THE DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS OF MR. BISWAS AS THE RESULT OF
INDENTURED SYSTEM AND DISPLACEMENT IN
V.S. NAIPUAL’S A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

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ABSTRACT

Colonialism brings many effects toward people’s life, especially those who have ever become the colonized. One of some psychological effects that are often experienced by the colonized is double consciousness. In V.S. Naipaul’s A House for Mr. Biswas, double consciousness is experienced by the main character named Mr. Biswas. This thesis aims to analyze Mr. Biswas’ double consciousness as an Indian diaspora in Trinidad using double consciousness theory by Homi K. Bhabha. This analysis finds that Mr. Biswas’ double consciousness is caused by indentured labor that deals with displacement or separation toward the colonized from their motherland. As the result, the colonized who experience this double consciousness suffer from the confusing sense about their authentic identity.

Keywords: Diaspora; Displacement; Double Consciousness; Indentured System; Slavery

1. Introduction

Colonialism began in the late fifteen century until the early twentieth century by the Europeans. It was based on 3G Goal that was glorified by the European to conquer the world. The 3G stands for gold, glory, and gospel. Gold means the purpose to get money and wealthy; glory means the purpose to get power, while gospel aims to spread the major belief of Europe, Christianity. To embody this 3G goal, the Europeans traveled around the world by sailing until they found other continent named Asia and Africa that they considered as ‘the new world’ or ‘new land’. Then, the European got the new land as their colony.

Since the new land contains with abundant natural sources, the colonizers exploit the sources and get the colonized as their slaves. During the slavery, the colonized work with indentured system that is identical with migration. This migration causes the existence of a population so-called diaspora in the new land. According to Tyson in Critical Theory Today, diaspora is a population of the colonized descendants who are separated from their native homeland (421). Meanwhile the adjectives are ‘diasporic’ and ‘diasporan’, which designate an attribute or modality (Brubaker 4). Usually, the diasporic people experience a confusing sense about their identity that is called double consciousness or double vision.

According to Homi K. Bhabha in The Location of Culture, double consciousness or double vision is the field of the ‘true’ emerges as a visible sign of authority only after the regulatory and displacing division of the true and the false (120). It means that double consciousness is the issue that relates to image as the sign of authenticity by means of the negotiation for displacement. The ‘true’ emerge in Bhabha’s statement reflects the surface appearance or image to show the authentic side of an identity. Double consciousness does not only appear in the real world of the colonized, but also in literary work, especially those that are included in postcolonial literature. A House for Mr. Biswas is one of some great postcolonial novels that ever exists. This novel was published in 1961 and won Nobel Prize in 2001. In A House for Mr. Biswas, Naipaul represents double consciousness through the psychological condition of Mr. Biswas, the main character who becomes the victim of colonization. As an Indian diaspora in Trinidad, Mr. Biswas perceives kind of dilemmatic sense about his identity. This dilemmatic sense toward self is what in postcolonial criticism called double consciousness. Thus, this study aims to uncover the existence of double consciousness in Mr. Biswas’ life and how the character deals with that postcolonial issue.

2. Analysis

The double consciousness that is experienced by Mr. Biswas is the result of slavery that deals with displacement. As a descendant of colonized who lives in diasporic population in Trinidad, Mr. Biswas feels
like being trapped between two different cultures, one of Indian native culture and the other of the new mixed culture of Trinidad. This transformation makes Mr. Biswas to experience double consciousness since he cannot decide which culture really he belongs to.

2.1 Indentured System and Displacement: the Impact of Double Consciousness

As what has been explained in the previous discussion, the colonizers need to exploit the natural source of the colonized land in order to get profit and wealth as what has declared in the 3G goal. However, they do not want to do some hard jobs such as plantation and harvesting. Thus, they get the colonized or the indigenous people as their slave to do the hard work.

Slavery is “a relationship in which one person is controlled by violence through violence, the threat of violence, or psychological coercion has lost free will and free movement, is exploited economically, and paid nothing beyond subsistence” (Bales 1). It often contains violent activity toward the natives since they are exploited.

