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Ecological Crises in *A House for Mr. Biswas* from
the Perspective of Postcolonial Ecocriticism

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Abstract: This paper analyzes Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* from the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism and points out the manifestations of and reasons for the destruction of the ecosystem in Trinidad. Both nature and humans in Trinidad are suffering, which can be mainly attributed to the colonial presence of such colonist countries as America and Britain.

Keywords: *A House for Mr. Biswas*; postcolonial ecocriticism; humans; alienation

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Written by the Nobel Prize laureate, V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas* has received considerable attention from such scholars as Homi K. Bhabha, Zhou Min, etc. Some of the previous research on *A House for Mr. Biswas* (abbreviated as *House*) was conducted from the perspective of postcolonialism, focusing on the identity crisis and the tension between the local regions and the west. However, few studies have approached the intricacy of ecological problems in the *House* from the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism. Postcolonial ecocriticism, as a new dimension in the development of ecocriticism in recent years, calls on the public to pay attention to the inter-racial relationship, the relationship between the first world countries and the third world countries in the course of studying the relationship between humans, nature, and environment, to scrutinize the

unique situations of ecology in the third world countries once enslaved or being enslaved by imperialism (Huggan, Tiffin). It is from the perspective of postcolonial^① ecocriticism that the paper approaches the ecological crises in *House*.

1. Wretched Ecological World

In *House*, a wretched ecological world in Trinidad is presented. In this nightmarish scenario, nature is being intruded upon and damaged by humans with seemingly justifiable excuses; humans, as a species in this ecological system, are also subjected to physical ailments and mental sufferings.

Damaged nature

In *House*, the domain of nature is being dramatically reduced. For the sake of themselves, humans are invading the territory of nature, reducing nature to oil derricks, reservoirs, and cities in the name of pursuing development; in the name of seeking survival, they have cultivated lands for farming. When Biswas went back to where he was raised in his childhood:

He saw nothing but oil derricks and grimy pumps [...] The pond had been drained and the whole swamp region was now a garden city [...] The stream where he had watched the blackfish had been dammed, diverted into a reservoir, and its winding, irregular bed covered by straight lawns, streets, and drives. (Naipaul, 1984: 41)

Throughout Biswas's whole life, no matter where he was, be it his childhood hometown, the town where the Hanuman House was located, or the Green Vale, or Port of Spain, he could always catch sight of rice paddies, the sugarcane estates. As industrialization and urbanization are gaining momentum, the intrusion on nature by humans will also escalate, depriving animals and plants of their habitats and posing a threat to their very survival.

A very important component of ecocriticism is the criticism of industry and sci-tech (Wang, 2011: 229). Mechanized industrial production, as represented by railways, coal mines, and oil derricks has a contaminated nature. Humans are also extracting warping amounts of natural resources from nature that are non-renewable. Such artificial projects as reservoirs and roads have changed landscape and weather conditions, posing higher risks of natural disasters like earthquakes and blocking the migration of animals and fish. Rice paddies in a way guarantee food supplies, yet the methane released by them is a considerable reason for global warming. The development of agriculture and industry and the operations relevant to them not only undermine the ecological system on a regional scale but on a global scale at large.

In the course of nature being destroyed, humans dwelling in Trinidad are suffering from their dilapidated dwellings and physical and mental problems. Their interpersonal relationship was filled with coldness and indifference.

One of the keywords in the title of *House* being "house", the houses and the dwellings of people in the work have been portrayed by the author objectively and elaborately that borders on anatomical precision. These houses

and dwellings were either depressing or dirty. Firstly, they were so depressing that people could hardly breathe within. The Hanuman House of the Tulsi family located on the Street of Arwacas seemed “bulky” (Naipaul, 1984: 80), but was in reality “not deep” (Naipaul, 1984: 82). “The side walls were windowless” (Naipaul, 1984: 80). The shabbiness and darkness within the house were depressing enough, which was made worse by the fact that the house was shared by Mrs. Tulsi, her sons, daughters and sons-in-law, and their children, widows in the Tulsi family and the boarders. Moreover, the dwellings depicted in *House* are characterized by squalidness. In Green Vale, “The barrackyard, with its mud, animal droppings and the quick slime on stale puddles” (Naipaul, 1984: 209) was nauseating, while the sight of the slum areas in the Port of Spain with “the stench of cesspits and overloaded septic tanks” (Naipaul, 1984: 441) was simply overwhelming.

