
V.S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS*: A STUDY OF LIMINALITY*

Yıldıray ÇEVİK¹

¹ Assistant Professor, Faculty of Science and Letters, Istanbul Arel University, Turkey,
yildiraycevik@arel.edu.tr, ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0003-2967-6517

Abstract

A permeating theme in V.S. Naipaul's opus is the theme of the clash of cultures both individually and collectively. In his novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), the society in Bhabha's concept of "liminality"- along with hybridity- is subsumed under the theme of clash of cultures. In the novel, the struggle for identity of an Indian person residing in Trinidad is depicted through the clash of agrarian values with challenging western ones. The methodology will encompass insights pertinent to the postcolonial theory that envisions the concept of "liminality", as inherently qualified by an existential lack. On an individual level, the clash is conceived via "liminality" defining the one forced to exist in an interstitial space. This aspect of Naipaul's fiction reveals the fragmentation and alienation that happen to the universal location of man in the present day. This study delves into H. Bhabha's notion of liminality in order to surface Naipaul's depiction of the clash of cultures as referred in the novel. Naipaul paints a world marked by subtle confrontations with the human condition, which is intertwined with the sense of loss in the clash of cultures detrimental for the continued revival of flawed human existence.

Keywords: liminality, Naipaul, postcolonial, fractured identity, in-betweenness

1. Introduction

Postcolonialism is a term coined for the critical interpretation of historical, cultural and literary products that are particularly focused on the Third World countries. Postcolonial criticism deliberates on political, social, and cultural ideologies that contribute to the values and societal features of the colonized and colonizers. The prominent thinkers of postcolonial studies are known to have formulated a series of features that are linked to relevant writing. The present study intends to depict the confrontations of the colonized in line with the

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concept of “liminality”. The concept of liminality is employed in line with the confrontations of the characters in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), particularly focusing on the protagonist Mr. Biswas.

V.S. Naipaul’s novels are known to focus on and illustrate a postcolonial dilemma majorly for readers to respond to the question of how to read his works and his politics together, along with their employment in various living conditions. Naipaul’s novels are critical in that the early ones are remarkably settled in the Caribbean to depict a strong protest and reactionary vision of the new world-encompassing multifaceted clashes and conflicts onto the surface (Bhattacharya, 2006, p.245). *A House for Mr. Biswas* by V.S. Naipaul is considered a masterpiece in his career. It is an acclaimed novel based on his father’s life in Trinidad. It is a novel in the grand style, deliberate, broad in scope, and constructing a world with a biographical manner, with a central hero and various minor characters. It owns an intrinsic, spontaneous vitality and is located in time and place in a context of value and feeling. The novel creates a world, peoples it, and shapes it to progress; the author speaks when he feels he has to, but always correctly. The novel includes social and political values that are processed in the times of decolonization. Naipaul is credited in that he genuinely delves into experienced colonial individuals who are forced to survive in liminality, suffering from a series of disappointments. Argyle (2002) states that the novel’s initiation with a prologue and the mention of death in its first sentence, as well as the summary of the protagonist’s sufferings renders the novel in attractive mode to the reader (p. 109). Naipaul pictures the overall life in Trinidad as homelessness and depravity, in which many locals are born into poverty and needy conditions. As he remembers from his childhood, many children suffer from disorders and in-betweenness. He felt as if he were in the wrong place to grow up since many children are fragmented families’ products. Thus, Naipaul describes his early days in England as much different from the Trinidad period away from disappointment and a strong sense of being forced into limbo and uncertainty.

The novel is considered critical as it relays the main features of postcolonial writing. The significance of postcolonial novels lies in the vitality of their reaction to crucial aspects of postcolonial writing. Naipaul demonstrates essential characteristics of the key concept of such a genre, focusing on hybridity and liminality. Before going into the analysis of the novel, we had better elaborate on the concept of liminality as it is regarded by prominent writers and Naipaul.