Slavery has big role to cause double consciousness, since it relates to migration and displacement toward the colonized. The displacement happens as the result of indentured system. According to Karen Harris in Sugar and Gold: Indentured Indian and Chinese Labour in South Africa, the concept ‘indenture’ amounts to an individual being bound to work according to a prescribed contract (1). Meanwhile according to the University of Calgary’s Online Source in The Impact of Indentured Labours, indentured labour is “the practice of binding individual workers to a set of service in a specific country for any employer who would purchase his or her contract of indenture” (‘Introduction’ par. 1). It means that the indentured labours work for the colonizers without being paid and they are sent to another country that is far from their motherland as what has been declared in the contract. Therefore, many indentured labours experience displacement.

In his work, Homi K. Bhabha also adds that double consciousness relates to the practice of cultural displacement. He states that “In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.” (9)

In other words, displacement leads the colonized into dilemmatic feeling about their own identity since they cannot decide which one they are in; in the original native identity or in the new one which they get in the new land. This in-between condition is what Bhabha calls double consciousness.

Caribbean Islands is one of some destinations to send Asian and African indentured labours. Since the indentured labours and their descendant are separated away from their native country and cannot go back, they live in the new land, marry, and have descendant so-called diaspora. Theses diasporic people often experience double consciousness, as what happens to Mr. Biswas.

As a diasporic character, Mr. Biswas experiences double consciousness because physically, he is an Indian. However culturally, he lives in Trinidad. In Trinidad, he has to adapt with the new culture that is different from his native. Moreover, in his neighbourhood, diasporic people do not always come from the same original place, but also from another place such as Africa, China, etc. Thus, the culture of Trinidad is more complicated than India and this condition oppresses Mr. Biswas to feel confuse about his authentic identity.

The double consciousness that is experienced by Mr. Biswas as the result of displacement relates to Bhabha’s other statement: “the liminal point of this ideological displacement is the turning of the differentiated spatial boundary, the ‘outside’, into the authenticating ‘inward’ time of Tradition” (159). It means that displacement or separation toward some people from their homeland often leads the people to feel the unstable sense about their authentic identity since they can not decide which culture they belong to. Moreover, it is difficult to combine their native identity with the new one they get in the new place they dwell, as what happens to Mr. Biswas who gets some difficulties when he tries to be both Indian and Trinidadian. Therefore, Mr. Biswas keeps being drifted by this double consciousness.

2.2 Mr. Biswas’ Double Consciousness

As what has been explained in the previous discussion, slavery with indentured system often leads the colonized to suffer double consciousness since this activity is identical with displacement.

Double consciousness can be found in the characterization of Mr. Biswas. As Indian diaspora, Mr. Biswas’s life cannot be separated from colonial issue. Since he has ever been colonized person, colonialism affects his life a lot. Living in diasporic population makes him realizes that it is difficult to find the patent
identity of diasporic because they live in the mixed culture society. Moreover, the new culture of Trinidad is influenced by western culture. Therefore, he experiences double consciousness since there are two cultures that he lives in; Indian native culture and Trinidadian mixed culture.

2.3 Mr. Biswas’ Unstable Sense

Mr. Biswas unstable sense about his identity is represented in his dilemma when he wants to write a story about superhero.

“Sometimes his hero had a Hindi name; then he was short and unattractive and poor, and surrounded by ugliness, which was anatomized in bitter detail. Sometimes his hero had a Western name; he was then faceless, but tall and broad-shouldered; he was a reporter and moved in a world derived from the novels Mr. Biswas had read and the films he had seen.” (166)

His confusion about the cultural background of the hero reflects Mr. Biswas’ unstable sense about his identity. On one hand, he believes that he is destined as an Indian. Yet on the other hand, he is drifted in the new culture that is influenced by western colonization. The term faceless that is also mentioned above reflects Mr. Biswas’ feeling of being trapped between two different cultures and torn from both the cultures. The hero itself seems like representing Mr. Biswas’ own self as a hero in his life story. Moreover, the conflict that the hero gets similar with Mr. Biswas’ problem as a diasporic person such as being trapped in a family that he does not like, losing his freedom and authentic identity, and others as follows.

“None of these stories was finished, and their theme was always the same. The hero, trapped into marriage, burdened with a family, his youth gone, meets a young girl. She is slim, almost thin, and dressed in white. She is fresh, tender, unkissed; and she is unable to bear children.” (166)

Another unstable sense of Mr. Biswas to the mixed culture in Trinidad is reflected in his sentence when he quarrels with his son, Anand, at the moment the boy asks him for money to go to London Theatre.

Mr. Biswas said, “When you get to my age you wouldn’t care for Westerns.”