Many characters in *House* are physically frail, suffering either physical deformity or strange diseases, many of whom have a premature death. Because of malnutrition, Biswas was born to be six-fingered. Biwas’s daughter Savy had bowlegs, while his son Anand had asthma. Mrs. Tulsi had chronic diseases. A favorite topic for the women in the Tulsi’s was what medication their husbands should be taking, taking delight in exchanging the effectiveness of such medicines as hartshorn and Dodd’s Kidney Pills, which shows the lack or loss of virility of the male in this area. Death was a frequent visitor to the Tulsi’s, many women in the Tulsi’s witnessed the premature death of their husbands and children. No wonder the number of boarders and widows in the Tulsi’s kept swelling who lost source of income.

Most of the characters in *House* are mentally inert and listless. The assistants in the Tulsi store “were grave and unenthusiastic” (Naipaul, 1984: 82). Hari, the pundit in the house, also a sluggish man of few words, spent most of his time sitting by the side of the long table, “he was obsessed with his illnesses, his food and his religious books” (Naipaul, 1984: 115). Biswas, neither down-to-earth nor celestial, was made to feel “I am not whole” (Naipaul, 1984: 268) by the cruelty of reality and disillusionment in life. He once had an anxiety disorder, and after the recovery spent the rest of his life in disorientation and indifference. For these listless people, alcohol became indispensable, no wonder in pubs or bars “at any time of the day there were people who had collapsed on the wet floor” (Naipaul, 1984: 59).

Indifference, conflicts, and mutual hostility characterize the interpersonal relationship in *House*, the characters in *House* struggle in a beastly fashion. After visiting his sister Dehuti’s home, Biswas came to the realization that “the links between Dehuti and himself, never strong, had been broken, that from her too he had become separate” (Naipaul, 1984: 73). After marriage, Biswas was estranged from his mother, not sure “whether she was glad to see him” (Naipaul, 1984: 191). The colossal Tulsi family seemed to be wafting with motherly and sisterly love and filial piety, however, but it was impossible for Shama to derive real emotional and economic support from her sisters and the family (Zhang and Wang, 2015: 71).

2. The Western Colonial Presence

Upon close reading, we may find elaborate depictions of the colonial presence in *House*, which contributes to the ecological deterioration in Trinidad.

Firstly, colonial presence in Trinidad presents itself in the form of military presence. When the Tulsis settled down in Shorthills, the Americans also went there, with the aim of establishing a military base. The military

lorries shuttled in and out. When they were running short of lorries, they even hired lorry from W. C. Tuttle (Naipaul, 1984: 407). In order to facilitate transportation, the Americans expanded the roads. Outside the Port of Spain, “the smooth new American highway” was built, the locals “were checked on entering and leaving the American army post by soldiers with helmets and rifles” (Naipaul, 1984: 503). *House* doesn’t directly portray the cruelty of the colonizers, but their atrocities will be recorded in history forever. In *House*, there was a sketchy description of the town Biswas once lived in transformed into an oil field (Naipaul, 1984: 41) and there was no further information of oil fields in Trinidad. In reality, the oil fields had practically been controlled by America and Britain combined before WWII. The Trinidadians launched resistance against the oppression. The year 1936 witnessed the bloody putting down of the oilfield workers’ strikes against the colonial rule, and many people were killed (Mei, 1966: 31).

