

Mr Biswas and Tiger as Truly Representative of the Colonised in Trinidad

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Abstract

Colonial suppression has been depicted by many writers through their novels, plays, poems, and short stories. V. S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon have been particularly significant among the post-colonial writers, each presenting a raw and poignant picture of colonialism. Their works depict the real conditions of the colonised during the colonial regime in the Caribbean. Though they have written many novels, this article will analyse V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and Samuel Selvon's *A Brighter Sun*. In particular, it will compare the character of the protagonists of these two novels, 'Mr Biswas' and 'Tiger' respectively. It will also scrutinise how the characters of these two novels represent colonial suppression and the colonial strategy to exploit the culture and natural resources of colonised places. This will be discussed in conjunction with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, especially his work on the merging of cultures. "Hybridity can have three meanings- in terms of biology, ethnicity and culture."¹ The present research applies the theory of hybridity in the selected texts as ethical and cultural hybridity can be experienced by the two characters of the mentioned novels.

Keywords: Colonialism, Post-Colonial Literature, Suppression, Trinidad, Hybridity.

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¹ Antony Easthope, 'Homi Bhabha, Hybridity and Identity, or Derrida versus Lacan,' *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 4, nos 1-2, (1998), pp. 145–151.

Introduction

Post-colonial writers portray the conditions of the colonised people and their treatment by colonisers. They deal with both the adequate and inadequate impact of colonialism on colonies during colonialism. Since the sixteenth century, various imperialist powers around the world have made attempts to colonise other places and communities, often destroying other cultures in order to implement their own way of life. This can be seen in the ongoing colonial occupations of Australia, the United States of America, Canada, much of Africa, and much of south-east Asia. Colonialism is generally associated with “Western” powers, generally referring to Europe and, by extension, the imperialist behaviour of the United States.² The Western powers had occupied various countries and had been ruling over them forcibly. Many sites subject to colonisation were originally targeted to extract natural resources, and other sources of wealth; however, the colonisation of Indigenous peoples was itself often the motive. Simon Carey explains, “The dominance of the British in India led to the advancement of European economic ideology and practice throughout the country.”³ For instance, during British rule in Trinidad, the people of Trinidad could not resist as the British had military power and manpower to enforce their laws. The British committed atrocities in almost all their colonised countries. The British did not spare even the farmers and peasants; they would levy heavy taxes on them and lead them to die from starvation. Another common tactic was to establish industries and keep the Indigenous population colonised as their employees and pay them low wages. The motive of the British was to exploit the Indigenous peoples and extract wealth from their land.

The horrors experienced by colonised peoples across the world have long been channelled into literature. This genre is generally referred to as post-colonial literary studies. Here, the suffering, anger, and sadness associated with colonialism is depicted both as catharsis and to inform outsiders of what has gone on. Colonisers not only exploited the colonised materially and economically but also culturally; they spread missionaries throughout the colonies and attempt to convert people to Christianity, and to the Western lifestyle in general. This propagation of their religion and culture

² While colonialism is generally associated with Europe, there are some countries outside of what is considered the West that have had notable colonialist histories. These include Japan, China, and Israel.

³ Simon Carey, ‘The Legacy of British Colonialism in India post 1947’, *The New Zealand Review of Economics and Finance*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2012), p. 40.

resulted in hybrid culture in the colonies. In many cases, the colonised resisted and protested in their own form. They did not accept the culture of the colonised, but rebelled against them.

The literature of the time of colonialism and in its aftermath depicts the lived experiences of life in the colony. There are many post-colonial writers whose fictional and non-fictional works illustrate the condition of the colonised during colonial rule. V. S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon have been significant among the post-colonial writers, each presenting a raw and poignant picture of colonialism. Their works depict the real conditions of the colonised during the colonial regime in the Caribbean. This article will analyse V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* and Samuel Selvon's *A Brighter Sun*. In particular, it will compare the character of the protagonists of these two novels, 'Mr Biswas' and 'Tiger' respectively. It will also scrutinise how the characters of these two novels represent colonial suppression and the colonial strategy to exploit the culture and natural resources of colonised places. This will be discussed in conjunction with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, especially his work on the merging of cultures. "Hybridity can have three meanings - in terms of biology, ethnicity and culture."⁴ The present research applies the theory of hybridity in the selected texts as ethical and cultural hybridity can be experienced by the two characters of the mentioned novels.

