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## Subalternity: A Reading of female characters in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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### Abstract

V. S. Naipaul, the diasporic writer plays a paramount role in postcolonial literature. He feels the necessity to define a personal identity in one's own life and therefore he creates determined characters in his fiction that expose their loss of identity in various ways. Through his works, he has depicted the rootlessness of the marginalized people who live with fractured identity. This rootlessness is something that never stops to haunt Naipaul and he never stop to remind himself about his origins in his work. He has exposed the experiences of lost, rootlessness, homelessness basically through his male characters and has avoided any examination of his female characters. Even the role and the position of the individual women are not significant enough in his fiction. They are disfigured, defeated, deprived and dislocated. However, his female characters are not less important in this sense that they are equal to those male characters who silently suffer for the availing condition. This paper is an attempt to establish to what extent the woman's invisibility and marginalization is justify, to foreground the miserable conditions of the lives of subaltern female characters and their struggle as depicted in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. His female characters are treated as peripherals in the works and therefore they are denied an enabling environment. Feminism and postcolonial literary theory have been concerned for the critical analysis of the present study and these theories provide the methodological reading of the text.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, V. S. Naipual, Identity, Dislocation

### Introduction

The word '*Subaltern identity*' is derived from the cultural hegemony work of Italian Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci. He weaved the idea about subaltern identity in the theory of class struggle in his "Prison Notebook" when he was put behind the bar by Mussolini. To escape the sensor of Mussolini government, he avoided the wide spread Marxist term and used the new term "Subaltern". In postcolonial theory, the word subaltern refers to the lower classes and the social groups who are marginalized. Homi K. Bhabha, the post colonial thinker, emphasized the importance of social power relations in defining subaltern social groups as oppressed, racial minorities whose social presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group; as such, subaltern social groups (Bhabha 191-207). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian postcolonial thinker uses the term 'subaltern' in more specific sense in her article "Can *Subaltern speak*? According to her the subaltern cries out in various ways, they talk and never achieve the dialogic level of utterance. Ranjit Guha uses the term 'subaltern' to define the general attributes of subordination in South Asian society. He expresses it in terms of class, caste, gender or any other way. In postcolonial term, everything that limited to cultural imperialism is subaltern. Subalterns do not get the platform to raise their voice and cannot change the existing social orders. They are different from those marginalized groups who get a platform to raise their voice against oppression. Postcolonialism raises the questions and reinvents the modes of cultural perception, the other way it records human relation among the colonial nations and subaltern people who were exploited by the colonial rule. Colonialism was led to the extension of civilization based on the self ascribed superiority of the European western world over the non-western world which effected the intellectual and moral reformation of the coloured people. They were established by themselves with natural harmony because everyone whether coloniser or colonised has assigned cultural identity, a place and economic role within the imperial

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colony. Postcolonial theory establishes intellectual spaces for these subaltern people who raise their voices for themselves and produce cultural discourses by supporting the western thought- the way colonialists understand the world.

V. S. Naipaul is one among them who raises a resonant voice through his work. The novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* brings superstition, the abuse of power and oppression that both male and female characters have confronted. The female characters of the novel are the typical representation of the Indo -Caribbean women who once came to Caribbean with their family after the abolition of slavery. They work as labourer for five- year contract. After five years, they were given either a piece of land on the island or a free passage to India which made many Indians homeless. In the time of indentureship, women outnumbered men and average 25 percent of women are found as labour force. This disparity between men and women and dominant patriarchy created social problems and made the life of the women miserable. They received lower wages and could not purchase land. When indentureship came to end in 1917, they were transformed from the indenture labourer to household keeper and played the role of wives, mothers and sisters. Indo- Caribbean female characters are dealt with on the periphery of the action and the victims of the patriarchal system. They are marginalised, misunderstood and neglected. Rambai Espinet argues that Indian women are invisible in the West Indian fiction because of the less attention that has paid to their existence by some of the male authors. According to her, the women, in the novels of Naipaul play only supporting roles and their invisibility springs from the old Hinducustoms which declaims against actually seeing Indian women (Espinete 427).

