

## Gender Dynamics & Identity in the Novels of V. S. Naipaul and Chitra Banerjee

### Divakaruni: A Comparative Perspective

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#### **Abstract**

This article investigates gender roles and identity in selected novels of V. S. Naipaul and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The novels of these prolific Indian writers hold a significant place in literary world. These writers have left a lasting literary legacy with their works. V. S. Naipaul and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have discussed gender roles and identity in most of their novels. Through their writings, they have raised the issues of identity crisis of the protagonists of their novels. Their works reflect their personal experiences. There are a lot of similarities between Mr. Biswas; the protagonist of the novel *A House for Mr Biswas*; and Naipaul as both are Indians and reside in Trinidad. Like Mohan Biswas, Naipaul also experiences the agony of rootlessness. Similarly, Tilo's character in *The Mistress of Spices* reflects Divakaruni's life. Like Tilo, Divakaruni has played many roles in her life and there are many similarities between Tilo and Divakaruni. Both, Naipaul and Divakaruni use their characters to portray their own life experiences. In the shadow of gender and identity, the main characters in these books perform their roles. Naipaul and Divakaruni discussed gender roles and identity crisis in most of their works, although they do so in rather different ways using various characters and narratives, the main themes of their novels are gender and identity.

**Keywords:** diasporic sensibility, alienation, struggle for identity, gender roles.

#### **1. Introduction**

The socially constructed characteristics of women, men, girls and boys are referred to as gender. This covers the customs, actions and roles that come with being a male or female, as well as the relationship between them. Gender is a social construct that differs from society to society and is subject to change over time (1). It impacts the way people act and interact, how they see themselves and each other and how power and resources are distributed in society. Gender identity is not static or limited to a binary (boy or man, girl or woman); rather, it is a continuous process that is subject to change over time. Through their roles, expectations,

relationships with others and many other ways, gender is institutionalised in society. People display a wide range of understandings, experiences and expressions of gender.

Gender is the mutual relationship between men and women. Gender is socially formed and not biologically determined by a person's sexual behaviours or characteristics (8). It serves as a fundamental governing principle of society and frequently controls the processes of distribution, consumption and reproduction. Despite this concept, gender is frequently misinterpreted as referring solely to the progression of women. However, gender issues are centred on women and the relationship between men and women, including their roles, division of labour, interests, needs, as well as access to and control over resources. Numerous facets of life, including planning, productivity, family well-being and household security, are impacted by gender relations. The hierarchical nature of gender creates disparities that interact with other social and economic inequalities, including age, geography, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity and financial status. We call this intersectionality.

Identity can be broadly defined as an individual's sense of self, which is shaped by their distinctive characteristics, relations and societal positions (130). Furthermore, despite several changes in their circumstances, one feels that they are the same person over time, exhibiting the continuity of identity. During childhood, when a person is most influenced by those who care for them, the seeds of their identity are planted. However, as people grow from childhood to adulthood, they begin to think about their identities and social roles. Teenagers experiment with various roles and behaviours to find their sense of self. Even though adults constantly re-evaluate their identities, these changes are not significant. According to renowned psychologist Erik Erikson, this critical identity development during adolescence is crucial for creating a strong self-concept and determining one's course in life.

## 2. Critical Analysis

*A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) is a masterpiece written by V. S. Naipaul. It is about the life and death of Mohun Biswas, an Indian-born Indo-Trinidadian, whose life narrative is very similar to that of Naipaul's. He incorporates his personal life experiences in his works. Although it contains autobiographical elements, it is not an autobiographical novel. A comprehensive understanding of Naipaul's personal difficulties, sorrows, conflicts and confrontations with society, his familial history and postcolonial diasporic pluralism is necessary before delving into the novel. It may be a "West Indian novel of rootlessness," in which Naipaul's character is portrayed by Anand and his father's character by Mr. Biswas. Because of his father and his

family, Naipaul's life was chaotic and unfocused. Throughout his life, he was in search of his identity, in an alien country. Because of the lack of social power and financial instability, Biswas feels immensely unfulfilled in his roles as a husband and father, which emphasises gendered expectations in Naipaul's story. His need for control over his family and traditional gender norms causes stress in his marriage to Shama. Mr. Biswas believes that identity is closely linked to autonomy and ownership and that not realizing his goals is a sign of his failures as a man. This emphasises how the effects of colonialism on economic and social systems affect gender and personal identities, depriving male characters like Biswas of their customary position of authority over their family. When he asks Shama for something, she consistently turns him no, demonstrating his failure at gender performativity (12).

