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2026**RESEARCH ARTICLE****UNDERSTANDING SELF-ACTUALIZATION THROUGH A DIASPORIC LENS:
A STUDY OF V. S. NAIPAUL'S NOVEL *A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS*****Dr. Padma Nath Sharma***Associate Professor, Department of English, Sibsagar Commerce College, Assam.*E-mail: pn_sharma@yahoo.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13213>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

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Migration is a phenomenon as old as human civilization itself. Across centuries, people have moved from one place to another in response to climate, subsistence needs, economic opportunities, and political or social compulsions. Yet migration invariably involves loss—of community, homeland, and cultural rootedness. The longing for one's place of origin, its landscape, and social bonds often persists across generations, regardless of distance or success achieved in the host land. Literary representations of diaspora foreground the psychological and emotional consequences of such movements, particularly experiences of displacement, marginalization, fractured identity, and the persistent search for belonging.

V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* powerfully captures these concerns through the life of Mohun Biswas, a second-generation Indo-Trinidadian negotiating cultural hybridity and colonial marginality. This paper examines the novel through the combined lenses of diaspora studies and Abraham Maslow's concept of self-actualization. It argues that Biswas's lifelong quest for a house represents a deeply ironic and qualified form of self-actualization—one shaped by displacement, dependency, and postcolonial constraints. In the context of contemporary global migration and identity debates, the selected novel remains strikingly relevant.

Keywords : *Diaspora, Rootlessness, Hybridity, Identity Crisis, Self-Actualization, Displacement.*

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INTRODUCTION

The term *diaspora* derives from the Ancient Greek *diaspeirein*, meaning "to scatter" or "to disperse." Historically, it referred to the dispersal of the Jewish people from ancient Israel following the Babylonian captivity and Roman conquests. In contemporary usage, however, the term has expanded to describe the dispersion of communities across multiple geographical locations, often accompanied by the maintenance of cultural, emotional, or symbolic ties to an ancestral homeland.

Within literary discourse, diaspora is understood as a condition marked by displacement, exile, and the experience of inhabiting cultural and geographical in-between spaces. Diasporic literature frequently addresses themes such as cultural hybridity, nostalgia, alienation, marginalization, identity fragmentation, and the search for belonging. The issues such as forced dispersion, dislocation, guilt, re-rooting etc also come to foreplay through memoirs of displaced writers in fiction and poetry. Diasporic narratives are informed by sociology, postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and anthropology, reflecting the complexity of migrant identities in transnational contexts. The term has broadened significantly since its biblical origins to encompass global migration experiences.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

William Safran is one the pioneering figures and theorists who provided the modern definition of Diaspora in his 1991 article *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*. Safran identifies a set of recurring features associated with diasporic communities, including geographical

dispersal, the preservation of collective memory, a sense of estrangement within host societies, and an enduring attachment to an imagined homeland. Safran's work is foundational for delimiting "diaspora" beyond the metaphor because it marked a pivotal moment in shifting diaspora from a term primarily associated with the Jewish historical experience to a broader, comparative social-scientific concept applicable to many contemporary migrant communities. It helped legitimize diaspora as a serious academic topic and igniting consciousness across generations and influenced discussions of transnationalism, nationalism, and political behavior. The work became a catalyst for kick starting diaspora studies as an interdisciplinary field and providing enduring criteria for understanding dispersed communities' identities, myths, and ties to homelands. It also became essential reading in migration, transnational, and postcolonial studies.

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Robin Cohen further expanded and refined Safran's model in his influential work *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. Cohen extends Safran's model by offering a more inclusive and comparative framework, proposing a typology that distinguishes Diasporas according to historical causes, patterns of movement, and cultural outcomes. He introduced victim diasporas (forced dispersal through persecution, exile, or slavery e.g., Jewish, African, Armenian), Labor diasporas (e.g., indentured Indian



or Chinese workers). Imperial diasporas (e.g., British settlers in colonies), Trade diasporas (e.g., Lebanese merchants) & Cultural diasporas (e.g., modern examples driven by globalization). This classification by Cohen took diaspora studies from a narrow, homeland-centric view to one that accounts for diverse origins, voluntary/involuntary movements, and hybrid identities.

