

## **“Home” and “Homelessness” in African-Diasporan Literature**

***Julia Udofia, Ph. D***

*Department of English*

*University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria*

*E-mail: dr\_udofia@yahoo.com*

### **Abstract**

The motif of “home” and “homelessness” seems to be a recurrent one in African-Diasporan literature, especially, the literature of the Caribbean. The historical dislocation of the Islands, coupled with the cultural and racial diversity of the area has given rise to what can be referred to as a plural society. The result is the creation of the formless, casual society with haphazard standards and the emergence of the confused, unaccommodated man. The fragmented nature of the society gives the West Indian an acute sense of “homelessness” and is best described as paradoxical since it insists on roots and rootlessness; “home” and “homelessness” at the same time. This motif of “home” and “homelessness”; the predicament of the nomadic society and individual, the wanderer in space and time who can find no anchorage is therefore, discussed in this paper.

## Introduction

“Home” and “homelessness” seems to be a recurrent motif in African-Diasporan literature, especially the literature of the Caribbean. This can be attributed to the peculiar history of that place which some scholars see as definitive and irrevocable. Besides the accidental nature of the “discovery” of the area and the brutal mode of occupation and violence among the colonizing forces, there was also the problem of racial and cultural diversity of the area. With the exception of the indigenous Indian population which was largely swiftly exterminated, the inhabitants of the Caribbean either migrated or were forcibly transported there, which is why John Figueroa (1970) remarks that the mixture of the people making up the West Indies is remarkable, for as the history of the world goes, nowhere else, (except, perhaps, the U.S.) have Africans, Asians, Amerindians, Europeans and every possible mixture of these come together to form a new people, thus, giving rise to a multi-cultural or plural society.

And so, with this conglomeration of people of different races and religious beliefs and with different motives of being in the Caribbean, it was difficult to create a common Caribbean ethos, especially, given the fundamental inequalities created by the institution of slavery. The result was the creation of the formless, casual society with haphazard standards and the emergence of the confused, unaccommodated man who is helpless and cast in a sterile and unfriendly landscape. Gordon Rohlehr buttresses this point when he remarks that the phenomenal rate of immigration in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Trinidad and the recurring problem which that country faced of assimilating thousands of people of different ethnic backgrounds and languages have led to what appears to be the general instability and lack of rooted dedication to the land in the Trinidadian (1978, 27).

Still commenting on the problem of a debilitating West Indian history, Naipaul asks:

Who in the New World does not have a horror of the past, whether his ancestor was torturer or victim?... How can the history of this West Indian futility be written?... The history of the Islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation and nothing was created in the West Indies (1969, 29).

And so, the fragmented nature of the society gives the West Indian an acute sense of exile. Some scholars describe it as being a part of what you could not become and George Lamming (1978) views it as paradoxical since it insists on roots and rootlessness; “home” and “homelessness” at the same time, so that the expression, “the derelict man in a desolate landscape” becomes an almost embodiment of the West Indian experience: the predicament of the nomadic society and individual, a wanderer in time and space who can find no anchorage (Ormerod, 1978, 85). Thus, as Susheila Nasta observes, “the sense of displacement, coupled with a need to give form and definition to a divisive background and a history of deracination informs much of the subject of the literature of this portion of the earth, termed “the Caribbean” (1988, 4). This motif of “home” and “homelessness” is, therefore, discussed in this paper.

## “Home” and “Homelessness” in Caribbean Literature

In the Prologue to *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1969), Biswas, the central character in the novel reflects:

How terrible it would have been, at this time to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them; in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one’s portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated (Naipaul 1969, 13-14).

The home metaphor therefore, forms the core of the novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1969). It initiates and sustains the novel. If a house which is Mr. Biswas's ambition to build is simply a roof over one's head, then Mr. Biswas has this very early in the novel with his marriage to Shama and into the Tulsis household. But his rejection of the Tulsis house reveals how much more is involved in the house metaphor: it is a house occupied by Mr. Biswas and his family alone; a home, that is Biswas's desire.