Anand lost his temper. “When I get to your age I don’t want to be like you.” (223)

This conversation reveals Mr. Biswas’ confusion about the complicated culture of diasporic population that has made his identity becomes ambiguous and unclear.

From here, it can be stated that Mr. Biswas’ double consciousness is influenced by the practice of displacement that causes him to live in the cultural environment which is different from his native Indian culture. Besides, the impossibility to reborn the native culture of diaspora leads them to adapt with the new culture of the new land they inhabit.

2.4 Quest for Authentic Identity

Double consciousness often leads a person who experiences it into the unstable senses about his original identity. According to Tyson, “double consciousness often produced an unstable sense of self, which was heightened by the forced migration colonialism frequently caused, for example, from the rural farm or village to the city in search of employment” (421).

In A House for Mr. Biswas, the displacement that is experienced by Mr. Biswas leads him into the unstable sense of identity. Mr. Biswas, who is separated from his original country, realizes that naturally, he is born as Indian, but culturally, he is a Trinidadian. It is difficult for him to reanimate Indian culture in Trinidad. On other side, living in Trinidad, in which the culture is complicated as the result of many people’s migration, is hard to be practiced since he needs to adapt firstly. Therefore, it is difficult for Mr. Biswas to find his genuine identity; whether he is Indian, Trinidadian, or even English.

This unstable sense makes him to be curious about his valid identity. He wants to belong to one authentic culture even though he knows it is hard for him to reach the goal among the complex cultures of diasporic population.

“For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis.” (18)

The term wanderer in the description above represents how Mr. Biswas wants to have one place or one obvious identity. Besides, thirty-five years is not a short duration for searching. In other words, Mr. Biswas’ struggle shows how belonging to one valid culture and having one genuine identity is important for him.
The description above ensures Mr. Biswas’ desire about belonging to one valid culture. As a person who is identical with migration, Mr. Biswas’ life cannot be separated from cross cultural interaction. He has experienced being brought to another place that is culturally different from his ancestor’s culture as the result of that interaction. During that cultural interaction, he is influenced by the circumstance around him (in this case the culture of the places he lives in). When he experiences being the colonized, he is influenced by the colonizer’s culture such as going to school to get formal education. In another circumstance, when he experiences of being diasporic person, he is influenced by the culture of the new land such as speaking in non-standard English. Therefore, it is difficult for Mr. Biswas to go back to basic as the pure native Indian because he is affected by the practice of colonial cross culture.

Besides causing double consciousness, displacement also causes the person who experiences it to miss the homeland. This condition is also represented in Mr. Biswas’ feeling when he sees his mother Bipti works in the garden.

“In the setting sun, the sad dusk, with Bipti working in a garden that looked, for a moment, like a garden he had known a dark time ago, the intervening years fell away. Thereafter the marks of a fork in earth made him think of that moment at the top of the hill, and of Bipti.” (205)

The event above is the reflection of Mr. Biswas’ longing to his native country, India. By remembering Bipti and the garden, he is brought to the past in which at the time, he feels that he is an Indian. This longing to the history is the evidence that Mr. Biswas still feels belonging to Indian’s culture.

However, on other side, Mr. Biswas also feels that he belongs to the new culture of Trinidad because technically, he lives over there in the present and future. Moreover, he has experienced the process of ‘being civilized’ for the colonized by the colonizer such as getting formal education in school. His interest in knowledge leads him to be civilized rapidly and automatically makes him to be different from other diasporic children.

“Mr. Biswas was taught other things. He learned to say the Lord’s Prayer in Hindi from the King George V Hindi Reader, and he learned many English poems by heart from the Royal Reader… [In] arithmetic he got as far as simple interest and learned to turn dollars and cents into pounds, shilling and pence.” (21)

This school experience makes Mr. Biswas different from the common prototype of Indian that is often considered as uneducated, uncivilized, and illiterate. He happens to be a different Indian who is capable of reading and writing in his young age.

“And it was through this association that Mr. Biswas discovered his gift for lettering…”

[D]uring an arithmetic test one day, finding himself with an astronomical number of hours in answer to a problem about cisterns, he wrote CANCELLED very neatly across the page and became absorbed in blocking the letters and shadowing them.” (21)

This unusual gift that Mr. Biswas gets as an educated man also brings him to one important point of his life, becoming a journalist of Sentinel, a Trinidadian newspaper that is printed in English. This profession strengthens Mr. Biswas’ difference from other people like him and makes his real identity becomes more complicated than just as the usual diasporic person. Besides, he tries to find his genuine identity as Indian Trinidadian by doing this job.

