

**A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND PERSONHOOD  
IN V.S NAIPAUL'S  
A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS AND SAMUEL SELVON'S  
THE LONELY LONDONERS**

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**Abstract**

*Studies have shown that many people are faced with identity crisis; they cannot identify their personhood especially when such people are not in their place of origin or as a result of acculturation. Such people do not know whether they belong here or there and so they tend to search for their personhood. This work, therefore, examines the issue of search for identity in V.S Naipaul's A House for Mr Biswas and Samuel Selvon's The Lonely Londoners. Critical evaluations of the novels reveal that life is full of constant movement in search for better conditions. Naipaul is one good writer who searches for self. One reading his works will find out that almost all his works dwell on colonialism and its effect on his people. His writings reveal the inner most mind of a Caribbean people. Also in Samuel Selvon's The Lonely Londoners, the writer explores the issue of racial discrimination and confrontation which is invariably reflected in the condition which the blacks were forced to live; their persistent struggle to be recognized and be identified with the rest of the world. The data for this study is extracted from both primary and secondary sources. Postcolonial criticism is the theoretical anchor of the study. This study reveals these two novels as works of art that deal with the problem of isolation, frustration, nostalgia, quest for identity and negation of an individual. Findings also reveal that it is a peculiar problem in the West Indies as well as all the third world countries.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Life, Existence, Struggle, Individual, Colonialism

**Introduction**

Caribbean literature is regarded as a new literature because when compared to English Literature, it is relatively new. It was until the late 1960s that books were published in the West Indies. Paul Gilroy, states that, "creative writings from this region dated back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is at the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that writers of repute began to emerge on its literary scene" (58).

Caribbean literature is not just an entertainment literature, its genres encompasses the historical issues of enslavement and forced migration (the Trans-Atlantic dehumanisation), the related themes of home and exile, colonization, and decolonization, poverty and sufferings, colour and racism, longing for freedom and justice, nostalgia etc. The theme of cultural identity also frolicked in the literature of the Caribbean-the feelings of "belonging". They were cut away from their root and they were not accepted by the mother countries (Gikandi, 23).

And so, there is in Caribbean literature the predominance of the alienation theme in various forms: homelessness, rootlessness and exile. Julia Udofia remarks that: “ It is a situation of being a part of what you could not become. So, the primary cultural commitment of Caribbean writers like Derek Walcott, V.S Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, George Lamming, Roger Mais and others remains the search for identity and self-discovery” (60).

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh opines that Caribbean literature “is a search into the gory story of bloodshed, slavery, the brutality of conquest, and colonialism” (11). She stresses further that the literature is “a look into the historical scares of imperialist subjugation and its attendant torture and suffering of the group of people that make up the Caribbean. It is a leap into the dissonance of racial prejudice, cultural dislocation, ancestral enslavement and the agonizing condition of exile (12).

Consequently, this literature has to do with literary works written by people who were born or grew up in the Caribbean Islands or West Indies that reflect the emotional, cultural, economic and socio-political realities of the Caribbean people. West Indies Literature are more or less protest and satirical in nature. The primary import of the West Indies literature like that of other regional and national literatures is to bring to fore the national consciousness through personal experiences. All the Afro-Caribbean experience is reflected in their literary works especially in their novels. The novels show their response to the colonial situation. But despite the background, there was the zeal among the twentieth century writers to establish their desire for the restoration of individual self and to disapprove the notice that the Blackman is faceless and rootless.

The study of Caribbean literature is important to us Africans because most of the people are blacks like us, taken into slavery and afterwards released. They were also colonised like us and so we share similar experiences of poverty, alienation, discomfort, disillusionment after colonisation, the struggle for survival and unity. This paper therefore, using postcolonial theory is an attempt to probe V.S Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* to establish the fact that literary works do not just mirror reality but act as a prism that reflects the distorted but clearer image of reality in its representation of the colonized blacks and their experiences.