The colonial presence also hampers the economic development in Trinidad and accounts for the economic backwardness in this area. In *House*, we see the sugarcane fields and rice paddies stretching as far as the eye can see, yet somehow we see a little description of other crops, which gives us pause for thought. Is this singular agricultural setup lacking diversity and variety at all reasonable? It is not difficult to find the answer. The dire consequences of such a deformed agricultural pattern show themselves pretty quickly. The production of flour was not adequate in this country, thus placing a premium on imported flour, which is proven by one detail in *House*. The cranes at the docks were in such a busy operation that an accident happened where a reporter was killed by “a crane load of flour accidentally falling from a great height” (Naipaul, 1984: 325). Moreover, despite the import of flour, the supply was far from enough. “There were fights in shops for hoarded, weevil-ridden flour” (Naipaul, 1984: 377). This unreasonable agricultural structure is to some degree attributable to the unique geographical features of Trinidad, but to a greater extent has resulted from the colonial rule. Given the excellent natural conditions in the Caribbean areas, e. g., fertile land and ideal weather, the colonizers established over here booming plantations, transforming the Caribbean areas, including Trinidad, into land supplying cash crops and raw materials for the suzerains (Xue, 1987: 14). Under colonial rule, Trinidad became the “plantation” or “farm” for the suzerains, “the former trading cash crops for industrial products and cereals” (Xue, 1987: 16). After WWII, the diversity in agriculture was enhanced in the Caribbean areas, the volume of cereals increased, however, cash crops still dominated agriculture (Xue, 1987: 14).

The influence of American and British industrial products on Trinidad finds good expression in *House*. The sale of cars made in America and Britain was booming. In order to further boost the sale, they printed advertisements on calendars. “The religious pictures on the walls were crowded out by calendars from the distributors of American and English motor vehicles, and an enormous framed photograph of an Indian actress” (Naipaul, 1984: 243). The car bought by Biswas was a Perfect made in the U. K. The publicizing of industrial products may appear in the seemingly unlikely cranny. Biswas bought an exorbitant American book named *Newspaper Management*, however, it “turned out to be an exhortation to newspaper proprietors to invest in modern machinery” (Naipaul, 1984: 341). Apart from the official import of industrial products, there was the thriving hidden illegal smuggling. When Biswas went aboard American ships on the South American tourist route, he “was invited by a ship’s cook to join a smuggling ring that dealt in-camera flash-bulbs, declined and was unable to write the story because it would have incriminated his late predecessor” (Naipaul, 1984: 326). The fact that the American and British industrial products may prosper in Trinidad proves “the very poor

industrial development of Trinidad, whose market of industrial products has been encroached upon by the capitalist superpowers” (Jiang, 1983: 25).

Due to the influence of the long colonial rule and the economic influence of America and Britain in Trinidad, the agricultural products in Trinidad lacked diversity, the industrial development was slow and poor, and therefore Trinidad had to rely on imported industrial and agricultural products. “The deformity of a singular economic structure has accounted for the chronic poverty and backwardness in the Caribbean areas” (Xue, 1987: 16). The economic oppression of the Trinidadians and the oppression of nature by introducing this unreasonable agricultural system into Trinidad are closely related. This agrees with environmental racism which emphasizes “the connection, in theory, and practice, of race and the environment so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the other” (Curtin 2005: 145).

Additionally, the military presence and economic influence of America and Britain enabled them to hold sway over the administration and legal system in Trinidad. As the number of Americans grew, there was correspondingly a rise in the number of illegal immigrants who worked for these Americans. In order to guarantee a sufficient workforce there, America forced Trinidad not only to accept the entry of these illegal immigrants from other islands but also to pass laws “against the indiscriminate eviction Shama had so coolly practiced” (Naipaul, 1984: 433).

The western colonial presence was also responsible for the cultural identity crisis of the Trinidadians, the immigrants from India included. In the Tulsi’s, Christmas was observed as an important festival, while the unique Indian festivals were fading out of sight and mind. Their religion was getting diluted in their lives, “the religious pictures on the walls were crowded out by calendars from the distributors of American and English motor vehicles, and an enormous framed photograph of an Indian actress” (Naipaul, 1984: 243). They look forward to the quality education in suzerains, anxious to send their children to America and Britain. When Owad who had been studying in England planned to return, in the Tulsi’s “everyone was excited”, “his exact attainments were not known, but were felt by all to be extraordinary and almost beyond comprehension” (Naipaul, 1984: 524). These Trinidadians sent their sons to either America, Britain, or Canada to pursue the career of doctor or dentist. They attached great importance to the suggestions of the American or British magazine editors. They enjoy listening to such American songs as “You Are Always in My Heart” (Naipaul, 1984: 495). They regarded the possession of a set of Morris furniture^② as a symbol of status. In order to get more knowledge about staying fit, they made a point of reading *That Body of Yours*, an American magazine. They regarded decent their children as working for the Americans. The American and British colonizers’ influence on these Indians living in Trinidad in terms of religion, education, music, career choice, mode of living, and the ideas concerning health was so huge that the Trinidadians experienced an enormous identity crisis, associating the suzerains with holy paradise. When Anand was depressed, agonizing over what to do for the future, Biswas timely sent a book named *Outwitting Our Nerves* (Naipaul, 1984: 586) written by two American psychologists, willingly and happily submitting his son’s mental well-being to the control and manipulation of the Americans. In the course of European conquest and global domination, “not only were other people often regarded as part of nature-and thus treated instrumentally as animals but also they were forced or co-opted over time into western views of the environment” (Huggan, Tiffin 2010: 6). The assimilated Trinidadians are also likely to exploit nature.