2. Liminality

In postcolonial theory, the space “in-between black/white”, us/them, old/new, is called liminality. This term is coined from the word “limen”, which means a threshold, mainly used

in psychology. It consists of the meaning of some limit below perception out of sensation and awareness. The feeling of liminal as in-between space differs from the more definite word limit or its synonyms. Liminality describes “an in-between space in which cultural change may occur: the trans-cultural space in which strategies for personal or communal self-hood may be elaborated, a region in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange between different states” (Ashcroft et al., 1998, p.117). Naipaul has majorly utilized Homi K. Bhabha’s theories as regards key concepts in colonial and post-colonial writings. Thus, the paper here intends to apply Bhabha’s notions as the focus of the study of liminality and its application into Naipaul’s novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Homi K. Bhabha (1949), one of the well-known voices in post-colonial and cultural studies under the light of the theories relevant to colonialism and postcolonialism, is well-accredited and vital in voicing colonialism and its impact both on the colonizer and the colonized. Bhabha’s studies focus on ambivalence and the clash of cultures through traumas and restrictions consisting of relevant topics in colonial writings such as traditions, habits, and ways of life. Bhabha’s relevant theories and considerations originate from primary and experimental concepts of liminality, hybridity, and ambivalence, which are stimulants of cultural productivity. They fundamentally depict how colonized people have found the means to cope with confrontations with the colonizers. Such ways are known to be never as secure as they should be; they are grounded on shaky foundations interwoven with a thin layer of tolerance. Many thinkers put forth that colonialism gets locked in the past, and it is tough to shake the grounds to breed tolerance and harmony. However, Homi K. Bhabha teaches the types of intrusion of relevant cultures in the present, enforcing each to adapt perspective in multicultural interactions. The power of major nations and perspectives is hardly ever fully appreciated since this force is beset with stress and chaos that requires retaliation. Culture is organized around diverse influences that lead to multifaceted effects; in other words, culture does not stay individual by itself. It is reinforced through the amalgamation of various influences. In addition, it is built with multilayered implementations and traditions of colonizers in the frame of postcolonization. Given that, it seems acceptable to come to terms with a body of culture pertaining to any nation, even if it can be liminal and ambivalent. In connection with this, hybridization occurs as an ambivalent condition in which cultural heritage and traits do not get reciprocated in a different territory.

Ashcroft et al. asserts the tendency of postcolonial writings to come too close to hybridization and claims it as a weakness. Hybridization does not necessarily mean the oppression of the subaltern or the process of colonization in a certain land. It underlines the reciprocity or bilateral interactions. Ashcroft et al. states hybridity can be seen as a vital feature of postcolonial thinking. It permits the liminal and ambivalent formations to exist,

leading to the decline of history, values, and traditions and giving way to cultural transformation and relative welfare in materialism (1998, p.45).

Naipaul exposes a much different idea about liminality, even though he appears to have written under Turner's influence. When we turn into the background and type of utilization of liminality by Naipaul, scholars observe that it is a vital concept that contributes into factors that give rise to the re-productivity of culture itself. In other words, liminality sets the design of postcolonial culture incorporated into a transformed version of the new culture. It is necessary to produce cases of liminality in order to exploit cultural studies so that one can fairly evaluate the pros and cons of the suggested model. It is the postcolonial writers that cherish and conceptualize the applications of liminality as it is displayed by diasporic writers who add new dimensions to the meaning of liminality. Bhabha highlights the controversial terms regarding postcolonial concepts in the introduction to *The Location of Culture* (1994) to clarify the possible ambiguity in the "liminal" negotiation of cultural identity across differences of race, class, gender, and cultural traditions. The display of cultural and national differences takes place when the spheres of cultural values and national focus come to the point of discussions. In such cases, in-betweenness, class, gender and liminality are handled to clarify cultural traditions. How is it possible to formulate the claims of society with empowerment, although there are many discriminatory aspects even in shared histories of deprivation? The values and meanings can readily conflict in a liminal atmosphere despite the efforts to reconcile them.