At this point, there is therefore, the need to first understand what Identity is. Identity can mean so many different things different people; suffice it to say that everyone has a different opinion on it. The researcher sees identity as who you are – the real you, your root. *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature* states that: “identity is who someone is: the name of a person, the quality, beliefs etc., that make a particular person or group different from others” (1274). One may also define identity as the distinctive characteristics belonging to any given individual or shared by all members of a particular social category or group. Developing a sense of self is an essential part of every individual becoming a mature person. Each person's self- conception is a unique combination of many identifications; such as broad as this or that, man or woman, Christian or Muslim, or as narrow as being a member of one particular family.

Beyond the basic need for a sense of control, David Straker states that “we are deeply driven by our sense of identity or who we are. We are in the middle of our individual world, where we place central importance on our sense of individual self”. (24) Here, we talk of personhood which simply means the quality of being an individual person.

#### **Post colonialism as Theoretical Anchor of this Study**

The theoretical framework for this study is postcolonial theory which looks at issues of power, economics, politics, and culture and how these elements work in relation to colonial

hegemony. A post-colonial critic is therefore, concerned with literature produced by colonial powers and works produced by those who were colonized. Violet Bridget Lunga states that:

Postcolonial theory represents a complex field of study, encompassing an array of matters that include issues such as identity, gender, racism, and ethnicity ...focuses on exploding knowledge system underpinning colonialism, neo-colonialism, and various forms of oppression, exploitation present today...challenging epistemic violence; that is, it questions the undervaluing, destruction, and appropriation of colonized people's knowledge and ways of knowing, including the colonizer's interest (193).

The above shows that postcolonial theory features racism, loss of identity, hopelessness, disillusionment, cultural differences experienced by the colonized. We see this in Caribbean, Asian, Indian, African and in the works of any continent or country that has ever and is still experiencing any form of diaspora. We see this portrayed in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), Ndubuisi George's *Woes of Ikenga* (2014), Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1991), Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) to mention a few.

The ultimate results of the social and economic challenges faced by the major characters of the above-mention novels include constant police surveillance and harassments which led to frustration, dejection, lawlessness, isolation, loss of identity, drug addiction and abuse, emotional and psychological deterioration and degeneration. It is based on this premise that Ndubuisi George opines that: "Life outside one's country can be adventurous but life as an economic migrant in the Western World is best understood by those who have lived it" (104).

It is important to note that most characters in Caribbean novels are loners and hustlers. The themes of loneliness and alienation are depicted in V.S. Naipaul's *A House of Mr Biswas* and Samuel Selvon's work never ceased to engage with the alienation of migration, the trials of everyday survival, and the larger ironies of Empire, in various narrative modes ranging from sober realism to exuberant satire, from standard to creole Englishes, and shifting settings across the Atlantic. Selvon was confronted with the task of having to assert a black humanity and identity for West Indian migrants in London largely without black literary models, within and against a world of Anglophone letters which still abounded with white "legends, stories, history" of "tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships." (Fanon, 111–112) Caribbean literature then, was to celebrate a new ethos and identity. It established the West Indian identity as different from the European, and neither is it African, Chinese nor Indian but a strange and pleasurable mixture of all these. The writer in the New World then, is engaged in an attempt at articulating a trueness of being.

#### **Search for Identity and personhood in *A House for Mr Biswas***

The novel paints a poignant picture of Mr Biswas as he struggle to preserve his own identity in an alien environment and he also tries to forge an authentic selfhood. Besides, focusing on his dark world, the novel introduces brief glimpses of ethnic and social history of the marginalised East Indians community in Trinidad. The narrative tries to maintain equilibrium between Mr Biswas's inner self and disinterested outer view. Paul Theroux opines that: "The life of Mr Biswas resembles the life of Naipaul himself whose series of experiences of exile and alienation while living in Trinidad seem to be portrayed through the characters of his

protagonist, Mr Biswas” (45). Yet, the tone is not negative, nor do the readers find a pessimistic approach on the part of the novelist in his dealing with constructing his own imaginary homeland, a theme found also in Naipaul's other novels. He presents Mr Biswas's relentless struggle against the forces that try to subdue his individuality. His struggle is long and tiresome, but in the end, he is successful in having a space he can call his own imaginary homeland. V.S. Naipaul creates the novel out of what he saw and felt as a child. This famous novel of his, *A House for Mr Biswas*, depicts in extreme extent the desperate struggle for Mr Biswas to acquire a house of his own which is symbolic of an individual's need to develop an authentic identity.