Cultural Identity Crises in *A House for Mr Biswas*

V. S. Naipaul is a dazzling figure in the field of post-colonial literature. He has authored several books, with *A House for Mr Biswas* being his most acclaimed, the text manifesting the problems faced by the colonised during colonialism and the societal change in the colonised countries. Mohan Biswas, referred to as Mr Biswas, the protagonist of this novel, experiences three generations under colonialism, and witnesses the cultural change in his society and culture as it becomes hybrid. He is an Indo-Trinidadian man who desires his own house, as he was born in a mud hut in rural Trinidad. He marries Shama Tulsi and after marriage he moves to Hanuman House. "Mr Biswas went to Hanuman House to paint signs for the Tulsi Store, after a protracted interview with a large, mustached, overpowering man called Seth, Mrs Tulsi's brother-in-law."⁵ Thereafter, he prefers isolation and lives a miserable life. He makes little money and has no economic safety net, as he

⁴ Easthope, 'Homi Bhabha, Hybridity and Identity', pp. 145–151.

⁵ V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 36.

belonged to a poor family. The country's wealth rests in the hands of the colonizers and powerful people. He loves his daughter Savi, but appears less interested in his son Anand, whom he finds muted; though this later changes. After spending much time pondering from one place to another, he ends his life after fulfilling his dream of buying a house. Owning a house is a significant event for Mr Biswas and other colonised people, as they had been kept so poor by the colonizers that they could not afford their house and live. Mohit K. Ray explains, "One of the dominant themes which emerge from the reading of *A House for Mr Biswas* is the theme of the cultural clash- the difficulty of adjustment of the protagonist in Tulsidom."⁶

Mr Biswas is presented so that a common reader will come to know what problems the colonised had been going through, and the predicaments and dilemmas they find themselves in. Naipaul uses Mr Biswas as a witness to how there comes a drastic change in culture, education, language, and other customs after encountering the coloniser's culture. Deepak Kumar and Shagufta Naj summarise, "Mohan Biswas's love for natural human liberty and individuality inspire him to fight against the lifeless rotten rituals, myths, and customs of degenerated Brahmin cultural systems represented by the Tulsis in the novel."⁷ Mr Biswas faces identity crises largely because of his lack of material foundation, which further drives his fixation on owning property. This can be seen as a direct result of colonisation, as the very place in which he belongs to is economically inaccessible to him.

Tiger's Identity Crises in *A Brighter Sun*

Likewise, in Samuel Selvon's *A Brighter Sun*, Tiger is the protagonist of the novel. He witnesses the changes and effects of colonialism in society. The novel presents Tiger as a wanderer who has lost his identity and experiences his culture as it mixes with others. His culture has become hybrid as he has been unable to protect his own original culture. "Tiger's challenge involves recognizing what he must relinquish to participate fully in the creole culture of Barataria. Creolization is presented in the novel as an inevitable fact of

⁶ Mohit K. Ray, *V.S. Naipaul: Critical Essays* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002), p. 40.