Bhabha (1994) argues that "cultural identities cannot be ascribed to pre-given, irreducible, scripted, or ahistorical cultural traits that define the conventions of ethnicity" (p.35). He further puts forth that colonizer and colonized can hardly be differentiated in their particular terms and identities. In the discussion of individual and cultural identity, the transfer of two-sided recognizable cultural traits is included. Thus, an interim phase of mutual ground for cultural space exists which denotes the liminality and hybridity at the end of the process. "Liminal" space is a "hybrid" site that witnesses the production--rather than just the reflection--of cultural meaning (Bhabha, 1994, p.43). More clearly, a liminal space, created through the nature of cultures, does not discriminate against. Yet, it presents the ground of mediation their mutual exchange and relative meanings for the sake of compromise. In the case of liminality, even in the gapped and discriminated conditions of cultures, liminality, a threshold of cultures stand up to creating the multifaceted culture into hybridity.

3. The Analysis of *A House for Mr. Biswas* in Liminality

A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) is a rich novel in that it attractively displays the picture of life in Trinidad during a period of fifty years. The development of the characters and the plot take place against a changing social background. Mr. Biswas is placed at the center of the novel incorporating the relevant themes and points onto him. Naipaul succeeds in transforming an ordinary person into one with heroic status making the readers sympathize with him both in his successes and failures. He is an archetypal person in quest of a universal goal – the search for identity in a meaningful and decent life and the search for reality on which he is embarked (Argyle, 2002, p. 110). He is caught between two cultures and unable to settle fully in either. Warner (1970), in his article on the clash of cultures in Naipaul's novels, states that the concept of liminality remains a crucial element to appear in the novel, explaining the foundation and reasons for many incidents that account for the logical flow of ideas. Such clash and ambivalence also clarify the challenges that Mr. Biswas experiences into the adaptation process into the Trinidadian society. The clash that appears as a result of feeling liminal in many incidents is also triggered by the Tulsis (Naipaul, 1969, p. 70; subsequent references to the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* will be cited as *MB*). Liminality accounts for many unpleasant incidents in the novel. It sets the responsibility for Mr. Biswas's hardships of adaptation into his encounters with the Tulsidom, which is an essential topic of a person who inserts himself into his society. Mr. Biswas spent his life in a changing environment that existed at Hanuman House. Naipaul deliberately chose this environment to play a role in the depiction of the Tulsidom atmosphere. Hanuman House, established by a Hindu priest, both in Trinidad and India, included the required conditions to display potential confrontations of the rare Indians in Trinidad, who are forced to stay in "in-between", as regards cultural and societal values. The Hindu priest intended to set up a sanctuary for coming generations; yet, contrary to his expectations, the house remains as the fault of culturally abnormal events, in which the owners prove to have potential for those who have to stay in liminality.

As a second-generation Indian, Mr. Biswas is a part of the collective effort of the Hindu population to recreate their world in the dominant Creole society of Trinidad. Naipaul shows this attempt is doomed to failure as the Hindu world of the Tulsis is described as enclosing a self-sufficient world absorbed with quarrels and jealousies, as it is hard for the outsider to penetrate much as for one member to escape. It protects a static world making the members await decay in conflicts and hardships.

Mr. Biswas was a journalist before he was fired from work and just before he died. He was settled in Port of Spain as a result of many failures in trials to progress in his profession (*MB*, p. 1). The novel's opening is critical as they refer to the tragic changes in the protagonist's life as seen between the first and second halves of the novel. On this point, Diot

states that the first words in the novel depict impersonal preciseness about the protagonist, but such preciseness is absent after the first half of the novel (1986, p.78).