James Clifford in his significant essay *Diasporas* critiqued Safran's homeland-centric view and instead argued for multi-locale, non-territorial understandings (e.g., lateral connections, ambivalence about return), drawing on examples from the black Atlantic and medieval Geniza networks.

Paul Gilroy in his important work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* introduced the "black Atlantic" as a counterculture of modernity. He explored how African diaspora through slavery produced hybrid cultural forms (music, politics, memory) that challenged Eurocentric modernity.

Avtar Brah in his *Cartographies of Diaspora* focused on South Asian migration to the UK, emphasizing "diaspora space" as intersectional (gender, race, class) and relational rather than fixed origins.

Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, third space, and mimicry as mentioned in his seminal book *The Location of Culture* are central to diaspora literary analysis, especially in cultural in-betweenness.

There are many other notable contributors to Diaspora studies. It includes names such as Khachig

Tölölyan, the founding editor of *Diaspora* journal, Vijay Mishra (on Indian indentured labor), Stuart Hall (cultural identity in diaspora), Salman Rushdie (Magical realism on postcolonial India and migration & explores hybrid identities and cultural clash), V.S. Naipaul (Identity and rootlessness), Jhumpa Lahiri (Generational conflict and cultural dislocation), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Race, migration, Biafran war and diaspora implications), Junot Díaz (Dominican diaspora, fukú curse, identity in US), Zadie Smith (Multicultural London, immigrant families, hybridity), Edwidge Danticat (Haitian diaspora, trauma, and family), Kiran Desai (Global migration, class, and postcolonial legacies), Amitav Ghosh (Memory, borders, transnational connections, indentured labor diaspora) etc. All these writers and theorists highlight diaspora as both lived experience and critical lens, often intersecting with postcolonialism and globalization.

American psychologist Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper "*A Theory of Human Motivation*" and later expanded in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality* explained about human motivation as driven by a hierarchy of needs which is arranged in a pyramid-like structure. Maslow's central proposition is that human motivation operates progressively, with immediate survival needs taking precedence over psychological growth and self-fulfillment. Needs lower in the hierarchy are prepotent (stronger and more urgent) and must be reasonably satisfied (not necessarily 100%) before higher needs become dominant motivators. However, people can pursue multiple needs simultaneously to some degree. The hierarchy depicted as a pyramid with five levels, from bottom (most basic) to top includes Physiological



needs (Base of the pyramid) which includes Biological survival requirements: air, food, water, shelter, clothing, sleep, warmth, reproduction), and homeostasis. If not met (e.g., starvation), these dominate motivation and the higher needs fade. The second one is Safety needs, which includes security, stability, health, employment, property, protection from harm and freedom from fear/anxiety. Once physiological needs are met, people seek predictability and safety (e.g., job security, safe housing, financial stability). This is followed by love and belonging needs (Social Needs) which includes Emotional relationships, friendships, intimacy, family, sense of connection, affection, and belonging to groups. Loneliness or isolation can block progress here. Then there is Esteem needs divided into Self-esteem (confidence, achievement, independence, mastery) and respect from others (status, recognition, prestige). If not met, esteem needs lead to feelings of inferiority or low self-worth.

The Self-Actualization need is top of the pyramid and the highest level. It is the desire to realize one's full potential, achieve personal growth, pursue purpose, creativity, peak experiences, and become the best version of one self. Maslow defined it as:

"It refers to the person's desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially."

In other words it means "What a man *can* be, he *must* be." Self-actualized people are self-aware, autonomous, creative, problem-centered, accept themselves/others, have peak experiences, and live authentically with a sense of purpose. Maslow estimated this level is rare — only about 1–2% of people fully reach it consistently. Maslow studied

historical figures such as Einstein, Lincoln, Roosevelt and contemporaries that he considered self-actualised. The common traits that he observed are realistic perception of reality, acceptance of self and others, spontaneity, creativity, and problem-solving focus, autonomy and independence, deep & meaningful relationships, peak experiences and the sense of humor, humility, and ethical values. Maslow's theory views humans as inherently motivated toward growth and fulfillment. Self-actualization is the ultimate drive not the perfection, but becoming everything one is capable of being — once foundational needs are sufficiently met. It remains influential in psychology, education, management, and personal development.