A careful study of the novel as a work from a third world country reflects the experiences of the people of Caribbean. Though written in the 1960s, it captures the literary responses of modern writers and the lives of our present society. *A House for Mr Biswas* reflects the problems of the middle class populace in the West Indies as well as in Africa. It deals with problem of search for a house (identity) which connotes comfort and search for better conditions of existentiality which ends with death. Just like the title of the novel indicates the protagonist, Mohen Biswas moves round the country looking for a house of his own and better condition of living. At the end of the novel, the writer reports that he dies in his house.

The novel is divided into two parts, the first part deals with the major character Mr Biswas's birth and struggle to adulthood. The second part that concerns this paper brings Mr Biswas in focus as he moves from his mother's house in search of somewhere else to stay. He looks confused, not knowing where exactly he wants to go. It is the bus boy that even informs him that he is on his way to Port of Spain.

In the bus to Port of Spain, Mr Biswas wishes that the bus goes on and on without stopping but finally he reaches there. Here, the writer portrays a man in a confused state of mind. He decides to live with Dehuti and her husband. His sister and brother-in-law advise him to rest for a while before looking for a job. As a lonely man and uncomfortable, after a few days he decides that his resting time is over. Later, he goes out looking for a job. His search lands him in the *Sentinel*. The editor at the newsroom tells him to come the next day for a trial. This is captured in these lines, “come tomorrow if you are serious. We give you a month's trial but no pay” (339). The portrayal of man in search for identity leads Naipaul to create Mr Biswas as a man constantly on the move. As the writer rightly puts it: “A chance encounter had led him (Mr Biswas) to sign writing had taken him to Hanuman house and the Tulsis; sign writing found him (into marriage) place on the *Sentinel*. And neither for the Tulsis store signs nor for those at paid” (340).

This is a clear indication that the man is always on the move in search of his basic need. Mr Biswas wants to be his real self. For him to keep his job at the *Sentinel*, he works with enthusiasm. He makes up his stories and turns them up to the editor. The stories make him famous as he keeps appearing in the newspaper every day.

A settled man in Port of Spain, Mr Biswas goes back to Hanuman house to reconcile with his wife and in-laws because he left without telling them. This move of reconciliation is also one of search for comfort, to be identified with his people/ family. Now he has a job, he wants them to love and respect him for what he is. Mrs. Tulsi allows him take his family back to Port of Spain but she also wishes to live with them and so she offers them her house while she

lives with them. Now in the new house, Naipaul pictures Mr Biswas in a life of luxury. For four years as recorded by the author: “the newspaper delivered free, still warm, the ink still wet water ran clear in the gutters already cleansed by the sweeper. He naps at noon, had tea in the back Veranda”.(353) This luxurious living makes Mr Biswas imagine ownership of the house and lots of other good things follow these four years.

Changes are normal with man, so life changed for Mr Biswas again after the comfortable four years. One of the Tulsi's sons Owad is to leave for the United Kingdom for studies to be trained as a medical doctor. Because of this, Mrs. Tulsi too is to return to Hanuman house back in Arwacas. This is again to move Mr Biswas, on his own part, he has no job satisfaction, and fear sets in because at the Sentinel, his boss is to leave and no certainty for job security for him. Mr Biswas is seen on the move again in another search for a house and job.

Here, Naipaul reflects life as a journey and search for comfort and identity. In another incident in the novel where the writer shows us the movement of the Tulsi's to another location, Shorthills, the estate is located at the North-East of Port of Spain, among the mountains of the Northern Range. The movement to the house is awaited with great expectations and the promise of many good things. For instance, the availability of a swimming pool, a sheep, horses and a good light supply. Movement is normal with man as shown by the writer so the Tulsis also “never considered themselves settled in Arwacas or Trinidad” (412). This is also seen in the life of slaves in the West Indies who intended to go back to their countries after their release but could not. As seen in the novel, the Indians keep ties with their homeland and feel they will soon go back. It is also normal for one to keep moving as long as one is searching for a better condition of living, a real identity of his personhood.