The period included in the novel is a span of 56 years, between 1905 and 1961. Main social changes took place in this period such as those about Hindu culture and values. They are known to have undergone “creolization” and the relevant changes that influenced the conduct of the people exposed to societal confrontations. In line with the concept of liminality, Mr. Biswas is arrested between the old Indian culture and the newly appearing creolization that brings forth the educational process of Mr. Biswas’s children, who are given scholarship opportunities to study abroad. Mr. Biswas is saddened that he has to stay in an ambivalent situation as declining old traditions and emerging materialism and individual progress become more dominant in cross-cultural relationships. Along with this, Naipaul also supports Mr. Biswas’s standing in liminality since Naipaul stresses Trinidad as a “materialist immigrant society” bereft of genuine, traditional culture and history. Naipaul underlines Trinidad society as peasant-minded, materialism oriented, separated from its traditional roots, and reduced to a colonial community. Naipaul aims to display what he observes rather than regret declining traditions and presenting formulas for the future. He handles the transformation in such a way that cultural and social transformation is always present, no matter how the reader ignores to see it. Materialistic transformation fueled by American dollars and remarkable foreign presence is inevitably accompanied by welfare increase and economic rivalry. As a result of growing prosperity, parents feel the need to send their children abroad for education, which indirectly ends in ambivalence when the offspring return indoctrinated by the American mindset.

The novel opens with a prologue in which the word “house” is repeated many times to implicate the seriousness of a house for Mr. Biswas. In the following chapters of the novel, Mr. Biswas, gradually upholding life, pictures his adulthood and masculinity in the lowest sections of colonial society, which gives the impression that self-confidence and communal credibility can be attained through the ownership of a house. The desire for house ownership outgrows with fits and bursts as he experiences life in colonial Trinidad so much that it turns into an obsession which also turns his life into a fundamental desire to assert his personality as a worthy man.

Mr. Biswas was born into the colonization in which sugar-estate workers are cut off from their land of ancestors and torn by the social and political environment as they are imprisoned in the struggles for basic survival. In this locality where poverty and hardships prevail together with the death of traditions and rituals, everybody has to lose past connections and get decreased to absurd superstitions, as we see in the example of the birth

of Mr. Biswas when the midwife gathers plants and hangs them to secure baby's future (*MB*, p.15). In connection with the loss of traditions, Argyle remarks, the Indians in the West Indies are not so much as settlers, "all of them, sure that it is no more than a stage on an incomplete journey, the end of which is a return to India" (2002, p.111). The loss of traditions in the concept of liminality is reinforced when the newborn baby with six fingers comes out the wrong way. The fear can be seen to delineate the life of Mr. Biswas in his inferior, doubly colonized people without prospects in an ambivalent society.

The societal conditions and customs of the Indians in Trinidad can be evaluated within socio-political conditions that impact the colonized. The desperate state of the community in which Mr. Biswas was born makes them withdraw inward and hold tight to the Indian traditions accompanied by self-assertion and acceptance. The colonial system seen as superior, rational and prosperous provides a strong force of pull on the colonized, having to struggle in stable, inferior, and deprived conditions. Naipaul here consults to liminality in order to highlight the impasse of the colonized as we see in Mr. Biswas. The latter is caught between those two systems where each undermines the other as well as both systems function to oppress him and fracture his stamina. Thus, Mr. Biswas is tasked to define his self-worthiness in materialistic goals like a house-ownership, as it is rather hard to achieve acceptance and identity in a limited space, in-betweenness, without proving his wealth and social-political success. So, he plans for a formidable career in colonial society. In the further pages of the novel, Mr. Biswas expected to be transferred to the cane fields for cleaning weeds and reap. He would be paid in return for his services so that he could save some money in time to buy a few acres for his agricultural works. Another plan for his progress in society contains selling the field at good prices to fix his debts in establishing the house (*MB*, p. 23). As we see from the lines, Naipaul proves the rigidity, liminality and limited prospects of the colonial system for the colonized Indians in Trinidad. After Mr. Biswas' father dies, the family is shattered due to social, economic and political reasons. He is derailed off the career path as his lack of orientation to the system is due to his rootlessness in the eyes of the colonizers. Family members are evacuated from the house, which is critical for him because he turns into an aimless wanderer with no place or family for some thirty years. Once he is out of the assigned place, he steps into the world outside the Indians to find himself. In this way, he is exposed to the restricting demands of the Hindu and non-Hindu worlds. Ejected from the two systems to which he is assigned, Mr. Biswas has to be satisfied with low-level jobs and enterprises. Further, as cultural and familial ties disintegrate, he is left to his own resources. Yet, he is insistent on the improvement of his standings:

