



Self-actualization in Postcolonial Novel: A Study on V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas

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Abstract

The aims of this study are to unfold the characteristics of self-actualization as reflected in A House for Mr. Biswas, a novel by V.S. Naipaul and to measure the range to which Mr. Biswas as a postcolonial character succeeded to reach to self-actualization. Self-actualization is a postcolonial term which indicates the desire to achieve one's greatest potentials. The study has used the theory of Abraham Maslow who describes his concept of self-actualization in his theory of Hierarchy of Needs. The approach of this study is qualitative. V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas is a representative one among the postcolonial novels which possesses major aspects of postcolonial literature. Mr. Mohun Biswas, the protagonist of the novel successfully reach the level of self-actualization although he has some limitations. Mr. Biswas carries the significant aspects and features of a self-actualizing person.

I. INTRODUCTION

Post-colonial literature deals with post-colonial aspects such as de-colonialism, alienation, identity crisis, diaspora, quest for authenticity, self-actualization etc. Self-actualization is a continuous process of creating, retaining, and enhancing an individual's self-concept through experiential reflection, which allows him/her to develop, meet and handle changes and grow. It is also a part of the overall consciousness of actualizing tendency and an intrinsic way of differentiating what is 'self' within its 'total' perceptual field. From post-colonial period, the tendency of self-actualization has been begun. In 1943, Abraham Maslow has used this term in his article on "A Theory of Human Motivation". As a post-colonial literature, self-actualization is noticeable everywhere in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Throughout the novel, we follow the protagonist's processes of self-actualization.

The study focuses on the self-actualization of Mr. Biswas in *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a postcolonial character. Mr. Mohun Biswas is successfully able to reach to the level of self-actualization as a postcolonial character through Abraham Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs where self-actualization is top of any needs of human life.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Vaishnavi & Sharmila, (2017) stated in their article on *Identity crisis in V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas* that the novel tells the story of its protagonist, Mr. Biswas from birth to death in different phases faces problems of an identity crisis. Mr. Biswas felt himself as an alien and an outsider in his own family and in his own Indian world. The author insisted his reader that the "house" he mentioned in his novel is the symbol

of identity which Mr. Biswas searches throughout his life instead of running away from it.

Siamardi, Tahereh; Deedari & Reza, (2016) shared their ideas in their article on *The Situation of Colonial "other" in V. S. Naipaul's "A House for Mr. Biswas"*, in considering Naipaul's "A House for Mr. Biswas" as postcolonial text, by the theories of Homi k Bhabha, it is argued that, mentioned novel sums up Naipaul's approach to how individuals relate to places. This novel shows that individuals' quest for home and a place of belonging is complicated first, by the reality of homelessness, and second by the socio-cultural complexities peculiar to every place. In other words, the reality of homelessness makes the desire for home, elusive. "A House for Mr. Biswas" describes the story of homeless and rootless immigrants who lack identity and security in the colonial world. In this novel Naipaul deals with shifting identities, roots, homes and changing realities of migrants.

Kaur, (2015) in his article on *Quest for a Genuine Identity and Home in V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas* declares, V. S. Naipaul tries to declaim characters that the outcomes of an ethnic and cultural blend and exhibit their endeavor and attempts to negate one or more cultural characteristics to show they are pure and pious but finally they become aware of the fact that they are the products of multicultural confusion and their identity cannot be authentic and fixed. Mr. Biswas shifting from place to place without a solid patent identity. His identity is uncertain, unfixed, transferable and changeable because of cultural diversification, therefore he cannot attain one fixed identity and a place of his own.

Again, In the article on *A Postcolonial Survey of A House for Mr. Biswas by V.S. Naipaul*, Shojjan, (2015) describes by studying the three generations of Indian in this novel we can observe how the characters of the novel change their identity, religion, education, custom etc. as a result of living in the creole society. It is seen that as the generation changes the belief of the characters on their original culture fades away and they merge into the colonial power. The characters in the novel, when encountering the colonizer's culture, change their identity and

become who they want them to be. Moreover, during the course of the novel, the characters find the ambivalent personality as a result of experiencing un-homeliness in the society of mixed culture. This ambivalence makes them have double consciousness to be attracted toward the colonizer's culture and at the same time repulsed from it.