Go and get me a tin of Salmon. Canadian. And get some bread and pepper sauce. She said, Go and get it yourself. You not going to start ordering me around, you hear

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler states that (3):

gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed

Hanuman House, where he lives, is a reflection of a slave society. Mr. Biswas's male ego is frequently wounded by Seth. Mr. Biswas doesn't have anything of worth. Owning a house gives Mr. Biswas a sense of importance and helps him discover his own identity, which he never had. He was able to provide for his family, live by his own rules and act in his own best interests rather than that of others. Because he is in control of himself, he will never again need to follow commands from others. Thus, the book gives an analysis of gender roles in Indo-Trinidadian culture as well as a critique of colonialism. Naipaul's portrayal of Mr. Biswas highlights the precariousness of masculine identity, whose gendered self-worth is made unstable by familial expectations and economic dependence on others (4). Mr. Biswas fights tenaciously and unrelentingly against the forces that want to suppress his individuality. Despite his struggle being protracted, he succeeds. After many challenges and setbacks, he eventually achieves his goal of owning a house, which is a remarkable achievement for a man with limited opportunities. A person's continual quest for self-identity is the theme of this book. Naipaul appears to have chosen a happy conclusion for the book, which is why he developed a resolute protagonist who, after several failed attempts in the beginning, eventually acquires a space of

his own. At last, he succeeds in establishing his identity in the society and he desires to leave his children with this legacy. Even though the house is mortgaged and poorly constructed, he feels satisfied that he has got his identity and can satisfy his masculinity. He finally finds his place in a foreign country. The main character of Naipaul's work, Mr. Biswas, continues to fight for his individuality against his destiny and finally proves his destiny wrong by getting a house of his own and getting his identity.

The novel examines the identity crisis issues of Mr Biswas, from childhood to death. The novel's focus is on marginalised people who are seeking identity after being excluded from societies to which they belong (7). Through his personal experiences, Naipaul presents the lives of West Indians and the realities of descendants of bonded labourers, which shows the realities of Trinidad's colonial society. A sense of identity and location was challenging for East Indians in Trinidad at the time. Mr. Biswas, an East Indian descendant living in the West Indies, which was an English colony at that time, is physically in the West Indies and culturally in East India and he looks to find his true identity. *A House for Mr. Biswas* outlines the issues of a distorted and turbulent past and attempts to find true meaning in life. Away from the Hanuman House of the Tulsi family, Mr. Biswas views owning a house as a sign of independence and a place to establish roots. Even his own family views Mr. Biswas as a stranger because he was born with six fingers on his feet, which is a symbol of bad luck. In his own family, he remains a stranger and lives a lonely life because he is viewed as an unlucky boy. Upon reading the novel, it is easy to notice that Naipaul's real-life experience of alienation is identical to that of the fictional protagonist Mohun Biswas. During his stay with Anand, he tells him (12):

I am not your father. God is your father..... I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know

It explains the tumultuous mental state Biswas was experiencing. He was completely unable to form an emotional connection with his family members, which made him feel even more alienated.

In *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Divakaruni explores the relationship between gender, tradition and identity in the Indian diaspora through his protagonist Tilo. In this novel, Divakaruni addresses the issues related to immigration, conflicts between cultures and identity crisis. Tilo is a magical character that helps members of the Indian community in America (15). She is skilled in the art of healing with spices and represents conventional femininity and transgressive strength. Her identity as a "Mistress of Spices" is symbolic of her Indian ancestry,

but she struggles to balance his duties with her aspirations for independence and love. The novel highlights many events that occur in the protagonist's life as she struggles to get her identity in Oakland. Tilottama's attempts to establish her identity are evident in the novel, which draws empathy from the readers (16). Myth and romance are the main themes of the book. The storyline reconstructs a mythological setting where spices are essential to the protagonist's and the immigrants' lives. Divakaruni talks about how traditional roles and cultural expectations have molded women's identities. The internal struggle Tilo has, between her responsibilities as a "Mistress" and her aspirations for self-identity is an illustration of the dilemma that many women face in diasporic cultures, where maintaining cultural identity necessitates self-sacrifice (2). The protagonist of the novel is an immigrant to the United States. Her struggles as a non-local resident for cultural search, have been shown in this novel. The various facets of Tilo's identity are depicted in this book. She was born as Nayan Tara in a small village. After being taken away by the pirates, she was given the name Bhagyavati. When she chooses to make it to the snake island, the snakes give her the name Sarpkanya. She changed her name to Tilottama (Tilo) to become the mistress of spices and finally, she changed her name to Maya. This demonstrates the hidden identities of Tilo, which her clients and others were unaware of.