Bruce King's book *V.S. Naipaul* is a comprehensive and critical introduction to V.S. Naipaul's life, novels, and non-fiction works. The book provides an analysis of his works and traces Naipaul's evolution as a writer. King examines structure, themes, significance, and artistic growth in early works (*The Mystic Masseur*, *Miguel Street*, *A House for Mr. Biswas*) and later how he progressed to bleaker explorations of alienation, displacement, and postcolonial realities in the wider world (*The Mimic Men*, *In a Free State*, *A Bend in the River*, *The Enigma of Arrival*). A central argument is that Naipaul creatively modified Western and Indian literary forms to suit the West Indies' cultural context, then expanded them globally. This adaptation enabled him to become an international writer whose works address universal themes of identity, rootlessness, and cultural fragmentation through a diasporic perspective. The book also addresses Naipaul's controversial aspects such as criticisms of his views on postcolonial societies,



accusations of elitism or lack of sympathy etc. without being overly defensive or accusatory. King explains Naipaul's development from Trinidadian comedy to global critique, including his Nobel lecture "Two Worlds" in 2001 where Naipaul reflects on his career as the "sum" of his books. Thus, King's study portrays Naipaul as a transformative figure who bridged colonial and postcolonial worlds through rigorous observation and literary innovation, while acknowledging the debates surrounding his unflinching depictions of societies in transition.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a significant diasporic text.
- To analyze the novel as a narrative of second-generation diaspora.
- To explore themes of identity, rootlessness, and resistance to romanticized notions of diaspora.
- To interpret self-actualization through psychological and postcolonial perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical method to textual analysis, drawing on postcolonial and diasporic theoretical frameworks. Secondary sources, including books and journal articles, have been used to contextualize and support the analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In diasporic narratives, self-actualization emerges as an ongoing struggle for autonomy, authentic selfhood, and psychological fulfillment, often shaped by displacement, cultural hybridity, and social marginalization. As Maslow's hierarchy of needs

suggest that self-actualization comes after basic physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem needs are at least partially met. In diasporic contexts, however, this journey of self-actualization is very rarely straightforward. Migration frequently blocks lower-level needs making self-actualization both harder to reach and more meaningful when it is achieved.

The novel *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) by V.S. Naipaul chronologically structures the life of Mr. Mohun Biswas, a second-generation Indo-Trinidadian man born to indentured Indian immigrants in colonial Trinidad from his birth till death. Born in rural Trinidad and under ominous astrological predictions that he would be a "*lecher and a spendthrift*" who would "*eat up his father's substance and die in misery*", Biswas enters a world of poverty and cultural limbo as the son of indentured Indian laborers' descendants. His father's early death leaves the family destitute, forcing young Biswas into precarious living arrangements—first with relatives, then as an apprentice sign-painter. He experiences repeated displacement, living as a "guest" in others' homes. A traumatic childhood event of accidental burning of a doll reinforces feelings of inadequacy and fear. He briefly attends school but drops out, taking menial jobs like shop assistant and overseer. These early years of Biswas highlight the rootlessness in the Indo-Trinidadian diaspora when they were torn between ancestral Indian traditions and colonial Trinidadian realities preventing fulfillment of basic physiological and safety needs as described in Maslow's lower hierarchy levels. He shows early signs of intellectual curiosity and a desire to define himself beyond his "ill-fated" label. This defiance of



predetermined destiny is a core self-actualizing impulse i.e. refusing to accept imposed identity.

Moreover, sign-painting becomes his outlet for creativity and self-expression as he takes pride in his work though it is of modest nature. It becomes his first real effort for autonomy by living alone and earning his own living and controlling his space.

"And it was through this association that Mr Biswas discovered his gift for lettering. When Alec tired of doing inaccurate erotic drawings he designed letters. Mr Biswas imitated these with pleasure and growing success." (Part 1, Chapter 2: Before the Tulsis)

Though short-lived, it reveals an emerging drive for self-reliance. He dreams of stability and status, reading voraciously to expand his mind and envision a larger life. This restlessness and refusal to conform fully to family or community expectations foreshadow his lifelong quest for personal significance. He outbursts to his mother Bipti after mistreatment by relative Bhandat, crystallizing his early rebellion and declaration of intent for autonomy and ownership.