⁷ Deepak Kumar and Shagufta Naj, 'Towards the Path of Exploring: Unhoused and Unnecessary in *A House for Mr Biswas*', *International Journal of English and Education*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2013), pp. 235-246.

day-to-day life in Trinidad.”⁸

A Brighter Sun is Selvon’s first novel in which he writes about the predicament of the colonised in the Caribbean. Identity crises, women’s oppression, and patriarchy are particularly articulated in this novel. After marrying a woman named Urmilla at an early age, they leave Barataria. Urmilla has “black, sad eyes, long hair, and underdeveloped breasts.”⁹ She is silent, submissive, and gentle. She takes the traditional role of wife, rarely pushing the boundaries of her gender. “The hierarchical regard for man over woman, or boys over girls, is reflected in *A Brighter Sun* by the presence of the older male characters: Sookdeo, Ramlal and Jaggernaut.”¹⁰

The influence of colonialism in this novel can be observed when it comes to Tiger’s treatment of Urmilla. Tiger, being illiterate, is unfamiliar with how to behave around his wife, having no point of reference for what is normal. He bullies her on even trivial issues. Initially, she is not aware of how to cook and manage affairs, though she develops skills in domestic labour. Tiger changes jobs frequently in an attempt to find his fit. When he comes home from work, he beats and bullies Urmilla out of frustration. Tiger starts drinking “just enough to make him feel big”, and shouts at Urmilla unprovoked.¹¹ When Urmilla becomes pregnant, Tiger makes it clear that he expects a boy child, forbidding her from bearing a girl. He even prays “in the night, Oh God let it be a boy child.”¹² Urmilla replies, “But, Tiger man, I can’t help if God put a girl!”¹³ Tiger responds, “Well, he better put a boy, you hear.”¹⁴ She says, “Girl child good too, you know, don’t mind what people say. I sue to cut cane just as good as my brother and them.”¹⁵ Here Urmilla challenges the basis of the patriarchal system, that boys have greater value than girls. Tiger performs normative masculinity in the marriage based on what he has observed from other men in his life. He reasons, “Men

⁸ Decaires Narain, ‘Three into One Can Go? Creolizing Narrations of East Indian Trinidadian West Indians’, in *Beyond Calypso: Re-Reading Samuel Selvon*, ed. Malachi McIntosh (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2019), pp. 52-68.

⁹ Samuel Selvon, *A Brighter Sun* (Hachette: Allan Wingate, 1952), p. 5.

¹⁰ Alfrena Jamie Pierre, ‘Feminist Consciousness in Samuel Selvon’s “Tiger” Books’, *The Indian Diaspora: Identities, Trajectories and Transnationalities Conference*, University of the West Indies, May 2015, p. 3.

¹¹ Selvon, *A Brighter Sun*, p. 31.

¹² Selvon, *A Brighter Sun*, p. 32.

¹³ Selvon, *A Brighter Sun*, p. 37.

¹⁴ Selvon, *A Brighter Sun*, p. 37.

¹⁵ Selvon, *A Brighter Sun*, p. 40.

smoked: he would smoke. He would drink rum, curse, swear, and bully the life out of her if she did not obey. Hadn't he seen when his father did that?"¹⁶

The oppression Urmilla experiences is made clear. She feels "it was her bounden duty to bring forth a boy. Night and day she prayed, Oh God, help me to please Tiger, put a boy child in my belly."¹⁷ While Urmilla is pregnant, Rita, a slightly older woman in the community, advises her not to do adventurous and tedious work, but Tiger does not allow Urmilla to take rest. The patriarchal mindset of the colonised is clear throughout their relationship. Rita assists Urmilla to overcome the grief and the torture of which she has been the victim. Rita is not able to help. Tiger's treatment of his wife is the result of both a lack of education and a sense of ongoing despair in the face of colonial reality. Urmilla has no voice with which to appropriately respond to his abuse, as her social, political, and educational standings have been violated by her husband. While Tiger suffers under colonialism, Urmilla suffers both systematic oppression and domestic violence.

Hybridity

The concept of hybridity applies to both the protagonists of these texts. 'Hybridity' is a term coined by Homi K. Bhabha, an Indian post-colonial academic. He originally developed the idea in his 1994 text *The Location of Culture*. The concept of hybridity describes the mixing of colonised experience and colonial influence. He explains, "Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination."¹⁸ Hybrid culture is defined as the process through which different cultures are mixed to form a new culture, often through colonialism. Liang Yuying paraphrases Bhabha: "Instead of seeing culture as something fixed at a certain point in time and space, Bhabha argues that culture is always set in dynamic processes, in ever-folding, ever-changing and ever-transforming processes."¹⁹ Hybridity is applicable in both *A House for Mr Biswas* and *A Brighter Sun*.