Because of the economic and political control of the western colonial powers, the natural exploration and

utilization in Trinidad most probably won't be ecology-friendly, for "rapaciousness was one of her people's (American's) faults" (Naipaul, 1984: 532). Therefore, there existed in Trinidad so many sugarcane fields and oilfields that encroached and intruded upon nature. The Trinidadians, living under the yoke of the direct or indirect colonial rule, are bitterly wallowing and struggling because of the resulting economic poverty and wretched lives. They were not adequately fed or clothed, having no guarantee for their health, thus disease and premature deaths would only be commonplace. This is a country where poverty, uneven distribution coexisted simultaneously³. Unable to satisfy their basic needs, besides resenting the colonizers, there would emerge an assortment of conflicts among the people themselves. Moreover, *House* seems to express a point of view that living under the tremendous yoke, unless the people can face up to and fight against the oppression, the mutual empathizing would be practically useless. "How ridiculous were the attentions the weak paid one another in the shadow of the strong!" (Naipaul, 1984: 554)

LuXun, the famous activist, and satirist in China, once remarked, "I now understand the reason why a dying race remains silent. Silence, oh silence! If we do not explode from the silence, then we shall perish in silence" (2017: 76). There were many dauntless fighters and warriors among the Trinidadians, but there were also indifferent and cowardly onlookers who look up to the mighty colonizers with awe and respect, who had "left a memory of reckless valor" (Naipaul, 1984: 174). They were looking up to the very appropriate spokesperson of colonizing capital, i. e., money, the heaps of silver and copper, the stacks of greenish notes. They "gazed at the coin with awe, then kissed it" (Naipaul, 1984: 443). Brainwashed by the ideology of the American and British colonizers, they followed the lead of the colonizers blindly, only to lose the national quintessence and pride, the very qualities which make them unique. They look listless and indifferent. Some of them partake in the features of A Q in Lu Xun's works, despising their own culture while at the same time waiting anxiously for a permanently unlikely process of assimilation into the foreign culture dominated by the colonizers. They hover around in the limbo-like phantoms, belonging neither to the category of living beings nor to that of ghosts.

3. Conclusion

In *House*, the damaged ecology in Trinidad is presented, where nature has been encroached upon by roads, oil derricks, and profitable crops. Under direct or indirect harm, nature is becoming dilapidated. Suffering from such miserable problems as terrible dwellings, physical ailments, mental inactivity, and mutual indifference, the Trinidadians fail to comfort each other through the alienation between each other. The primary reason for these problems is the control the western countries exert over Trinidad in economy, politics, and culture, leading to the disruption of the whole ecological system. The local Trinidadians who have been assimilated into the western view of nature are also likely to cause further damage to nature. Even though it seems that in *House* Naipaul doesn't seem to come up with a Utopian solution to the complicated ecological problems in Trinidad, the novel certainly reflects Naipaul's serious reflection on the ecological crises in the third world countries in the postcolonial context.

Note:

① The definition of the postcolonial era in this paper agrees with the proposition put forward by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin. They “use the term ‘post-colonial’, however, to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.” see Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature*. London: Routledge, 2002, 2.

② Branded furniture manufactured in the U. K.

③ In *The Analects of Confucius*, Confucius regarded that if a country were to prosper, the monarch should be concerned more with the even distribution of resources and unity among the nation than with poverty and scarcity of resources.

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