The studies were done based on identity crisis, quest for identity, notion of hybridity, authenticity of identity, themes, post-colonial survey etc. on V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The perspective of self-actualization is an unexplored one among the post-colonial literature especially on V.S. Naipaul in Bangladesh.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Self-actualization

The study is wholly related with the very theory of 'self-actualization'. To explore this paper it is important to know the theories clearly. Generally, self-actualization is the desire to achieve one's greatest potential. The theory of Abraham Maslow is highly used by this study. Self-actualization according to Abraham is "Intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately of what is the organism itself, self -actualization is growth-motivated rather than deficiency-motivated".

The term 'self-actualization' originally related to the Humanistic Psychological Theory; most notably to the theories of Abraham Maslow. He used the term while outlining his hierarchy of needs. Maslow coined the term self-actualization to describe the growth of an individual toward fulfillment of their highest needs. Maslow believed in, and created, a psychological hierarchy of needs (Journal psyche).

Self-actualization is one of the basic motives of human life leading to realization of needs and performing those activities which can realize the needs to create satisfaction. Satisfaction of any single need becomes urgent, when it is a prerequisite for all body's self-actualization. In the book *Motivation and Personality* Abraham Maslow describes self-actualization as a person's striving towards self-incarnation towards

actualization of personal potential, striving for identity (Journal psyche).

He developed the concept of the hierarchy of needs to address both the basic and esoteric needs of human existence. His hierarchy is represented in a pyramid with the lower needs listed at the bottom requiring personal growth to reach the top and become self-actualized

because it represents linear growth taking place. Maslow described human needs as being relatively fluid- with many needs being present in a person simultaneously. Its stages include physiological needs, safety needs, the need for love and belonging, the need for esteem and finally, self-actualization. Maslow's hierarchy of needs ascends in the following order:

