. In this regard, N.S. Iyer writes the following about Naipaul: 'He was an East Indian by descent, Trinidadian by birth, English by virtue of his Oxford education,' unquote. So, Naipaul's partial affiliations to multiple nations abstained his sense of belonging to any particular place.

This can be observed through his writings, where he describes his relations with other nations. When he stayed in India to write '*An Area of Darkness*,' he wrote, 'I had not learned acceptance from India, was content to be a colonial without a past, without ancestors,' unquote. Although he lived a significant part of his life in England, he said, 'The English language was mine, the tradition was not.' His magnum opus, '*A House for Mr. Biswas*,' which was published in the year 1961, is also set in the Caribbean. It is an account of the protagonist Mohan Biswas, who is a man of Indian descent living in Trinidad.

A House For Mr Biswas

- His magnum opus, *A House For Mr Biswas* (1961), is also set in the Caribbean. It is an account of Mohun Biswas, a man of Indian descent living in Trinidad. Naipaul's father was the inspiration behind the protagonist in this semi-autobiographical fiction; its plot recounts his quest to find a house of his own.
- Born into a poor family, Mr. Biswas struggles to find a place to live with his freedom. He moves from one crowded house to another inhospitable one. At first, he moves in with his mother's sister, Tara. He is assigned the job as a sign painter in the house of Tulsi family, where he begins a flirtatious relationship with Shama, a girl from his employer's family. When Mrs. Tulsi, the matriarch of the Tulsi family, comes to know about the affair, Mr. Biswas is bullied into marrying Shama.

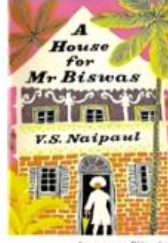




Image source: Wikipedia

Naipaul's father was an inspiration behind the formation or the shaping of this character, the protagonist Mr. Biswas, in the semi-autobiographical fiction. So, his plot recounts Biswas's quest to find a house for himself. Born into a poor family, Mr. Biswas struggles to find a place to live with his freedom. So, he moves from one crowded house to another inhospitable one. At first, he moves in with his mother's sister Tara.

He is assigned the job as a sign painter in the house of Tulsi family. But in this Tulsi family, he starts a flirtatious relationship with Shama. Shama happens to be a girl from his employer's family, that is the Tulsi family. When Mrs. Tulsi, who is the matriarch of the Tulsi family, comes to know about this affair between Shama and Mr. Biswas, Mr. Biswas is bullied into marrying Shama. Even after his marriage, his desire for a house does not end.

He despises living among the members of the Tulsi family. After many failed attempts at finding a house, he comes closest to happiness and freedom when he is employed as a journalist for a tabloid called Sentinel. Later in his life, he manages to have a house of his own. However, this house does not meet his expectations. Apart from exploring the colonial history and the multiracial society of the Caribbean, V.S.


Naipaul here also criticizes the hollow mimicry of the Western culture by the Caribbean population. The quest for a house by Mr. Biswas has been interpreted in as many symbols as possible in the novel, such as a seeking for identity and freedom. The house also represents a sense of belonging, attachment and alienation. So, Hanuman house is a microcosm of the Indian diaspora in Caribbean reflecting old Hindu culture, which has been brought from India to Trinidad by the indentured labourers. And the members of the household try to preserve whatever is left, whatever is kind of remnants from the Indian culture where they come from.

The household also signifies the disintegration of cultural identity with the new generation's negotiation of space and identity in a multicultural environment through the characters of Owad and Shekhar, both of whom marry outside their Hindu community. And as a result, there is this depletion, there is this weakening of the rigid cultural identity of the Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas's longing to own a house, to possess a house for himself, works as a metaphor for the alienation caused by displacement among the Indian diaspora in Trinidad. So, a sense of unbelongingness of the diasporic population in general and of Nepal in particular, which is instilled through the process of migration, is evident in the novel.

Although the inspiration for the protagonist, the character of Mr. Biswas, comes from Naipaul's father, the character of Mr. Biswas also in a way reflects a void created by the loss of belongingness that is intrinsic to a diasporic person like author Naipaul himself. So, one could say, in other words, that Mr. Biswas's character is influenced and inspired by Naipaul's personal experience of displacement, of double displacement as a diasporic person, and it also deeply draws on Naipaul's father's character. K.K. Babakir argues that the search for a house in the text is essentially a quest for personal identity.

