



Constructing Indian Diasporic Identity: A Comparative Study of V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*

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Introduction:

The term diaspora generally refers to people leaving their home country. In Indian literature, the diaspora story encompasses centuries of migration, colonial trauma, and cultural adaptation. Indeed, the narrative of Indian exile—from involuntary indenture, voluntary migration, or exile—has been able to critically examine struggles between self and colonizer-centric visions of home and identity.

For diasporic writers, that tension between being rooted and needing to keep moving is pivotal to their writing. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Bharati Mukherjee have all succeeded in turning that restless spirit into something veritable. In *Midnight's Children*, the narrator Saleem Sinai, via Rushdie's protagonist, experiences a fragmented sense of identity intricately linked to the traumatic history of postcolonial India. Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Interpreter of Maladies are starkly clear studies of cultural dislocation. She writes about her characters, torn between their own traditions and the pressure of fitting in in new locations. Mukherjee writes about the difficulty of altering who you are in books like *Jasmine*. This happens to people who move all the time.

In a lot of novels, the issue of belonging and identity formation among different people is represented as a path through an intricate journey that includes "home" itself—an aspect that has

many physical characteristics, but it also represents our social and philosophical life. In his ground-breaking concept of the third space, Homi K. Bhabha outlines that new hybrid formations of identity emerge within a culture's interstices, which are both fertile as well as fraught. Diasporic individuals, Bhabha suggests, inhabit a space of between-ness, where established certainties drop and new notions of identity emerge (Bhabha 1994).

Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971) by Anita Desai similarly describes the Indian immigrant experience in post-war England. Desai takes an in-depth look at migration's psychological effects, the myriad of factors at play when it comes to otherness, and the fragility of belonging experienced by people when they emigrate to other countries—the dynamic interpenetration of Dev, Adit, and Sarah, through their unique circumstances, serve as representative of this. London with Desai is a liminal city, where the relationship between human identity and society becomes an elusive abstraction—home and exile, home and home again. It is not even so simple. This is quite different from Naipaul's Trinidadian context, which is extremely wide. It can be analysed these complex and life-changing processes in the context of a comparative view of these novels in their respective forms, seeking to explain how the construction, discourse, and development of Indian diasporic identity played out.

They also place *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *Bye-Bye Blackbird* in the context of diasporic literature, where they are given the distinct historical and cultural situation of their time. This paper adopts a close reading of text to analyse how both Naipaul and Desai engage with the tensions between dislocation, yearning for home, and the continual search for an identity, hence revealing nuanced understandings of meanings such as “unhomed” or the never-ending struggle to belong.

Theoretical Perspective:

The study of diasporic identity, displacement, and the concept of home in literature is rooted in various theoretical perspectives which comprises postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and cultural hybridity. Together, these perspectives illuminate the complexities that define the experience of characters in V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas* and Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird*.

Essentially, diaspora doesn’t merely indicate the physical journey but also more psychological and cultural journey. Stuart Hall, a leading voice in cultural studies, contends that “diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall 235). This dynamic nature of identity construction underscores the persistent negotiation between the longing for origins and the demands of new environments. Within this framework, home is no longer a fixed place but a shifting concept, shaped by memory, longing, and adaptation.

Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity and the concept of the “third space” further enrich our understanding of diasporic subjectivity. Bhabha argues, “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of

nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha 2).

Vijay Mishra, Indian diasporic expert, emphasizes the sense of loss and perpetual longing that often characterizes diasporic narratives. Mishra observes that “the diasporic imaginary is fundamentally a mournful consciousness, a longing for a home that exists only in the imagination” (Mishra 1). This nostalgia is both a source of creative energy and a marker of existential exile.

Critics have highlighted how these theoretical insights manifest in literary works. For example, Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, “Indian English fiction has often engaged with the idea of home not as a physical structure, but as an emotional landscape, etched by memory and desire” (Mukherjee 15). Similarly, Bruce King, discussing Naipaul, remarks that his novels offer “an anatomy of rootlessness, where the quest for a house becomes a metaphor for the search for existential and cultural identity” (King 7).

Thus, theoretical approaches to diaspora, hybridity, and identity provide an essential lens for analyzing how Naipaul and Desai construct the experience of displacement and the search for home. Both authors, through their nuanced narratives, echo Bhabha’s assertion that “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity” (Bhabha 56), and reveal the ongoing, often painful, reshaping of selfhood in a world of movement and change.

Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*: Identity and Displacement:

Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*:, Identity and Displacement With a historical setting of colonial Trinidad, V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas* tells of the suffering of Mohun Biswas, a descendant of Indian indentured laborers. The beginning of the novel creates an atmosphere of profound uncertainty

and marginality; for Mr. Biswas it is the very prophecy of his birth, which is tinged with bad things happening, as he will be dealt with for the rest of his life.