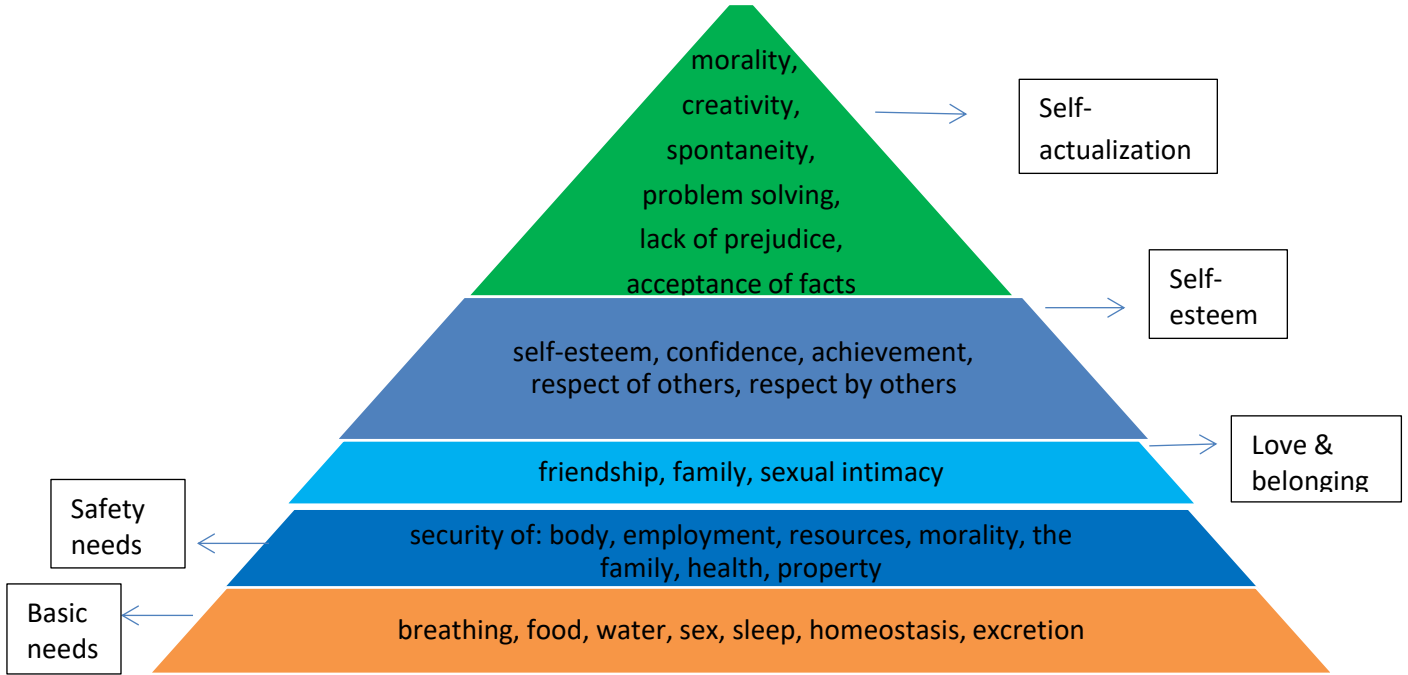


Fig. 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Self-actualization occurs when a person is able to take full advantage of his or her talents while still being mindful of his or her limitations. The process of self-actualization is different for everyone and not all individual achieve all levels of the hierarchy through their lives. Achieving self-actualization is somewhat rare: according to Maslow, only about 1% of the adult has self-actualized, and those that have done self-actualize will not necessarily remain in that state. People may travel between several levels of the hierarchy over the life-span, based on life circumstances, individual choices, and mental health.

Self-actualization is the desire for self-fulfillment, namely the tendency to be actualized in what he is potentially. Individuals who managed to become self-actualized people were able to resolve common ideological conflicts, such as that between determinism and freewill, due to their enhanced creativity and

psychological robustness. Self-actualizing people possess an unusual ability to detect the spurious, the fake and the dishonest personality, and in general to judge people correctly and effectively.

Abraham Maslow in his *Motivation and Personality* listed some aspects of a self-actualizer, e.g., efficient perception of reality, comfortable acceptance of self, others and nature, reliant on own experiences and judgment, spontaneous and natural, task centering, autonomy, continued freshness of appreciation, profound interpersonal relations, comfort with solitude, non-hostile sense of humor, peak experiences, socially compassionate, not prefer having many friends etc.

IV. SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

Some of the characteristics of self-actualizer can be noticed in the character of Mr. Mohun Biswas in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Self-actualizers justify the situations correctly and honestly. They are sensory to the fraud and immoral. They are also free to see the reality 'as it is'. In Port of Spain (Part two, Chapter two), Mr. Biswas feels very upset by the new directives which allow no scope to a reporter to function independently. Mr. Biswas is told by his editor, Mr. Burnett, that he might be sacked by the newspaper management. Mr. Burnett is actually sacked, and he leaves Trinidad. Everyday some new directives are issued to govern the conduct of the newspaper reporters. These changes include certain rigid conditions to be observed by the correspondents and reporters in the employ of this newspaper. Mr. Biswas's duty under the new editor is to write articles in praise of the public institutions. He finds this work irksome. According to the narrator,

"Mr. Biswas returned to the office in a state of great agitation. He had been associated, and zestfully, with some of the most frivolously excesses of the *Sentinel*. Now at the thought of each he felt a stab of guilt and panic. He was expecting to be summoned to mysterious rooms and told by their secure occupants that his services were no longer required. He sat at his desk – but it belonged to him no more than the columns of the *Sentinels* he filled – and listed to the noises made by the carpenters." (P. 388)

The Narrator added, "If they did just push me so much farther,' he told Shama, 'I would have resigned' "

Also, after the death of Mr. Biswas's mother, he writes an angry letter to Dr. Rameshwar who had been very rude to his brothers when they had gone to the doctor to obtain death certificate of their mother. Then, the doctor regrets to Mr. Biswas through sending a letter.