The female characters like Bipti, Shama, Padma, and Chinta play the role of wives in different way in Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Bipti, wife of Raghu and mother of Mr. Biswas is leaded an unhappy life. She has lost her husband and always suffers from the lack of money. Even she is not able to take care of her children. She has not having a smooth and harmonious life with her husband because she married Raghu without any love. When he drowns instead of mourning, she thinks of sending the message about her husband's death. Subsequently, Bipti finds herself helpless against some of the neighbours who harass her and her children and because of this reason she sells her hut and land and moves to Pagotes where her sister Tara offers a house of her husband. There, they live in a back trace completely on Tara's charity sharing a mud hut with some of her relatives. Bipti loses her hold with Mr. Biswas and now it is Tara who decides everything for them. Tara sends Mr. Biswas to a Canadian Mission School and then suddenly decides to send him to Pandit Jairam to get training in the intension to make him Pandit. After spending eight months with Jairam, Biswas is forced to come out from Jairam's house because of his disgraceful act. He returns to his mother with expectation that she will understand him. But Bipti who depends on Tara and her husband can only express her apprehension. She admits: "And it was Tara who wanted you to be *pandit*... I don't know what we are going to tell her" (57). From this situation, we are aware that Bipti is a woman who is completely lacking the spirit of doing anything.

Shama is one among them whose life becomes miserable,

irritated and suppliant in the house of her mother, Mrs. Tulsi, along with her husband Mr. Biswas. When Mr. Biswas establishes his rebellion against Tulsi family, Shama feels ashamed and tries to avoid him. But in front of others, her attitude changes and she pretends to be silent. She always plays the role of supporter of her mother and dependence on Hanuman house and her family. For instance, once Mr. Biswas buys a doll house for his daughter Savi, but Shama destroys it and throws it on a heap of rubbish because of her family's psychic pressure on her. From this instance we come to know that she does not want to be unfriendly with her family members and rather submits to their pressure. Even the relationship between Shama and Mr. Biswas is not satisfactory because Mr. Biswas wants to be recognized as a self dependent individual. He never at any state gives up taunting Shama about her family and her relatives. In many occasions he becomes violently angry with her. Moreover, once he hits on her belly and asks her to go away. Shama's unhappiness springs from her failure in her attempt at establishing the relationship with her husband. Throughout the novel she plays the role of traditional Hindu women whose main purpose in life is to be a good obedient wife and dedicated mother. Naipaul has depicted the character of Padma who always plays the role of peace maker. On the other hand, her husband Seth, brother of Mrs. Tulsi's dead husband very often has quarreled with other members of the house. On such occasions she never expresses any approval or disapproval of her husband's action. There is something wrong with her health. Few years later, Padma has died in Arwacas where she lives along with her husband. Some of the women folk on the basis of the dreams say that she is killed by her husband Seth. Chinta, one of the daughters of Mrs. Tulsi is also beaten by her husband Govind. But she accepts the beatings without protest. However, some of women characters of this novel like Tara, Mrs. Tulsi are portrayed as self confident and independent. Though, once Mrs. Tulsi controls the whole family in Hanuman House, in course of time her all daughters including those who become widow and live as Tulsi's dependent have worked as labourers under Seth because they have no alternatives. V.S. Naipaul earns his reputation as a nihilistic misogynist because he treats his female characters with less sympathy. Here, it is Mr. Biswas's struggle of slavery and he remains indifferent throughout the novel. The women are also significant enough to draw our attention because their appearance in the novel is active and without them the existence of the protagonist Mr. Biswas and the other male characters would never be recognized. They are portrayed as traditional Indian women: they respect and obey their husband and brothers; they never complain even they are beaten and do what they are supposed to do. All of them obey the rules that are prescribed to them and do not ask for any revolutionary changes in their positions. Moreover, the novel brings the suffering of women as subaltern along with the male characters. Here, he has brought the idea of being a woman in a tradition conservative society and exposes the harsh effects of colonialism. In the post colonial world, people who are once oppressed are left to lead such life. In search of their identity and self realisation, they trap themselves in unforeseen situations. Therefore, they continue to thrive on whatever comes on their way.

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