Biswas's sense of being unmoored is encapsulated most poignantly in one of the novel's most powerful lines, "How terrible it would have been... to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated" (A House for Mr Biswas p.13). This statement exposes the protagonist's keen consciousness of his social and existential invisibility. In colonial Trinidad, where the Indian community is situated on both the periphery of colonial rule and Creole society, Biswas's desire for acknowledgment and self-representation is further accentuated by his lack of property, prestige and freedom.

The house — as much a physical object as it is a strong metaphor — is the hub that holds Mr Biswas's search for character and worth. The fact that he tries again and again to construct or finally acquire a home results in setbacks, ridicule, and disappointment. But this desire is more than a personal ideal; it encapsulates the bigger diasporic quest for place and stability in a world where it is easy to wander aimlessly. The house is not just a place of shelter but a "sign of achievement and independence, a claim to a place in the world" (King 7). In this way, Biswas's odyssey can be understood in the larger context of the larger Indian diaspora living in the Caribbean, whose past is fundamentally one of up rootedness and living in a continual quest for the land one belongs.

The critic Selwyn Cudjoe supports the wider significance of Biswas's experience: "Mr Biswas's struggle embodies the general efforts of the Indian diaspora to forge its own space in the postcolonial world" (Cudjoe 108). His remark that Cudjoe's illustrates how Naipaul re-diversifies domestic from the personal to the

collective in this way, which makes Biswas's desire for a home serve as a proxy for the diaspora's search for identity, humanity, dignity and inclusion in a world marked by colonialism--a search for identity and dignity for the diaspora.

Furthermore, Naipaul's nuanced portrayal of Biswas's frustrations and joys, little victories, his frustrations and eventual resilience and courage also speaks to the resilience and nuance of diasporic identity. The novel does not romanticize or downplay the challenges of facing displacement in one way or the other. Instead, it presents a profoundly human depiction of the yearning to step from being the "unaccommodated" status to one of an acknowledged person with roots, no matter how thin, in a distant land.

Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*: Negotiating Otherness in the Metropolis:

Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*: Negotiating Otherness in the Metropolis Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* places the reader in 1960s London, a world defined by both promise and alienation for its Indian immigrant characters — Dev, Adit, and Sarah. Through interwoven narratives, Desai illuminates the psychological and cultural complexities of migration, placing the ongoing sense of otherness across their struggles to integrate.

A recurring theme throughout the novel is the profound alienation of Indian immigrants living in the metropolis. The feeling of perpetual alienation is captured perfectly by the phrase, "He was a foreigner, however hard he tried to forget it" (*Bye-Bye Blackbird*, p. 47). To Dev, and to an extent Adit, London is not so much a place as it is a social reality of exclusion that always feels foreign. But no matter all their attempts to assimilate the invisible hierarchies of race and belonging of the city keep reminding them of how different they are.

By portraying Indian identity at odds with assimilation, Desai masterfully creates this tension. Adit, who at first is very friendly to English customs, and marries an Englishwoman, is suddenly unable to resist his homesick state; he is longing for the warmth that is his homeland. Dev, meanwhile, resists assimilation, clinging ever more steadfast to his Indian roots despite all the temptations that come as a natural extension to London life. As Adit's British wife, Sarah is the conduit of worlds, but she is too implicated in the web of cultural negotiation and displacement.

This duality is reflected in critical commentary where the nuance of the portrayal is underscored. As Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests, "Desai's characters oscillate between the desire for acceptance and the fear of erasure" (Mukherjee 15). Wishful thinking on what it is like to be in the host culture is complemented by genuine fear of the loss of a sense of identity. The book's rhythmic novel suggests that this oscillation is a push and pull — adaptation followed by nostalgia or frustration, that in constant motion, the migrants find some balance that's fragile enough to keep them afloat.

In the end, *Bye-Bye Blackbird* won't have easy answers. Instead, Desai depicts the immigrant experience as an ongoing negotiation, as identity is shaped regularly by each subsequent encounter with acceptance and exclusion. For Desai, the metropolis proves a place of possibility too, a loss. In it the boundaries of self and other are never stable.

Comparative Analysis: Home, Belonging and Hybridity:

While V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* are separated by geography and context—colonial/postcolonial Trinidad and metropolitan England—their protagonists feel a "unhomed" sense. And when Mohun Biswas and Dev / Adit

dwelt on a world as it is, they inhabit spaces that resist offering true belonging, and their two separate quests for home and identity are tinged by their diasporic realities.

House vs. Home: Literal and figurative quests:

Naipaul's Mr Biswas is obsessed with the literal pursuit of a house—a physical structure offering dignity, stability, a sense of self itself. His place of rest: not only an accommodation, but also a symbol of autonomy in a world that has for decades denied him such powers. As Naipaul writes: "He had lived without seeing himself, only seeing the world" (*A House for Mr Biswas*, p. 215). Biswas's attempt to find his unique persona, away from familial and societal demands. Hence, the house, an emblem of his arduous march toward individuation and recognition.