Mr. Biswas accepts his nature with its flow. Sometimes he accepts the flaws of others and the incompatibility of the human conditions with his own temperament and endurance. Mr. Biswas feels very upset by the new directives which allow no scope to a reporter to function independently. He finds this work irksome, and he now lives in constant fear of dismissal. After having shifted to Shorthills, Mrs. Tulsi suggests to Mr. Biswas that

he and his family should also join them all at Shorthills where he would be given free accommodation in her house there. Mr. Biswas accepts the offer regards his residence at Shorthills as an insurance against the possibility of his being dismissed by the *Trinidad Sentinel*. The narrator reveals as

"Mr. Biswas, too, was waiting for improvements. But he did not greatly care about them. For him Shorthills was an adventure, an interlude. His job made him independent of the Tulsi; and Short-hills was an insurance against the sack. It also provided an opportunity to save, an opportunity to plunder." (P. 425)

After Owad's coming back from England, a furious quarrel takes place between Mr. Biswas and Mrs. Tulsi. Mr. Biswas says that he has made a mistake by having agreed to live here in the first instance. "I am giving you notice", Mr. Biswas shouted. "Curse the day I step into your house." (p. 589). But by next morning, Mr. Biswas's anger has subsided and he has already committed himself to quitting the house, and so he starts looking for accommodation elsewhere. "Mr. Biswas's anger had gone stale; it burdened him. Now there was also shame at his behavior, shame at the whole gross scene."(p. 590).

Again, one day Mr. Biswas receives a letter inviting him to attend a meeting of a newly-formed literary group. He goes but finds that he is not quite up to the mark.

"Mr. Biswas found himself a little out of his depth in the literary group. Apart from the poems in the *Royal Reader* and *Bell's Standard Elocutionist*, the only poems he knew were those of Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Edward Carpenter; and at the judge's the emphasis on poetry." (P. 506).

Further, the house purchased by Mr. Biswas from the solicitor's clerk is found to have many defects. After he has shifted to the house, his neighbor there informs him that the solicitor's clerk is a real cheat, a fraud, a speculator who had made it a practice to build ramshackle, fragile houses, and give them a decent look in order to sell them at a big profit. Mr. Biswas hasn't accused the Solicitor's clerk and hasn't been bothered by his neighbor's comments. In the word of the narrator,

“Yet when Mr. Biswas, pursuing his policy of getting on good terms with the neighbors, greeted him, the man brightened at once, sat forward in his rocking chair and said, ‘You have been a lot of repairs.’ Mr. Biswas took the man’s words as an invitation to his verandah.” (P. 614).

Independent, not reliant on culture and environment to forms, opinions and views, Mohan simultaneously impersonates the alienated modern man though inoperative reformer. His desperate bid for improvement is a self-centered one; but his struggle against a rigid social order makes his rebellion an assertion of universal norms. Under the influence of a preacher, Mohun begins to advocate the reformist and progressive views of the Arya Samaj. This leads to a widening difference between him and the Tulsi family as a whole. A house-blessing ceremony has been held at Shama’s insistence and contrary to Mr. Biswas’s wishes when he is settled at The Chase.

“He was taken completely by surprise, and lost his temper. ‘What the hell you think I look like?’ he asked in English. ‘The Maharajah of Barrackpore? And what the hell for I should get Hari to come and bless this place? *This* place? Look for yourself.’ He pointed to the kitchen and slapped the wall of the shop. ‘Is bad enough as it is. To feed your family on top of all this is really going too damn far.’” (P. 152).