The movement to Shorthills enthral the family in such a way that they imagine only good things in the new house. Thus, they say, “life could be rich at Shorthills” (414). Mr. Biswas moves with the family into the house at Shorthills basically to save his salary and eventually builds his own house. Their experience there is far from the fantasy earlier anticipated. Hope for happier and smoother days elude them. They wait for the “sheep, horses, swimming pool to be repaired, the drive weeded; electricity plant fixed the house repainted in vain” (424). Mr. Biswas too waits for improvement on his part in terms of his savings but finds none.

As a result of the discomfort at Shorthills, it is evident that another movement is going to come in a short while. Again, Mr. Biswas begins another search for a house. He finds a house not far from the estate at Shorthills; a place full of possibilities, isolated and unused. He now owns a land of his own. He sinks his earnings into the land and builds his own house in haste and moves in. Here in his house he finds no rest too in a haste to build his house, his long time savings run down as a result of that he has no satisfaction or comfort again; he burns his own house accidentally. This finds him back in the house at Shorthills. Back in the house at Shorthills, Mr. Biswas finds no rest and because it is his second return to the house and the writer puts it thus:

He could not simply live the house... he had to be released from it. And presently this happened. Transports become impossible. The bus service deteriorated, the sport car began to give as much trouble as its predecessor and had to be sold. And just about this time Mrs. Tulsi's house in Port of Spain fell vacant. Mr. Biswas is offered the room in it and he immediately accepted (458).

This is how he escapes another trouble. After a short while, in Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas faces a new kind of discomfort /hardship. He is later appointed the investigator of the destitute. The appointment requires him to investigate the living conditions of the destitute and provide deserving destitute with their basic needs.

While still working with destitute, Mr. Biswas gets another job with the government. Naipaul recalls that he gets this job accidentally. The new job is "Community Welfare Officer at a salary of fifty dollars a month higher than the one he was getting from the Sentinel" (525). He is in addition given a new car on government loan. He and his family enjoy occasional rides to different places but the experience is short-lived because Owad is soon to be back. The return of Owad to Port of Spain brings Mr Biswas back to his sense. He has to look for a house before it is too late. This is because Mrs. Tulsi is to come back. She comes back and moves Mr. Biswas to occupy one room.

Again Mr. Biswas is out looking for another house. He starts announcing to people that "I am given a quit notice". He again finds solace in cafes drinking. It is in the process that he meets a man who offers him his house for sale to enable the man buy another house. The man compares looking for a house and being sick. In the writer's words he says: "Is like sick when you sick you forget what it is to be well. And when you are well you don't really know what it is to be sick. Is the same with not having a place to go back to every afternoon?" (592). The man persuades Mr. Biswas in such a way that at the end he buys the house. It is then that he discovers that the house is not worth what he buys it with. But for whatever reason Mr. Biswas now owns his own house, a long search for possession, for identity.

In summary, one sees that one major theme in the novel is search for self-identity. The protagonist searches for personhood. In the search for his own identity, Mr. Biswas shifts from village to town and from joint family to nuclear family but fails to find his own roots amidst socio-cultural change, just as the individual is both a construction and a fixed entity, so the town is an imaginary element in the structure of identity. A Home for Mr. Biswas is therefore, individual attempts to overcome "homelessness". The novel delineates the traumas of a tainted and troubled past and attempts to find a purpose in life, beautifully analysing the sense of alienation and the pangs of exile experienced by the character (s).