Through her characters, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni addressed issues of identity exploration. Her novels sensitively address the psychological tensions and hardships faced by their characters (5). She uses a more intricate approach in depicting diasporic identity in *Mistress of Spices*. Divakaruni uses magical realism in this novel that allows Tilo to challenge the struggle between tradition and independence. By rejecting the cultural constraints placed on her and redefining her identity outside of her community's expectations, Tilo's choice to pursue her interests might be viewed as an act of self-liberation. In Oakland, California, Tilo manages a spice bazaar and also has magical abilities, which she uses to treat physical and mental illnesses. In this book, the first-person narrative is used from the viewpoint of Tilo, who has been trained to extract the essence of spices and use them to treat pain, find solutions to issues and improve people's life. Tilo makes an impression on his clients by treating their illness. Despite being an Indian, she establishes her own identity in Oakland and acknowledges Indian culture and heritage by dressing in Indian attire. The name she has chosen reflects the wide range of identities and consciousness she possesses. To reach her final self-destination, she has to make several identity changes. As Tilo says (6):

No. One more thing is mine. My name which is Tilo, short for Tilottama, for I am named after the sun-burnished sesame seed, the spice of nourishment. They do not know this, my customers, nor that earlier I had other names

While performing her role as a Mistress of Spices, she is specifically prohibited from looking in a mirror because a mistress is never allowed to see her reflection after assuming her mystical mistress-body. Through Tilo's mystical identity, Divakaruni offers a "reinterpretation of diasporic womanhood that challenges cultural norms without rejecting heritage" and challenges the constraints of traditional femininity. Tilo is presented as a figure of mixed identity and self-liberation through her relationship with Raven, which symbolises the conflict between cultural commitment and autonomy as an individual. Gender roles are debated in the struggle between tradition and modernity as the novel addresses the dualities of immigrant identity.

### 3. Conclusion

The stories of Mr. Biswas and Tilo, reveal that they are both victims of gender role stereotypes present in society. Mohun Biswas is portrayed as a victim of a patriarchal mindset. Men are always seen as the family's head and are supposed to live a dominating life. He suffers constantly because he is unable to show his male authority over his family, and he believes that having a house of his own will allow him to dominate like a man.

Despite lacking the characteristics of a hero, Mohun Biswas is portrayed as hero of the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. He lacks self-confidence and is constantly fighting to establish his identity and break free from the Tulsi family's matriarchal domination (14). The success and failure of his quest for independence and self-identity will be determined in terms of his house ownership. Mr. Biswas's quest for a house is meant to provide him with a sense of belonging and some freedom. He has been an escapist all his life and when he gets a house of his own, he seems to acquire some identity (9), (10). The novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* is an epic work on the life of the protagonist, Mr. Biswas and his struggles to build his own house that is symbolic of his identity (11). He ultimately purchases a house that is overpriced and in a dilapidated condition and incurs debt. Even though he is satisfied because now his wife and children give respect to him and he could satisfy his male ego there. He is now self-dependent and establishes his own identity which he lacked throughout his life.

Being born as the third girl child in a lower-class family in a small Indian village, Tilo is viewed as a burden by her parents. She is dark-coloured. Her parents think that girls add to their dowry debt. She recounts: "Mr parents' faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girl child and

this one coloured like mud". She never received love and affection from her family. Here, Divakaruni presents the realistic, image of a patriarchal Indian society, which favours boys over girls. Tilo struggles with balancing her aspirations for self-actualization with her responsibilities as a "Mistress". She finds it difficult to realize her goals and aspirations. Tilo establishes her identity the way she wants. She develops her inner strength and uncovers her life's purpose by establishing her own identity. She changes from being Nayan Tara to being Maya. Tilo's life story highlights her quest for self-discovery. Tilo helps his clients deal with drug abuse, racism, generational issues, and abusive husbands. Tilo is a benevolent human being and she values other people's emotions (17). However, she is also motivated by human love and desire. She successfully overcomes that longing and emerges as a compassionate woman to set her identity.

The characters in the selected texts are trying to prove their own identity through different mediums. The writers make an effort to shed light on their characters' psychological and physical issues. Gender roles and self-identity are extensively examined in these selected novels.

### **Acknowledgement**

The author is thankful to the management of Eram Girls Degree College, Lucknow for providing the necessary facilities to carry out the research work.

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