Displacement in *The House of Mr Biswas*

- Mr Biswas's longing to own a house works as a **metaphor for the alienation caused by the displacement among the Indian diaspora in Trinidad. A sense of 'unbelongingness' of the diasporic population in general, and of Naipaul, in particular, which is instilled by the migration is evident in the novel.**
- Although the inspiration of the protagonist comes from the author's father, the character of Mr Biswas also reflects a void created by the loss of belongingness of Naipaul, like any other diasporic person. K. K. Babakir (2021) argues that **the search for a house in the text is essentially a quest of personal identity.** Mr. Biswas is shown as **wondering between the vitiating Indian identity represented by the Tulsis, and the indifferent modern society of the Port of Spain.**




Mr. Biswas is shown as wandering between the vitiating Indian identity represented by the Tulsis and the indifferent modern society of Port of Spain. The pressure to find himself a place in society and completely lost and confused, Mr. Biswas's only sense of identity is maintained through holding onto his vision of a house. So, Naipaul was born and brought up in Trinidad and later went to England for his education. Critic K. S. Saradhambal asserts that during Naipaul's childhood, India was a constant source of cultural resources, be it religion, rituals, food, or social customs.

And all these aspects of Indian culture greatly influenced the Indian diaspora in Trinidad. The displacement and wider exposure to the multiracial society of London caused cultural alienation. So, to some extent, these cultural motives, these habits, were maintained better in Trinidad, whereas a further shift to the society of London caused a sense of cultural alienation. So, much like M.G. Vassanji, Naipaul is well known for roaming around the world to find inspiration for the characters in his novels, which in a way insinuates a constant source of alienation, vacuum, and a perpetual experience of displacement that shapes his self and his representation.

So, the way the author is shaped and the way he represents his characters in his writings draws their lifeblood from the author's nomadic lifestyle. This alienation of V.S. Naipaul is also reflected in Mr. Biswas's perpetual longing for identity and freedom in the form of owning a house, which, however, does not meet expectations by the end of the novel. Even if he has a house for himself, it does not meet his expectations or his dream.

Alienation in *The House of Mr Biswas*

- The pressure to find himself a place in society, and completely lost and confused, Mr. Biswas' only sense of identity is maintained through holding his vision of a house. Naipaul was born and brought up in Trinidad and later went to England for education. K. S. Saradhambal (2017) asserts that during Naipaul's childhood, India was a constant source of cultural resources – religion, rituals, food and social customs – for the Indian diaspora in Trinidad. The displacement and a wider exposure to the multiracial society of London caused a cultural alienation. Naipaul, like M. G. Vassanji, is well known for roaming around the world to find inspiration for the characters in his novels, which hints at a constant source of alienation and displacement that shape his self and representation.
- This alienation of Naipaul is also reflected in Mr. Biswas' longing for an identity and freedom in the form of owning a house, which however, also does not meet the expectation at the end of the novel.



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So, as a way of concluding our discussion today, we see that *A House for Mr. Biswas* presents a multifaceted struggle to find a sense of belonging and attachment, as portrayed through the figure of the protagonist, Mr. Biswas, and his journey to find a source of personal identity through owning or possessing a house. However, this search, this seeking of one's identity through a house, is frustrated in his case. It turns out to be a big fiasco and a mistaken assumption. Naipaul portrays the sensibility of a diasporic person experiencing constant trauma of alienation due to displacement.

The loss of identity and roots in Naipaul's case can be understood from his heightened awareness of rootlessness as it reflects through his following statement: I quote, 'I had been made by Trinidad and England.' 'Recognition of my difference was necessary to me,' unquote. So, he submits here that he has been shaped—he has been made by the

cultures of Trinidad and England—that the fact that he traces his roots to different origins here, which is the result of his double displacement. His entire personality, all his experiences, the plethora of experiences that he brings to the table while creating his own characters—his fictional characters—

are deeply influenced by, deeply beholden to, and draw on the cultures of Trinidad and England. So, this multiplicity in his character, this ambivalence in his character, is who he is. This statement is an embracing of this multitudinous, multifaceted character, this layered identity of a nomad that V.S. Naipaul has always carried as an author and as an individual. With this, we come to the end of our lecture today.

Let us meet with a new topic and another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.