¹⁶ Selvon, *A Brighter Sun*, p. 11.

¹⁷ Selvon, *A Brighter Sun*, p. 35.

¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (Delhi: Routledge, 1994), p. 112

¹⁹ Liang Yuying, 'Theorizing Space and Hybridity in the Character of Aadam Aziz in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*', *Literary Voice*, vol. 1, no. 17 (2022), pp. 169-174.

Tiger and Mr Biswas' Hybrid Culture

The characters in these novels share a number of fundamental similarities that build the foundation of their comparison. Both are from the Caribbean, and are under the suppression of colonial power, which originally came from Spain. They are presented as suppressed by colonisers who not only suppress them materially, but also through culture and language. Their culture has been hybridised without their consent. Selvon and Naipaul present the condition of the colonised people in the Caribbean through their works, and more specifically how their identity has been affected by the colonial rule in the Caribbean, particularly in Trinidad. Mr Biswas and Tiger face similar issues at the beginnings of their novels, with both struggling to construct a clear identity in the face of colonisation. Mr Biswas has lost his identity and recognition, and this manifests in his fixation on owning a house. In the same way, Tiger faces an identity crisis that leaves him dissatisfied with life, which he takes out on Urmilla.

The concept of hybridity is highly relevant to *A House for Mr Biswas*, in which Mr Biswas' culture is troubled by the presence of colonialism. The novel "deals with an East Indian's struggle for a place to settle his identity."²⁰ The characters of Mr Biswas and Tiger are the same as far as their identity is concerned. Mr Biswas was born in a poor family, and in his teens he is married abruptly to Shama Tulsi. The situation between Tiger and Urmilla is almost identical. Their family background, culture, stories, and issues are also similar, demonstrating the widespread impact of colonialism. They were not as mature to take the responsibility for the family when they married. Biswas moves to Hanuman house after he gets married. Likewise, Tiger moves to Barataria with his wife.

Mr Biswas is in search of a house where he could keep his family, and is forced to grapple with the systematic disadvantages he has faced for his entire life. He witnesses various cultures by moving from one place to another. Oindrila Ghosh explains, "The protagonist's feeling for his own house is similar to that of a soldier who has won a long and difficult war."²¹ Likewise, Tiger struggles a lot to establish his identity due to his early

²⁰ Tahereh Siamardi and Reza Didari, 'A Postcolonial Appraisal of V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*', *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2015), pp. 104-111.

²¹ Oindrila Ghosh, "'To lay claim to one's portion of the earth': Leaving a Mark on History in *A House for Mr Biswas*", *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 4 (2011), pp. 578-585.

experiences. In contrast to Mr Biswas, Tiger responds to systematic oppression with rebellion, becoming violent and dysfunctional in his inability to adhere to colonial expectations. His identity crisis is largely to do with his experience of belonging – or lack thereof. Tiger begins as a poor but ambitious farmer. After getting hired on a road construction crew, he tries to ingratiate himself with the U.S. military supervisors but loses control and attacks Urmilla. Thereafter, he struggles a lot to settle and lead a good life. After their baby is stillborn, he invests his energy in building a solid house. His culture gets merged with the culture of the colonizers and thereafter he establishes his own identity. Over the course of the novel, he does begin to find ways to engage with the culture around him, and as a result he becomes less violent. As such, Tiger goes through “creolization”. Guruprasad S. Y explains, “Selvon looks towards the process of creolization by thinking that, changing the society through the process of creolization. Selvon feels that one should accept the process of creolization; and through Tiger, he solves the problems.”²²