#### **Search for Identity and Personhood in Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*.**

Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* focuses on the immigration of West Indians to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and the cultural differences which are often subtle and implicit to the dying empire's fantasy of a 'white nation'. Selvon also illustrates the panoply of different cities, due to class and racial boundaries. In the novel *The Lonely Londoners*, the author through the use of plausible, realistic and / or believable characters portrays the lives of the black people among the white, the segregation and the discrimination of people with black skin. The West Indian migrant finds himself grouped or categorized as non-white, which means he is a black person and cannot be allowed equal right with the white. The Caribbeans that migrate to London pass time by hanging around with friends, eating, talking, drinking or smoking and some of their talk is "old talk", reminiscences of their previous lives in the West Indies and exchange of news from home. Moses says: "And I surprise that so many years gone by looking at thing in general life really hard for the boys in London. This is a lonely miserable city, if it was that we didn't get together now and then to talk about things back home; we would suffer like hell" (114).

*The Lonely Londoners* is one of Selvon's best published novels because it brings together in one minor classic, the experiences of the Afro- Caribbean. The author narrates his

personal experience using outside character(s). A recurring theme in Selvon's character development addresses upward social mobility. This mobility, however, is clouded by the character's designation as the 'other'. The accents and skin colour mark them as outsiders and force them to form a 'group identity' based on the principle of congregation via segregation. The Caribbeans voice out their bitterness: "Nobody in London does really accept you. They tolerate you, yes but you can't go in their house and eat, sit down and talk. It ain't have a sort of family life for us here" (114).

As a result of their sufferings, they are forced to eat birds and even pigeons just to survive. Galahad, one of the characters, try to catch a pigeon in the park to eat but Moses tries to explain to him that, "in this country, people prefer to see man starve than a cat or dog want something to eat (107). Moses further explains: "Boy, you take a big chance, Moses said. You think this is Trinidad? Then pigeons there to beautiful the park, not to eat. The people over here will kill you if you touch a fly" (109).

The West Indians are segregated in all aspects of life and this brought about the theme of 'self-assertion' and 'black identity' in the novel. The novel successful conveys the discrimination of jobs and other social things of life. The condition which irreparably twist the social and spiritual development of the victims, point out the brutalizing and dehumanizing emotions on the individual concerned within an alienating environment.

The alienation is as a result of West Indian's past with which he cannot find reconciliation and his immediate world in which he is a stranger. This no doubt produces the need for self-assertion, cum identity in the Caribbean black person in order to give meaning to his deculturated life and also motivate others for general resurrection, participation and restoration of the part of human dignity. In defining these conditions and the individual struggle for self-identity, Selvon focused attention on three control pairs in the novel. Moses Aloetta, Galahad and Captain.

In the novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, the writer is compelled to deal with Black- White confrontation, the West Indian emigrants' situation. The West Indian emigrants find themselves discriminated against in jobs, housing, and ever treated with deliberated disgust and rudeness in the ordinary ground of social contract. For instance, Moses' situation at his work place and the writer says:

Moses was sorry, it was the first time he ever really gets a good chance to say his mind and he had a lot of things to say. Though one time they wanted to take out his photo. It happened while he was working in a railway yard, and all the people in the place say they go strike unless the boss fire Moses... A few day after that the boss call Moses and tell him he is sorry, but as they cutting down the staff and he was new he would have to go (13).

Though the author stresses not only the individual characters' odd experiences, also the inter-related perception. Selvon portrays Moses as an independent person capable of making good use of his idea within the alien environment he finds himself. Notably, he does not allow himself to be used ordinarily rather he explores every situation around him reasonably. This is the reason he asserts himself before the white at his work place despite the fact that they threaten that they would embark on strike if the boss fails to sack him. For him, the threat does not give him sleepless night rather he still maintain his lawful right at his workplace by even refusing a journalist from taking him a photograph, despite all the threats: "It was a big balled in all the papers they put in under a big headlines saying how the colour bar was causing trouble

again, and a fellar came with a camera and wanted to take Moses photo, but Moses say no” (13).

The black white confrontation depicts pains, agony and hatred. Galahad while searching for a house: “I went to look at that room that Ram tell me about in the Gate, and as soon as the landlady see you she say the room let already. She ain't even given me a chance to say good morning” (73).