"Why do you keep on sending me to stay with other people. I am going to get a job of my own. And am going to get my own house too. I am finished with this." (Part 1, Chapter 2: Before the Tulsis)

It is the indication of initial phase of self-actualization: the assertion of an individual ego against collective or fatalistic pressures. This phase marks an early attempt at self-support and skill-building, aligning with Maslow's idea of realizing potential through competence and achievement.

The second phase of Mr Biswas' journey, the "Tulsi phase" begins from Mr Biswas's impulsive marriage to Shama, his immersion in the vast, matriarchal Tulsi household at Hanuman House, and his various attempts to live independently while still tied to the family represents the most intense period of suppressed and frustrated self-actualization. Here, self-actualization manifests not as fulfillment but as a prolonged, often comic and pathetic struggle against erasure, dependence, and communal domination. The marriage in the Tulsi family modeled on traditional Indo-Caribbean joint-family structures offers him material security of food, shelter, jobs in the family enterprises but at the steep cost of loss of autonomy and identity fragmentation. The Marriage thrusts Biswas into a system where sons-in-law are marginal: economically dependent and nameless and they are simply expected to conform. He loses control over basic decisions such as his children's names, his work and even his sleeping arrangements often separate from Shama. This dependence blocks lower Maslovian needs (esteem, belonging) and makes higher self-actualization — authentic self-expression, creativity, purpose — nearly impossible. Biswas feels trapped:

"The world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He felt trapped." (Part 1, Chapter 3)

His earlier intellectual curiosity and rebellious spirit are also reduced to petty resentments and daydreams.

In such a situation, there is an inner rebellion which is the core of self actualization. Biswas's drive toward self-actualization persists through defiant and often absurd acts of resistance. He Joins the Aryans to advocate women's education, conversion, and



abolition of caste/child marriage, the kind of ideas that directly challenge Tulsi orthodoxy and provoke family outrage. He Nicknames family members mockingly as "the old queen," "the big boss," "holy ghost" etc and spread gossip to undermine their authority. He also gets involved in petty revenges, like spitting in Bhandat's rum or writing defiant notes on official documents such as insisting on "Lakshmi" as Savi's real name on the birth certificate. There are also repeated verbal threats to leave or demands for promised independence, for instance, he says, "*when I get what you promised, I will leave*". Through all these acts he tries to assert his individuality which stems from a deep-seated need to be seen as more than "just somebody" or a disposable son-in-law.

There are other events in the story such as moving to The Chase with Shama to run a shop or building the ill-fated house at Green Vale or taking jobs outside Tulsi control for instance, as a driver or later journalist, all of which are nothing but attempts at escape and partial Independence symbolizing bursts toward self-actualization. Each escape reinforces his restlessness. The entire Hanuman House, described as an "*alien white fortress*" with its rigid hierarchy, collective routines, and matriarchal control under Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, functions as a microcosm of colonial-era communalism that stifles personal growth. The self-actualization process here is dialectical i.e. defined by opposition to the Tulsis rather than positive achievement. It is also incomplete and ironic. In diasporic terms, the Tulsi phase illustrates how communal structures transplanted from India and adapted in colonial Trinidad can both protect and imprison the individual. Biswas' persistent, flawed striving against

them embodies the diasporic quest for authentic selfhood amid cultural hybridity and postcolonial fragmentation: not a smooth ascent to Maslow's peak, but a grinding, lifelong negotiation of identity through resistance.

Biswas achieves a bittersweet form of self-actualization late in life, realizing potential through persistence rather than perfection. In his final years, he buys a house on Sikkim Street which was a rundown, debt-financed property bought impulsively after a night time viewing that hides its flaws. Though shabby and burdensome, it represents his long-sought independence from the Tulsis and a personal space. Owning the house grants dignity, respect from Shama, and a legacy for his children. He sees his children's education and Anand's success abroad as extension of his aspirations. On his deathbed, Biswas reflects with quiet satisfaction—he has "*lived to see his children educated*" and escaped total rootlessness.