Self-actualizers are true to one-self, rather than being how others want. Mr. Biswas doesn’t care about what and how others want. One afternoon when Mr. Biswas returns from his office, he finds that the rose-garden which he planted on one side of the house, has been destroyed and the ground leveled. He becomes furious. He is feeling so angry at this moment that he begins to break everything in his room. In such ways, throughout the novel he remains essentially true to himself rather than being how others want.

Most of Maslow’s subject had a mission to accomplish in life or some motive or anxiety ‘beyond’ themselves (instead of outside themselves) to ascertain. Mohun Biswas is not exceptional from this feature. He is deeply task centered throughout the story. He is found as the firm seeker of a house. After a several trial, at last he succeeds to find a house as his own address

of independence and happiness. Symbolically the Doll’s house reveals Mr. Biswas’s deep attraction towards a house. He firmly and frequently follows his task to be completed.

“Every room of the doll’s house was daintily furnished. The kitchen had a stove such as Mr. Biswas had never seen in real life, a safe and sink. As they progressed towards Hanuman House Mr. Biswas’s excitement cooled; his extravagance astonished, then frightened him. He had spent more than a month’s wages. He couldn’t take back the doll’s house now; he was attracting continuous attention. And he had bought nothing for Anand.” (P. 224-25).

Self-actualizers feel free from reliance on external authorities or others. They tend to be resourceful and independent. Autonomous quality can be found in the character of Mr. Biswas. On the occasion of Christmas, Mr. Biswas gives a gift of doll-house to his daughter only ignoring all the other children.

“ ‘What have you brought for the others?’

It was Mrs. Tulsi.

‘Didn’t have room,’ Mr. Biswas said gaily.

When I give, I give to all,’ Mrs. Tulsi said. ‘I am poor, but I give to all.

It is clear, however, that I cannot compete with Santa Claus.’

Her voice was even and he would have smiled, as at a witticism, but

When he looked at her he saw that her face was tight with anger.” (P. 225-26).

It leads to a lot of unpleasantness in the Tulsi household. Harassed by the sister’s taunting remarks, Shama breaks the doll’s house and throws it on the rubbish-heap. When Mr. Biswas comes to know of Shama’s action, he resents it greatly. A protest against Shama’s action, he takes Savi with him to Green Vale.

Self-actualizers seem to regenerate the perception of life’s fundamental goods. A sunset or a flower will be observed time after time as absolutely as it was at first. There is an “innocence of vision”, like that of an artist or child. The appreciation of life’s basic goods can be noticed in the character of Mr. Mohun Biswas. His life rounds around several places. In every new place, he decorates his surroundings newly.

He is seemed to different with natural aspects. A deep and real connection can be found in between Mr. Biswas and nature. As the narrator follows,

“Below the overarching tress the road was in soft shadow. Sunlight spotted the gravel in white blurs, spotted the wet green verges, the dark ridged trunks of trees. It was cool. And then Mr. Biswas began seeing the fruit trees. Avocado pear trees grew at the side of the road as casually as any bush; their fruit, only just out of flower, were tiny but already perfectly shaped, with a shine they would soon lose. The land between the road and the gully widened; the gully grew shallower. Beyond it Mr. Biswas saw the tall immortelles and their red and yellow flowers. And then the un-trodden road blazed with the flowers. Mr. Biswas picked one up, put it between his lips, tasted the nectar, blew and the bird-shaped flower whistled.” (p. 419).

The interpersonal relationships of self-actualizers are marked by deep loving bonds. Several interpersonal relationships are spreading throughout the novel and the protagonist is deeply connected with all the characters or persons. The relationship between Mr. Biswas and both Tara and Ajodha is noticeable. Tara and Ajodha are the best supporter of Mr. Biswas from his childhood. Afterwards his marriage this interpersonal relationship continues smoothly. Mr. Biswas with his children visits the house of Tara and Ajodha. They are quite hospitable to Mohun and his children.