On Monday morning he set about looking for a job. How did one look for a job? He supposed that one who looked. He walked up and down the main road, looking. He passed a tailor and tried to picture himself cutting khaki cloth, tacking, and operating a sewing machine. He passed a barber and tried to picture himself stropping a razor; his mind wandered off to devise elaborate protections for his left thumb. (*MB*, p. 67)

Having failed to acquire a prospective job, Mr. Biswas is obliged to confine himself to the Tulsis family, an extended one, for which Naipaul uses the adjectives like “Tulsi system”, organization and “contingent” in order to show how effective the Tulsis family is over the Hindu world. He suffers various humiliations and is enclosed within the Hanuman House of the Tulsis. As Warner (1970) remarks, Mr. Biswas feels trapped when he got clutched into the hands of the Tulsidom, as Naipaul pictures “Hanuman House as a symbol of traditionalism, rigidity, cultural infallibility, duty and communal life” (*MB*, p. 71). Living in the Hanuman House is reduced to a liminal form of existence due to their economic dependence on the Tulsis. The family and associates are based on fear, mistrust, intimidation and paranoia. Naipaul’s perception of the Hanuman House is critical. The house was so crucial that all the other notions are seen secondary and trivial. Mr. Biswas required a safe haven, a shelter; he could visit the Hanum House at his wish; yet he would be treated as insignificant with stable feeling of indifference. He had to stay away from the residents of the house as they had the intention of despising and minimizing all other than themselves. In time the reception he had from the residents would change into somewhat acceptance, and Mr. Biswas would be pleased to find “license” that permits for his entrance into the house. It was seen as green light, license for marriage (*MB*, p. 188). The Tulsis heavily dominate on Mr. Biswas’ life, which leads to innumerable cleavages among him, his wife and children. The logic and system of the Hanuman House deny Mr. Biswas’ every chance of self-realization and prospects of success; by doing so, he is reduced to an ineffective and superficial personality. Naipaul states, “[...] in none of these places he was being missed because in none of these places had he ever been more than a visitor, an upsetter of routine” (*MB*, p. 132). His life gets into an immense emptiness; yet it seems that the only way out of this dead-end is to have a house of his own. His determination to flee such fate dictates in him a stronger desire for a house, an entity not only for a formidable and secluded shelter for his independence, but also for his worth in the eyes of his peers (*MB*, p. 169). Although he attempts twice to build a house, he cannot complete them due to insufficient finance. Owning a house becomes such a dominating ambition for him that he buys his daughter a doll’s house as a present (*MB*, p. 139); his dream for a house can be seen as an act of subversion of the society. As a matter of fact, his struggle for betterment is forbidden desire in the mercilessly designed system of colonial society. So, the Tulsis, on purpose, send him as a driver to the workers’ barracks, a

condition which breaks him down severely. This job is designed for him according to the values by the Tulsis in the location where a colonized Hindu has to know his place first. They teach him that Mr. Biswas should not aspire more than the Tulsi society deems it proper to give. Yet, Mr. Biswas does not step back on his ambitions; even in his dreams, he plans the vision of the house with many details (*MB*, p. 210). Nonetheless, it does not alleviate his anguish of cherishing an unattainable goal and such hopelessness creates in him an obsession of non-ending pain and panic in his connections with others. Naipaul states that all he met was covered by fear like other acres, houses and all his endeavors were encountered by reaction and pressure. Mr. Biswas was not relieved from the tension he was directed since through the way he saw the world past accomplishments were one by one declined, losing their significance (*MB*, p. 269). Anxiety makes him ill; thus, in a bold decision, he leaves the rural society of Trinidad to go to Port of Spain. The death of the values symbolized by Hanuman is connected to the fact that Trinidad is rural in the way of life, hence making his days in Port of Spain reveal for his future.