However, his Self-actualization is incomplete and ironic as we find the house is flawed, debt-ridden, and temporary. Naipaul portrays it not as transcendent fulfillment but as "qualified survival"—a hard-won, imperfect autonomy amid postcolonial fragmentation. Biswas reaches Maslow's peak, that is, creativity via writing, morality in persistence, and acceptance of facts but within constraints of poverty and cultural displacement. Through a diasporic lens, Biswas's arc redefines self-actualization: not heroic triumph, but resilient negotiation of hybrid identity, where owning a flawed home symbolizes resistance to erasure and partial reclaiming of selfhood in a fragmented world. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul illustrates self-actualization not as



transcendent fulfillment but as a fraught, diasporic negotiation of identity, where Biswas's quest for a home symbolizes resistance to colonial fragmentation and cultural hybridity.

The last and final phase which is primarily the Epilogue and closing sections of Part 2 following the move to the house on Sikkim Street in Port of Spain represents the partial, bittersweet culmination of Mohun Biswas's lifelong quest for self-actualization. This phase marks the achievement of his central symbol of autonomy — owning a house — after decades of dependence on the Tulsi family, failed escapes (The Chase, Green Vale, Shorthills), and other marginal jobs. The house on Sikkim Street embodies his hard-won claim to personal space, identity, and dignity in a postcolonial, diasporic world marked by rootlessness and marginality. The house becomes the tangible realization of Biswas's lifelong drive to escape being "*unnecessary and unaccommodated*." In his illness, he repeatedly marvels at the "audacity" of having his own space — walking through his gate, barring entry, closing doors, wandering rooms freely — after a life of shuttling between others' houses. This marks a shift from reactive rebellion to quiet possession, that is, self-actualization through securing a physical and psychological "center." There is also relational triumph and new loyalty which he finds in his wife Shama. From Tulsi matriarchy to Biswas and their children, it is described as a "*triumph almost as big as the acquiring of his own house*." Away from her mother and sisters, she expresses loyalty without shame, allowing Biswas to feel respected as head of household. This relational growth of esteem and love

needs are more fully met and supports his inner fulfillment.

Although, the house bought by him is poorly built, heavily mortgaged, and brings financial ruin rather than prosperity. Yet in his final months, amid illness and despair, he experiences profound wonder at his accomplishment, reflecting a hard-earned sense of agency, belonging, and purpose. The lines in the novel encapsulate the ironic victory: modest, flawed, but meaningful defiance.

"In the scheme of his life, tragic as it was, his house was his one source of triumph. [...] It had been the triumph of the little man over his oppressors."

The final phase redefines self-actualization as an ongoing, imperfect negotiation not erasing hybridity or alienation, but carving out a viable self through persistence. Biswas dies "unaccommodated" in debt & illness, yet he achieves partial transcendence: a house, a loyal family nucleus, and a legacy of independence. Naipaul's ending is poignant rather than celebratory, emphasizing the cost and value of individual striving in a fragmented postcolonial world. Moreover, Self-actualization here is not triumphant or complete, Naipaul presents it as ambivalent, ironic, and limited — a fragile victory shadowed by debt, illness, failure, and impending death. Biswas, the protagonist, achieves a degree of independence and self-definition to some extent but at a great cost.

CONCLUSION

A House for Mr. Biswas ultimately redefines self-actualization within the constraints of diaspora and postcolonial marginality. Through Mohun Biswas's lifelong struggle for a home, Naipaul exposes the



inadequacy of idealized models of fulfillment when applied to displaced and historically marginalized subjects. It is this incompleteness that renders his journey significant. Again, when viewed through a diasporic lens, self-actualization emerges not as the realization of unlimited potential but as the hard-won assertion of agency against forces of erasure—colonial domination, communal conformity, and cultural dislocation. Biswas's house symbolizes a fragile but meaningful center in a life otherwise defined by transience. Naipaul thus suggests that rather than emerging through transcendence, diasporic selfhood is forged through persistence, resistance, and carefully negotiated forms of belonging. In foregrounding this qualified victory, the novel offers a profoundly human vision of self-actualization shaped by history, displacement, and the enduring desire to matter.

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