Biswas first vows to build his own house after being beaten up by Bhandat, long before he had met the Tulsis. His experience with the Tulsis only pushes him faster towards his goal. But as soon as he sees the Tulsis's "barracks" in Green Vale, he makes up his mind that the time for him to build his own house has come. Initially, he had told Bipti, his mother, after the beating: "I am going to get a job on my own. And I am going to get my own house too" (67). At first, this crucial declaration seems to reflect little more than a dissatisfaction with the hut in the trace to which he is ashamed to take his school friends. But before long, it is given a new significance by his reflection on the number of houses; none belonging to him that he has lived in:

Suppose, "Mr. Biswas thought in the long room", suppose that at one word I could just disappear from this room, what would remain to speak of me? A few clothes, a few books. The shouts and thumps in the hall would continue; the puja would be done; in the morning the Tulsis store would open its doors. He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him....In none of these places was he being missed because in none of these places had he ever been more than a visitor, an upserter of routine. Was Bipti (his mother) thinking of him in the back trace? But she herself was a derelict. There was nothing to speak of him (131-132).

Here is virtually the whole story of Mr. Biswas's life; shunted from one decaying hut to another, "a microcosm of 300 years of West Indian history" (Ormerod 1977, 173).

Biswas's ambition to build a house is therefore, more than a place he can live in. It is the symbolic quest for a home. This is why he begins it with such exuberance. This is why he resents the materials he is forced to buy cheap from Hanuman House. This is the reason the breakdown occurs while he is anxious about getting it finished and his reality begins to dribble away, crumpling human reality. And so, the crisis comes with the violence of the storm that blows down the ramshackle frame of the abortive house and Biswas, whom David Ormerod likens to Shakespeare's King Lear chooses to quit the safety of the harbour lines and sits in the wind-swept wreckage until he becomes the basic "unaccommodated man" being hinted at in the Prologue – "unnecessary and unaccommodated" (1988, 89).

The decision to build the Green Vale house had followed immediately upon his vision of his son, Anand, like the boy he had seen standing at dusk outside Hanuman House. He often recalls a picture from his past; his bus-conducting days. He remembers a bus racing through a barren wasteland: the picture remained: "a boy leaning against an earth house that had no reason for being there, under the dark falling sky, a boy who didn't know where the road and that bus went" (190). Biswas has been such a boy, and is such a man. Soon, the boy will be Anand, and the impact of the images, although their significance is evidently unclear to Biswas, means that he is "assailed by this sense of utter desolation" (190).

Five years after the Green Vale episode, Mr. Biswas builds a similar house at Shorthills. This time, it has concrete pillars, good timber, new corrugated iron for the roof and proper glass for the windows. It occupies such a site "as he had always wanted" and is actually completed. He seems to have achieved his ambition and he invites Bipti to share in his triumph. But the meaning of his original vow to Bipti has long been superseded. The children are dissatisfied. But it is not only the children who dislike the Shorthills house. Shama, his wife has over a mile to walk to the

shops and she regards the move as provocative. And so, Biswas must, once again abandon the Shorthills house for it is built in an inhospitable waste-land, far from the society.

But six years after living in the Tulsis's house in Port-of-Spain, when after losing all satisfaction in his work, his ambition to own his own house is rekindled and for the last time, he embarks on acquiring his own house. What makes its purchase possible is the four hundred dollars he is offered the same evening for the materials of the Shorthills house. Biswas seems to have achieved his ambition at last! But even as we begin to appreciate this achievement, doubts are raised. Nevertheless, Naipaul goes on to list Biswas's achievements and concludes: "but bigger than them all was the house, his house!" (14). But we know that Naipaul is having fun at Biswas's expense for we are told that Biswas has just lost his job, that the house is irretrievably mortgaged, that the house is uncomfortable, that it cost him far more than it is worth and that it is proving expensive to maintain. We also find that the house came into his hands not through his own initiative but because the solicitor's clerk was looking for someone to swindle. Above all, the house is jerry-built and will collapse at any time, thereby rendering Biswas "unnecessary" and "unaccommodated" as the man hinted at in the Prologue.