Language is a core aspect of culture. When it is rapidly mixed and changed, the whole culture of a person or a family is affected. This process is experienced by Mr Biswas. In the beginning, he knows only Hindi, and after encountering the colonizer’s culture he starts speaking English. This is not a choice, but a necessity in interacting with his colonised society. He realises that if he is unable to fit with the colonisers’ culture, he will become an outcast. Initially, it troubles him to face this reality and adhere to it, but with time he learns to adjust and finds acceptance in the society, as this is his only real option for survival. Mr Biswas’ mindset is disturbed by this process, resulting in his losing his original culture and diverting from adopting it appropriately. Tahereh Siamardi and Reza Didari summarise,

As mentioned, the first generation believes more in superstitions and even when Biswas goes to school, he does not believe in the lessons he should learn. He thinks they are useless. At school, he learns both English and Hindi but in the next generation, it is the English language that is dominant and they forget even how to speak Hindi as the native language of their ancestors. However, the system of education is a progressive force in educating people as in the case of Mr Biswas who is a literate person in contrast to his older brothers, which makes him

²² S. Y. Guruprasad, ‘The Creole Identity in the Caribbean Postcolonial Society: A Study of Selvon’s *A Brighter Sun*’, *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol 1, no. 5 (2014), pp. 284-293.

question some unreasonable rules and traditions of his clan.²³

Identity is not fixed; it constantly evolves with time. Tiger begins knowing only his own culture. Later, while staying in Baratavia with his wife and children, he must work for a company run by colonisers. thus He becomes familiar with the people from the West, especially the United States. His culture keeps on changing; the effect of foreign influence is apparent in his character. Whenever Tiger beats Urmilla, she retreats to her parents' home. Later, after Tiger attacks Urmilla especially brutally, their baby is stillborn. This deeply affects Tiger, and he resolves to turn his life around, and succeeds to some extent. At the beginning of the novel, Tiger is naive, illiterate, and innocent. He represents the Caribbean man, who is a victim of colonisation, rather than a creator of history.²⁴

Discussion

In *A House for Mr Biswas*, “the three generations in the novel are viewed through the eyes of Mr Biswas who is the protagonist and the focus of the novel.”²⁵ Mr Biswas himself witnesses the problems which people face when they lose their identity. He is unable to express what he feels, at the same time the effects of the colonial powers on him are evident. In contrast, Tiger's position changes according to the phases of his life. When he settles in Baratavia he works in a company and earns a modest income. “People in Baratavia! Look, Mr Tiger coming in the new car!”²⁶ His attitude and behaviour are based on his expectations of what masculinity is: “two things would win the old man's favor — respect and rum.”²⁷ The relationship of Mr Biswas and Tiger with their wives are quite different. Mr Biswas does not have a good relationship with his wife because she lives in her parents' home with a large group of people. He does not meet her expectations, and their marriage is unstable. In the same way, Tiger's married life is deplorable due to his patriarchal mindset. He abuses his wife as an outlet for his own frustrations and treats her as a lesser being.

The post-colonial approach seeks to illustrate the relationship between

²³ Siamardi and Didari, ‘A Postcolonial Appraisal of V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*’, p. 109

²⁴ M. Jafarullah Baig and Gulam Tariq, ‘The Theme of Perpetual Quest for Identity in Samuel Selvon's *A Brighter Sun*’, *Review of Research*, vol. 8, no. 7 (2019), pp. 1-6.

²⁵ Siamardi and Didari, ‘A Postcolonial Appraisal of V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*’, p. 107.

²⁶ Selvon, *A Brighter Sun*, p. 31.

²⁷ Selvon, *A Brighter Sun*, p. 66.

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colonisers and the colonised. In *A House for Mr Biswas*, the relation between colonisers and colonised in Trinidad is highlighted. Mr Biswas and his family are unable to protect their culture and are forced to watch it merged with other cultures due to the presence of colonialism. There is no other family seen in Trinidad like the Tulsi, family who is of Indian descent. It is difficult for the colonized to even find a place to live, a dilemma which is at the crux of the novel. As Mr Biswas is presented by Naipaul, Tiger is presented by Selvon in *A Brighter Sun*. The impact of colonialism is centred in both novels.