In the city, the rural taboos and limitations don't produce efficacy of limitation as he gets into diverse lifestyles. However, his unqualified colonial education does not bring much about the desired achievement as he now understands that his weak background can save him out of liminality. A regular income allows him to stay with his family under one roof, education for his children, and eventually a house. The somewhat relative achievement in essentials of life gets him to the village and develops a new code of intimacy with relatives and the Tulsis. He enriches in linguistic comprehension with selective new vocabulary such as "ice-cream", "Coca-Cola", the ones already uttered only by the Tulsis or their equals as colonizers. In parallels with this progress, he notices a change that infuses into walks of lives. Mr. Biswas is motivated by Shama in the words to direct him to take steps in prestige making process. He renders increased importance in his outlook, the way he is dressed up and, in the costumes, prepared for professional encounters. He is motivated to draw the list of the clothes in the closet according to the occasions in which they are to be worn. He is told the sum of the purchase would go up to one hundred and fifty dollars in order to make the compare and contrast with the bicycle he bought (*MB*, p. 346). From these words, we feel that the old Hindu traditions can no longer stand against the widespread change in the society; so, the Tulsi house gets collapsed in the face of overpowering societal transformation that influences considerably the young generation of the Tulsis (*MB*, p. 436). Having been affected by the radical changes to adapt to the general atmosphere of the society Mr. Biswas is seen to undergo a series of challenging steps as directed by the imminent conditions. However, the hardships he experiences prove the liminality that he is exposed to. The liminality is sided with Mr. Biswas's fear regarding the certainty in future. He feels he falls

into massive emptiness after psychological breakdown at Green Vale. His fear grows with the image of the boy in a desolate land, who gives the impression of a man stuck in liminality (*MB*, p. 57).

The changes that lead to liminality and ambivalence are also seen in language when Hindi is the language of the society of Mr. Biswas, yet English becomes more commonplace in public scene. “Linguistic liminality” takes place when Mr. Biswas’s children start conversation in English and subsequently turn to Hindi to show intimacy. Similarly, Mr. Biswas speaks English in the marriage ceremony and later continues in Hindi as the result of growing friendship. The concept of liminality becomes predominant when people use Hindi to show rebellious feelings and independence; yet, in Trinidadian culture English firmly holds, which is another source of liminality that keeps the colonized in-between.

Despite relatively sufficient progress in his conduct, Mr. Biswas’ inclusion into the economic betterment is a way far from personal fulfillment. He is employed as a journalist only to prove his inferior qualities in the professional hierarchy, the example of which is seen when he is assigned to examine his kind of people (Baksi-Hamm, 2013, p. 8). After he has to shift to a government office, his standing is not solid at all; hence, he is forced to resign and resume the previous one as a journalist. Again, this time, he is dismissed due to professional failure. His life is crammed with the impositions and directives from the colonial and Hindu systems; as a matter of fact, these systems function in contradiction to each other. Mr. Biswas depicts a fractured identity torn between the requirements and indoctrinations of the two systems. He is neither able to overcome the hardships blocking his dreams nor own a house that leads to a decent and comfortable life.

4. Conclusion

Naipaul’s depiction of the Hindus in Trinidad is harmonious with the theme of liminality, for the hero of the novel is exposed to ambivalence between independence and individuality, which highlights Trinidad social life. It is so because there is no more a Hanuman House to, at least, protect Hindus; everyone has to fight in a new world, and education seems to be the only weapon in this struggle. The traditional virtues have already been forgotten, and it is the arena where Naipaul exposes Mr. Biswas to identify and realize ambitions. It is stark liminality in which the system tends to destroy the personality. On the other hand, such liminality lets Mr. Biswas appreciate positive results. Naipaul hangs the hero in both the old and new systems, in an in-betweenness and hypocritical condition in which there does not seem to be much to choose between either.

Disclosures

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