In contrast, in Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, "home" is a deeper, more elusive and psychological construct. Dev and Adit, though, are physically at home within London but not in emotional or cultural terms. For them, the city is "only a station of exile" (Desai, p. 162) a place not a replacement of the profoundly meaningful sense of home born out of India. They are not searching, then, for a house but for a community in a context that constantly repeats their otherness. Their metaphoric migration emphasises the ongoing conflict between assimilation and cultural memory.

Bhabha's Third Space and Hybrid Identities:

Homi K. Bhabha theorizes the concept of the "third space" as a highly revealing framework for interpreting the hybrid identity of both Biswas and Desai's protagonists. Bhabha emphasizes that "It is in the emergence of the interstices, the overlap and displacement of domains of difference that negotiate the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural worth" (Bhabha 2). Both texts depict this "third space" where identity is

malleable, always in the process of negotiation between cultural inheritance and the demands of the new space.

Mr Biswas's hybrid identity is formed amid the history of Indian indenture and a racially-sensitive Trinidad, producing a mixed identity: one of partial Indian, not complete Caribbean one. In Desai's novel, Dev and Adit's lives in London represent a psychic negotiation of two worlds, an adjustment to their host society while standing against the erasure of their Indian roots. Both texts show the ambivalence and creativity that is essential in defining diasporic identity.

The point of both *A House for Mr Biswas* and *Bye-Bye Blackbird* are to suggest that this home, one's identity and hybridity will always be part of a diasporic landscape. Although Naipaul's protagonist craves an actual house as a mark of personhood, Desai's protagonists struggle with the ineluctability of home within a context of movement and uncertainty. Both novels confirm that, for the diasporic subject, what is home is a continual process, one that is to be worked out at the nexus of memory, aspiration, and the lived experience.

Critical reception and scholarly Perceptive:

Both *A House for Mr Biswas* and *Bye-Bye Blackbird* have been the objects of intense study by critics and scholars who have emphasized their significance to our collective understanding of diasporic identity and the evolving canon of Indian English literature.

V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* has frequently received acclaim for its incisive examination of rootlessness and the search for belonging. In the words of Bruce King: "an anatomy of rootlessness," meaning that the novel is powerful because it translates the personal struggles of Mr. Biswas into a universal meditation on exile and identity (King 7). Scholars, too, have highlighted the novel's

historical and sociopolitical context, identifying it as a foundational text in postcolonial and diaspora studies. Selwyn Cudjoe, for example, reads Biswas's journey as representative of the broader Indian diaspora's quest for stability in a postcolonial world. These readings highlight the ways in which Naipaul's retelling mirrors the experiences of displacement and the ongoing negotiation of selfhood in contexts of foreign or hostile existence.

Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* has also garnered praise for its nuanced exploration of the psychological costs of migration. Meenakshi Mukherjee contends that Desai's stories dive into "the psychic cost of migration and the fragile negotiation of selfhood," and deliver a delicate portrayal of the emotional turmoil of migrants (Mukherjee 15). Critics have praised Desai's ability to convey the swings between the desire to belong to a new culture and the dread of erasing one's origins. Her attention to the interiority of her characters and the details of their struggle has established the name *Bye-Bye Blackbird* as significant to the literature on migration and identity.

Both novels have since been read in many Indian English canon classics, and for diaspora studies. You often hear the stories mentioned in postcolonial identity, hybridity, and where "home" is constructively created in migrant narratives. In centering the personal and psychological aspects of displacement, Naipaul and Desai have enriched our understanding of the complexities of life as diasporic, the stories they tell as pertinent now as they were when initially published.

Conclusion:

In the review of V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, this study has shed light on the intricacies of Indian diasporic identity,

displacement and the continual search for home. As both writers highlight the alienation and marginalization that their protagonists come to realise, their stories also expose the extent to which the Indian diasporic experience is diverse.

Naipaul captures the desire for security and an identity in a historically displaced world in Mohun Biswas's quest for a corporeal house in colonial Trinidad. By comparison, Desai's portrait of Dev and Adit's emotional journey through metropolitan London highlights the psychological negotiations necessary to reconcile a sense of heritage with the realities of migration. Both authors use the word "home" itself—either as a tangible structure or as an emotional state—to examine what it means to work toward a sense of belonging when moving through different social circles, often in a hybridized state.

Most importantly, these works still resonate today in the era of global migration, where our questions of identity, rootlessness and forms of cultural negotiation still play a huge part in public and private conversation. In a world where cultures increasingly converge, and people from different cultures mix and overlap, the subjects of belonging, acceptance and the costs of migration posed by Naipaul and Desai remain relevant. Their novels contribute to the canon of Indian English literature, and give lasting insights into the human life in exile—telling readers that the search for home is at once the individual and collective journey that is inflected by history, memory and imagination.

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