It would thus, seem that the world contemptuously and consistently denies all of Mr. Biswas's attempt to find a home for himself and his family. He recalls that as a boy, he had moved from one house of strangers to the other and that it was the sense of loss of his house as part of the dribbling away of his small clutched store of certainties which signaled as a young child the inauguration of his servitude. Earlier, he had returned to his birth place to find that the place had disappeared, for the land was rich in oil and is now a garden suburb, just as the boy-narrator in *Miguel Street* (1974) returned to the house of the dead poet to find that his beloved trees had been cut down "and there was brick and concrete everywhere" (19). It was as if B. Wordsworth had never existed.

Naipaul therefore, writes about the attempt of Mr. Biswas to fight back against this cosmic denial of his very existence. His explanation of his disillusionment with the directionlessness of life in Trinidad parallels the accounts of many other Caribbean writers of his generation, like Samuel Selvon. According to Selvon: "I was finding myself in a situation where life was beginning to become very complacent and easy-going" (Nasta 1988, 1). And so, it is not surprising that Selvon addresses himself to precisely the same issues as Naipaul. For instance, in his trilogy – *The Lonely Londoners* (1989), *Moses Ascending* (1984) and *Moses Migrating* (1983) – Selvon presents the aimlessness, homelessness and frustration of West Indian immigrants in London.

Inhabiting a nightmare world, the immigrants in Selvon's novels are forced into fixed flat postures and here, it is noted that the term, "what happening?" which echoes throughout *The Lonely Londoners* and is the fundamental rationale of its numerous episodes comes to imply less a resilience in the face of complicated experience than a painful sense of futility and the incoherence. As Nasta observes, beneath the "Kiffkiff" laughter, behind "The ballad and the episode", the "what happening" and the "summer-is-heart" is the perception of the "boys" of a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement "that leaving you standing in the same spot" (1988, 5). Thus, the "boys" incomplete, frustrated and claustrophobic existence is, according to Nasta enacted in the fragmentary nature of its form and in the ironic representation of the characters' failure to break out of the two-dimensional identities – the self-caricatures – they have created for themselves for security within the closed immigrant group (1988, 5).

On this group identity, Harrold Barratt further comments:

One of the most pernicious consequences of the colonial world is that it renders the individual, especially the unskilled, barely literate colonial ill-prepared for independent, effective, assertive existence in what he perceives as the superior metropolitan society. The colonial, after all, was not required to make major decisions, and colonialism gave him a spurious security. Selvon's expatriate West Indians have a psychological

need to form a colony with a governor/leader if they are to survive in this closed society (“when I first come to Brit’n, “Galahad says” . . . . “You was a leader, and all the boys would listen to your advice”) (1988, 258).

It is therefore, the group, according to Rohlehr that has a full self; that faces the wilderness and survives, not to belong is to be lost in the void, for the formation of a colony, (resulting in a collective colonial consciousness) ensured survival of sorts but retarded the growth of individual strength and maturity and probably also accounts for why the immigrants are after several years in London still referred to as “boys”.

At the end of the novel – *The Lonely Londoners* – it thus, becomes clear that behind all the gaiety and carefree qualities of the characters lie a deeper problem of spiritual uncertainties, emanating from their underlying sense of homelessness which looks forward to Selvon’s next novel, *Moses Ascending* (1984).