Although having pleasing relationship with other, self-actualizing people admire desolation and feel blissful in their loneliness. His romantic, self-centered egotism has denied him the simple pleasure of sympathetic human companionship. In fact, this kind of loneliness lies at the heart of the human condition. As we find,

“He was disturbed by chatter and heavy footsteps, and made wide awake by the light coming in through the two open sections above the partition. Some aunts who had been waiting up below the house were now heard moving about the kitchen. The chatter continued, and laughter.” (p. 587).

He has not been feeling happy in this house because of its being a crowded, noisy, and dirty place. Mr. Biswas enjoys his loneliness.

Another quality which contributes to the favorable impression which Mr. Biswas makes upon our mind is his unfailing sense of humor and his wit. Most of the characters have been portrayed satirically by him. His chief targets of satire are Mrs. Tulsi, Shekhar, Owad, Govind, Hari and Chinta. He does not lose his sense of humor even in depressing circumstances. For instance, when the shop at The Chase shows losses even after Hari’s house blessing ceremony, he asks Shama if Hari can be invited to come and “un-bless” the shop so that the shop may make some profit. In Mohun’s voice, “I don’t want to know, Mr. Biswas said. ‘ I just don’t want to know. How about getting the house un-bless? You think Hari could manage That?’” (p. 164)

Mr. Biswas provides further evidence of his sarcastic wit when he mocks at Shama for having permitted Myna to go and pick the lice from Mrs. Tulsi’s head, a service which Mrs. Tulsi has rewarded by asking Mr. Biswas and his family to vacate the accommodation which they were occupying. It is also amusing to find Mr. Biswas using bad language to Mrs. Tulsi.

“Die! Sending poor little Myna to pick her lice. That did you any good? Eh? Think she would throw out the little god like that? One. The god must have a room to himself. You and me and my children can sleep in sugar-sacks. The Tulsi sleeping-bag. Patents applied for. Die, you old bitch!” (P. 555).

All Maslow’s self-actualizing person reports the frequent occurrences of peak perceptions (temporary moments of self-actualization). These events are characterized by feeling of joy, harmony and intense meaning. They feel associated with the universe, stronger than ever before, filled with light, beauty, elegance and so on. Temporary moments of self-actualization can be followed in the Epilogue immediately after The House. Anand’s unexpected success in the exhibition examination had brought much pleasure to Mr. Biswas. There is a sudden burst of good luck for the family when first Savi gets a scholarship to go abroad and when, two years later, Anand also gets a scholarship and goes to England. Again, the feeling of ecstasy can be noticed when Savi returns to Trinidad and gets a job at a bigger salary than Mr. Biswas himself could ever have got.

Self-actualizers possess humanity. They are amicable with anyone regardless of class, education, political belief, race and color. Of course, Mohan does not attain any high distinction in any field. His rebellion against the Tulsi family and its tyranny is the rebellion of a weak, mediocre man. Mr. Biswas's rebellion against Honuman House is an aberration.

Self-actualizers have few intimate friends rather than many superficial relationships. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Mr. Biswas has few intimate friends due to his comfort in solitude. Throughout the novel Alec is the good friend of Mohun. Alec is a Christian boy studying at the same school in which Mr. Biswas is admitted with Tara's help. They are always together at school. Even when the teacher tries to separate them by flogging them both, they again come together. On one occasion, Alec startles when his urine had turned blue as a result of swallowing some medical pills. Mr. Biswas, following Alec's example, also buys the same pills and swallows them with the same results. In Alec's company, Mr. Biswas smokes his first cigarettes and plays other pranks, typical of children of their ages. For some time after leaving school, Mr. Biswas loses touch with Alec but soon afterwards the two young men meet again. Alec has been figured out in the novel during the stages of Mr. Biswas's career. No other such intimate friend of Mr. Biswas can be noticed there in the book.