Galahad talks to the colour Black, as if it is a person; he went to Moses and tells him; “Is not we that the people don't like, is the colour Black”.(73) Given this as it may, black are not completely ignorant of the whites. For them (black) as a phenomenal challenge cannot go without self-awareness and determination in the socio-political and economic life. It is this social awareness that leads Moses refusing the white journalist from taking his photo. He knows that a white man does not have good intention for him and he knows that his image will be used in the end for caricature. One would note that it is the author's unique way of saying that after all blacks at any point in time knows their right even though such right does not exist within their confine but the fact here is there are blacks. Galahad also remembers this experience while working at lavatory: “And Galahad would take hand room his under the blanket, as he lay there studying... lavatory and two whites fellars come in and say how these black bastards have the lavatory dirty, and they didn't know that he was there, and when he come they say hello mate have a cigarette” (72).

They pretend to be friendly but have so much hatred for blacks this commentary makes Galahad imagine the misery in the colour, back. And after all, he does not see anything wrong in possessing the black colour: “And Galahad watches the colour of his hand, and talk to it saying 'colour'. Is you that causing all these, you know why the hell you can't be blue or red or green, if you can't be white? You know is you that cause a lot of misery in the world” (72).

*The Lonely Londoners* draws our attention to the problems of alienation and racial injustices that the blacks suffered in the hands of colonial masters. The Caribbean novels have a flavour of social realism, protest tradition and a reflection of a divided cultural heritage. It is important to note that most characters in Caribbean novels are loners and hustlers. Loneliness is something that can almost push somebody to wonder aimlessly in thought. Selvon's characters are all loners' individuals though it does not stop them from hustling to survive in a hostile environment. It is the bid to identify themselves as somebody that make them to migrant to London to hustle. According to the writer: “...To tell truth most of the fellars who coming now are real hustlers, desperate; it not like long time when forty or fifty stragging in, they invading the country by the hundreds” (8).

The rate at which the West Indians migrate to London makes the white feel bad and they begin to treat them indifferently. The writer mentions that Moses who almost receives them in London as an old sojourner feels somehow and laments on it; Moses tells his friend Harris: “I never see things so. I don't know these people at all, yet they coming to me as if is some Liaison officer, and I catching my arse as it is, how I could help them out” (8).

In brief, it is clearly evident that these people move to the ‘little world’, a city where they believe that they will survive. This also tells us more about the people of the Caribbean. These people cannot be said to be people of a race since they are a mixture of Whites, Indians, Blacks, Spanish, Aborigines, Mulattoes etc. These people found their way on the Caribbean Island as slaves but after the abolition of slavery, they found for themselves home on the Islands of Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Trinidad etc. They could not go back to their original countries, hence this struggle to survive and to identify themselves.

### Conclusion

By successfully going through the novels, *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Lonely Londoners*, one sees the life of average West Indian as a life that is guided by one basic principle; the struggle for survival. For Mr. Biswas, this begins on the very day of his birth. He is declared a bad omen, surrounded by evil and everywhere he goes, whatever he does, he seems not to fit in, with members of his family. At Pundit Jairams, at the shop with Bhandat at Hanumans house and even with his wife and children, he still could not fit in. He is so detached and aloof, it is not an exaggeration to say that throughout his life, he had no friends. Hence Mr. Biswas is alienated and lonely and this struggle for his personal identity. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, metaphorically is a miniature world which symbolises the colonial world. Mr. Biswas's personal battle with the stronghold of the Tulsi household is a quest for existential freedom and the struggle for personality. The feeling of deracination (uprooting), displacement and lack of a national community in Trinidad are the fundamental themes in this novel as portrayed in Mr. Biswas as they were for Naipaul personality. Both Mr. Biswas and Naipaul are in search of a home by which they will be able to find their identities.

This theme has become common in Caribbean literature. It is clearly seen in Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. Here are group of West Indians who went on exile to London in search of a better life and who were not only deprived of lucrative jobs but were also discriminated against as a result of their skin colour. It is a peculiar problem in the West Indies as well as all the third world countries. These people become jobless, hopeless and lonely. They too, seek to be identified. In *The Lonely Londoners*, one sees that Selvon's characters are on their own in an unfamiliar world that does not want them and so they are propelled to constantly struggle for their survival and identity.

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