Like in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Moses in *Moses Ascending* with his paltry savings buys a house in Shepherd’s Bush in London. According to Moses: “I had the ambition to own my own property. . . . If you are a tenant you catch your arse forever, but if you are a landlord, it is a horse of a different colour” (51). To enjoy his newly acquired landlord power, Moses installs as his “Man Friday” (to borrow Clancy Sigal’s phrase) an illiterate Midland white, Bob, to manage the property, while he retires to the “penthouse” (1988, 134). At last, Moses is home! After twenty years in England, he has finally “arrived”. But alas! this is only the beginning of his troubles: the house which he even calls his castle is a very dilapidated terrace house in Shepherd’s Bush and due for demolition. Like Biswas’s house, the house is going to fall apart at any time. Above all, Bob outsmarts him and at the end of the novel, Moses is back at the dingy basement, while Bob takes over the rest of the property.

Moses thus, attempts to find a home and construct a fully realized individual identity. However, because he is setting up on doubtful grounds, his dream of having “arrived” is shattered and he finds himself back at the basement of his house, dispossessed of his rights and privileges as landlord, such that nothing seems to have changed for him or for Third World man even after several years of independence.

This theme continues in *Moses Migrating* (1983). Having lost his “penthouse” in London, Moses decides to return to Trinidad for Carnival. Travelling third class in a liner, Moses stays in the “upside-down” world of the Trinidad Hilton – “a tourist”, in other words, in his “own country”. Here, Nasta (1988) notes that “the transitoriness, artificiality and unreality of the hotel room image the hollowness and disorientation of post-colonial identity, extending the metaphorical possibilities of rooms and houses in *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending*, though this time, it is neither basement nor attic but a hotel room”(6).

Similarly, Rufus and Forster in *An Island is a World* (1955), perplexed by their Island’s cultural confusion and lack of a stable identity emigrate to the U.S. and England respectively and after much soul-searching and series of adventures, return to Trinidad even more confused and despairing than before they emigrated. Forster, in particular, has no sense of belonging since he feels he is without a country and neither does being a Trinidadian have any significance for him. Alas! , Selvon’s immigrants seem unable to find a home either in Britain or in Trinidad. Neither in *The Lonely Londoners*, nor in *Moses Ascending* nor in *Moses Migrating* nor in *An Island is a World* do Selvon’s immigrants arrive at a promised land.

This failure to find a homeland probably makes the poet persona in Brathwaite’s poem to ask:

Where then is the nigger’s home?  
In Paris Brixton Kingston Rome?  
Or in Heaven? (21973, 76).

Indeed, the Prelude to the poem reads:

Drum skin whip  
lash, master sun's  
cutting edge of  
heat, taut  
Surface of things  
I sing  
I shout  
I groan  
I dream about  
Dust glass grit  
the pebbles of the desert (1973, 11).

The picture conveyed here is one of endless movement; a slow painful journey over a wilderness of rock and in this regard, the desert is both real and symbolic: the real desert crossed by the migrating tribes in the journey to the South Sahara as well as the spiritual wilderness which the deracinated African continues to cross throughout history. As Rohlehr notes, the image of the desert connected with the theme of pestilence, blood-sucking flies, the worm, the rats gnawing at the roots of the sacred tree in "Masks" and with the recurring images of whip, splintered glass, dust and sterility has become an archetypal tribal experience which, according to him is Brathwaite's belief the later history of slavery, the middle passage and urbanization merely fulfills (1978,65). Of this "homelessness", Brathwaite writes further:

It is a spiritual inheritance from slavery and the long story before that of the migrant African moving from the lower Nile across the desert to the Western ocean, only to meet the Portuguese; and a history that was to mean the middle passage, Americas and a rootless sojourn in the Caribbean sea (1963, 10).

Also, Naipaul comments: "one journey answering another; the climax and futility of the West Indian adventure" (1969, 15).

"The Journeys" (1973) continues the theme of endless movement:

Castries, Conway and Brixton in London  
Port of Spain's jungle  
and Kingston's dry Dungle  
Chicago Smethwick and Tiger Bay (1973, 80).