These two works deal with the problems of common people during colonialism. Colonisers not only destroy communities economically, but culturally as well. They manipulate the culture of the colonised and enforce their own, which leads the colonised losing their sense identity. Tyone Ali concurs, “Samuel Selvon’s *A Brighter Sun* (1952) and V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) are two literary masterpieces that together depict various degrees of the Indo-Trinidadian man’s sexuality and the quest for manhood as being at the heart of human life.”²⁸ Both novels have the same background and theme. The setting of these two novels has also been the same. Jalal Mostafae continues, “The notion of hybridity which indicates that the practices of colonial authority are intermingling other texts and discourses which results in a hybridization that facilitates colonial domination.”²⁹

It is evident through the above analysis that this theory of hybridity applies to the character of Tiger and Mr Biswas as their face hybridisation. “As postcolonial theorists considered the issue of identity as one of its essential discussions, novelists also exposed and expressed the conditions of identity crises that emerged in the post-colonial period.”³⁰ The post-colonial writers have revealed the true condition of the colonised. Tiger and Mohan Biswas represent the true struggle of the colonised during colonialism, as do their wives. They also witness the cultural clash and manipulation of the

²⁸ Tyrone Ali, “‘To me, I no man yet!’: Indo-Trinidadian Manhood in Samuel Selvon’s *A Brighter Sun* and V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*”, *Journal of West Indian Literature*, vol 28, no. 2. (2020), pp. 113-175.

²⁹ Jalal Mostafae, ‘Investigating Identity, Ambivalence, Hybridity: A Bhabhaian Reading of J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* and *Disgrace*’, *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 7, no. 6 (2016), pp. 163-167.

³⁰ Saman Abdulqadir and Hussein Dezai, ‘The Crisis of Identity in Postcolonial Novel’, *International Conference on Education and Social Sciences*, 2-4 February 2015, pp, 113-175.

cultures with the invasion of foreign cultures on their land. The cultural hegemony perpetuated through the missionaries and changes in language became the reason for cultural clashes and led to anarchy in the colonised. The colonised showed their protest in the form of resistance and rebellion. Initially they remained stuck to their own culture and protected their language and ethics, but inevitably they were forced to follow the foreigners as they were left with no option. Their life and experience indicate how hard it was for the colonised to survive at that time. They neither have their resources nor their own original culture. Their identities have been snatched from them, and their future depends on the whims of the colonising force.

Conclusion

Having analysed all the above, it can be concluded that identity allows people to be a part of groups and attain a sense of belonging in their social world. It plays an important role in making self-image. The more people identify with a particular group, the more that group plays a role in shaping how people feel about themselves. Mr Biswas loses his identity in *A House for Mr Biswas*, as does Tiger in *A Brighter Sun*. Their identity is hybrid, as we see as they both develop throughout their novels. Their resistance and protest are also evidenced, which ultimately leads to hybridity. They both have lost their Indigenouness. Thus, Bhabha's theory of hybridity is relevant in these two. "It hardly needs to be said that colonial contact disrupts indigenous culture, often radically. For many people, it renders traditional practices. In doing this, it makes cultural identity a problem –an issue on which one almost necessarily takes a stand."³¹ The idea of pure Trinidadian, as believed to be inherent in the identity of Tiger and Biswas, has broken down in the context. Both the protagonists acquire hybrid identities by encountering colonisers. These two characters in two different novels represent all the colonised people in the global south who struggle with the destruction of their cultures and identities. Through the struggles and successes of Mr Biswas and Tiger, it is evident how hard it had been to remain stuck to one's original and pure state of identity when the countries had been under the constant suppression of Western powers which led their identity to become troubled and unstable.

³¹ Patrick Colm Hogan, *Colonialism and Cultural Identity: Crises of Tradition in the Anglophone Literature of India, Africa, and the Caribbean* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 19.