V. DISCUSSION

In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Mohun Biswas carries all of the natures of a self-actualizer according to the features of Abraham Maslow's concept of Self-actualization. He has the quality of self-actualizer. Among them efficient perception of reality, autonomy, socially compassionate, few friends, task centering, comfort with solitude, reliant on own experiences and judgments, non-hostile sense of humor, peak experience, spontaneous and natural, comfortable acceptance of self, others and nature are more explicit and dominant than other characteristics like profound interpersonal relations, and continued freshness of appreciation. His obsession with a house is nothing but one of the needs related with the hierarchy of needs and the step of self-actualization. In the pyramid of

needs, after achieving the "basic or physiological needs" safety needs: security, order and stability" come. It is important for the physical survival of the person. Physical security, order and stability are on the whole depending on around a safe living place. A house is not only a place of living for a person. House is the ground where a man can grow with his or her family members. It is a habitation of growing a soul. A home consists not only with family members but also with the bondage of love, affection, respect, dignity. Family produces the inborn instincts to a human being. In this way, house is a crucial space for anyone. A home full of family members builds up the psychology of a child. It also influences the identity of a man. A man may feel lonely and helpless without a house full of his kin though he is able to achieve the success of this mundane world. Anyone finds his authentic identity in his own home. One's self-realization is easier in his or her own space. In a home, anyone has the advantage to flourish one's inborn potentials.

Similarly, a man may become solely limited or restricted in the house which is not his own. Mohan has to transfer from one place to another, particularly one house to another. So there is no security, order and stability. That is why he is obsessed with a house of his own.

House is the most fundamental needs of human being. To actualize his self he becomes obsessed with his own house as the step of hierarchy of needs. Abraham Maslow used the term to describe a desire. Mr. Biswas desires for solving the problem regarding a house of his own where he would be independent from any prejudice, and lived a secure, creative, moral, ordered and stable life. After the 'basic or physiological needs', 'safety', 'love or belonging', 'self-esteem', Mr. Biswas fulfills his desires regarding his own house and other problems related his residence. He has reached to the pick of the pyramid of needs as he possesses morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, lack of prejudice, acceptance of facts.

Though he has some limitations and shortcomings in his character, he has reached at the top of the pyramids of the hierarchy of needs. Abraham Maslow felt that the idea of self-actualization speed up the individual's intention, or dictation to achieve budding ambitions. Mr.

Biswas desires for solving the problem regarding a house of his own where he would be independent. He has fulfilled his desires regarding his own house and solves other problems related his residence. He has reached to the pick of the pyramid of needs as he possesses morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, lack of prejudices, and acceptance of facts. He has achieved what a self-actualizer wants. Self-actualizer wants to become everything one is capable of becoming and in this novel Mr. Biswas achieves what he tries to get.

VI. CONCLUSION

V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the one of most celebrated novels in post-colonial literature. Mr. Biswas is a self-actualizer in *A House for Mr. Biswas* by V.S. Naipaul. He possesses the features of self-actualizers as theorized by Abraham Maslow.

Mr. Biswas can be described here as a self-actualizer finding him grappled with the most alluring nature of self-actualizer. Throughout the novel he perfectly proves himself as a self-actualizer with his continuous process of self-actualization. When almost all of the natures of a self-actualizer present in his personality, Mr. Biswas tends towards self-actualization. He strives for his self-fulfillment throughout the book. Sometimes he is found as selfish but it is not separated from the attempts to self-actualization. Sometimes some of the characteristics of self-actualizing people seem as selfishness because of their unique qualities such as autonomy, independent, comfort with solitude, non-hostile sense of humor etc. All of the significant aspects of his character affect every segment of *A House for Mr. Biswas*. As he stands for the post-colonial people, the post-colonial aspects of the novel are affected by the characterization of Mr. Biswas. Through the characterization of the protagonist V. S. Naipaul successfully unfolds both the external and internal features and feelings of the post-colonized people of previously colonized nations. Post-colonial people have the desire to actualize themselves like Mr. Biswas because they have such longing to the needs as described in Abraham Maslow's the hierarchy of needs.

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