Even the Rastafarians' wish to escape in the poem is not unconnected with the problem of homelessness. Derived from a Pocomania hymn, "If I had the wings of a dove, I would like to fly away and be at rest", the Rastafarians in "Wings of a Dove" (1973) yearn to fly away. However, there is no escape for them. Thus, no longer wishing to be part of that society which has no place for them, the Rastafarians want only to be repatriated to Africa.

And so, "Rights of Passage" treats the theme of "home" and "homelessness". In the poem, Brathwaite explores the history and adjustment problems faced by blacks in the Diaspora from slavery to contemporary times. The title of the poem itself is a pun and refers variously to the traditional rites of passage in which youths are initiated into manhood, thus, referring to the initiation of pain experienced by the New World inhabitants. It also refers to the middle passage of the Atlantic Ocean crossed by slaves, and underscores the rights of slave descendants to explore this history.

In the poem, Brathwaite identifies the trends of "homelessness" and dislocation as common to New World blacks and the epic structure of the poem allows him to explore their fortunes in space and time so that their history from migration within Africa, the forcible migration from slavery, to the contemporary voluntary migration are highlighted. Also, there is the theme of quest for a sense of belonging for all blacks in the Diaspora, while the multiplicity of voices in the poem represent the different responses of blacks to similar conditions of deprivation and loss.

Important recurring images also reinforce the theme of “home” and “homelessness” in the poem. While images such as those of dust and desert symbolize aridity, exile and spiritual void, those of ocean and river stand for endless travel and migration. It is this burden of water which links the New World black both to Africa and to the New World. On the other hand, the images of pebbles and glass indicate disintegration and dislocation, respectively. Like Selvon who himself left his native Island for London, Brathwaite, also, as part of his quest for a spiritual homeland left the West Indies for Ghana, where he worked as an education officer between 1955 and 1962. Little wonder then that there is in the works a constant “oscillation” between different fictional landscapes, especially of Trinidad and London. Selvon’s and Naipaul’s works in particular, depict the difficulties of their characters finding a homeland, whether in the West Indies or elsewhere. Even Tiger’s move from Chaguanas to Barataria, to Five Rivers and then, to Barataria again in *Turn Again Tiger* (1979) is not unconnected with the problem of finding a homeland.

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that many Caribbean writers’ fictional worlds centre around the unanchored, estranged individual; a wanderer in space and time who can find no anchorage. The works constitute an intense involvement with the intolerable psychological tensions created by a degrading environment. The writers, paint the picture of “homeless” nomadic migrants making a middle passage from Africa or India to the West Indies, thence to England and back again “for after several years, there seems to be no system of values in which they can take root” (Ormerod 1977, 162). Against this indistinct and dissolving background, the characters try to seize upon something to give permanence to their lives and to arrest the flux, whether it is Mr. Stone’s scheme for the aged or Biswas’s and Moses’s desire to own their own houses. Naipaul, in particular, consistently paints the picture of the derelict man in the desolate landscape. *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *Moses Ascending* are, therefore, individual attempts to overcome “homelessness”. The writers see the characters as victims of their environment. Their urgency comes from their efforts to get others to acknowledge them so as to have it validated for themselves, their human necessity.

Biswas (and I add, Moses) are as Rohlehr remarks representative of the Caribbean predicament (1977, 92). They are so strongly individualistic and their limitations are grave. They begin with nothing and achieve little. Early in Biswas’s life, he had been taught that “ought oughts are ought” and this idea that “nothing will come of nothing” haunts his life. The possession of ramshackle houses is the utmost concession Biswas and Moses can wring from an obdurate society. In their attempts to have their own homes, we can see their desire to assert their own significance and establish a small centre or order in a society “that had no rules and patterns” (Naipaul 1969, 459).

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**ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR**

Julia Udofia, Ph. D, is a lawyer and Senior lecturer in the Department of English, University of Uyo, Nigeria.