This job also influences Mr. Biswas’ identity and makes his son, Anand, sees him as the different person from other people. Anand’s perception about his father’s different personality is reflected in his pride of Mr. Biswas’ profession as journalist when he tells his friend in school about that job.

“This, a new school game, had spread even to the exhibition class… [A]nand, who had read in an American newspaper that “journalist” was a pompous word, had said that his father was a reporter; which, though not grand, was unimpeachable.” (211)

Anand’s amazement toward his father’s specialty becomes the trigger that pushes Mr. Biswas to teach his children any knowledge that many diasporic people do not understand. Further, Mr. Biswas tries to convince Anand that being clever is precious. This effort is represented in the hegemony that he plants to the boy’s mind that being uneducated as the Tulsi is big mistake.

“Anand, look at the back of my hands. No hair. The sign of an advanced race, boy. And look at yours. No hair either. But you never know. With some of your mother’s bad blood flowing in your veins you could wake up one morning and find yourself hairy like a monkey.” (169)
This attempt is done by Mr. Biswas to save his children from being uncivilized. The usage of such terms as bad blood and monkey represent the unsophisticated behavior of the Tulsis. Therefore, he teaches his children any knowledge that will be useful for their future.

When two of his children, Anand and Savi get scholarship and go to London, he is so eager and motivates the children to not miss this amazing opportunity. This effort seems like becoming one way that is used by Mr. Biswas’ to find his genuine identity as the different diaspora that is free from the image of the oppressed and unsophisticated colonized.

His pride toward Anand and Savi is reflected in his tough feeling when he is sick and left by those children.

“Except the children. Suddenly the world opened for them. Savi got a scholarship and went abroad. Two years later Anand got a scholarship and went to England. The prospects of repaying the debt receded. But Mr. Biswas felt he could wait:” (280)

For Mr. Biswas, it does not really matter if he is sick without being accompanied by his beloved children since the important thing for him is the happiness and also the pride that the children will get from that scholarship program. Mr. Biswas does not want his children to experience double consciousness about their identities just like he does. Thus, he pushes the children to study abroad because he is sure the effort can help them to find their genuine identity that is free from common perception of diaspora as the oppressed group.

Before Mr. Biswas dies, the double consciousness still affect his psychological condition because he still can not find his authentic identity. This phenomenon is reflected in his controversial handwriting in the “Sentinel” that he writes when he is dying.

“One of the first stories Mr. Biswas had written for the Sentinel had been about a dead explorer. The Sentinel was then a boisterous paper and he had written a grotesque story, which he had often later regretted.” (281)

The interesting point of this effort is Mr. Biswas’ chosen story about the explorer. The explorer here is the representation of his own self as someone who keeps looking for his authentic identity. During the journey or the quest, he has done some attempts to find and build the identity including being the outcast that is different from the common people as himself. However, until the end of the journey, the goal still can not be reached because the culture that he tries to build is hard to be embodied as the result of displacement and the complicated culture of the place he lives in.

Another interesting thing that is done by Mr. Biswas before his death is his request about the news of his death in the “Sentinel”.

“He had tried to lessen his guilt by thinking that the explorer’s relations were unlikely to read the Sentinel. He had also said that when his own death was reported he would like the headline to be ROVING REPORTER PASSES ON.” (281)

This will is attractive because it seems like Mr. Biswas wants to show the world that he has tried to find his genuine identity even though that effort brings no result for him. The term Roving Reporter Passes On seems like representing Mr. Biswas’ feeling about his ambiguous identity and how it is hard for diasporic person as him to find and build the obvious identity.

3. Conclusion

Colonialism leads the colonized to experience some psychological effect as the result of the colonizers’ oppression toward them. Slavery with indentured system is the example of the colonizers’ oppression toward the native. It relates with displacement to the native from their motherland as the effect of the prescribed contract of the indentured system or labor. This displacement forces the colonized to experience double consciousness or double vision since they are trapped between two different cultures; their native culture and the new culture of the new place they dwell. Double consciousness produces the confusing sense about the authentic identity. In A House for Mr. Biswas, the double consciousness that is experienced by the character happens as the result of displacement. The displacement leads Mr. Biswas to look for his obvious identity that is free from any oppression that causes his double consciousness.

4. References


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