



Literacy, imagination and autonomy in *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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ABSTRACT. The present article tackles the concepts of literacy, imagination and autonomy in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) by V. S. Naipaul. The novel reveals that the spread of the English language and Englishness became inevitable during British Imperialism since one of the instruments for its propagation was the imposition of the colonizer's set of values. It will be shown that although limited and detached from the learners' reality depicted in the narrative, the missionary school education engendered the imagination as a driving force upon which the protagonist, Mr. Biswas, relies in order to achieve his dreams of autonomy. Theory is mostly foregrounded on works by David Slater, Boaventura dos Santos and Diana Brydon.

Keywords: literacy, imagination, autonomy.

Letramento, autonomia e imaginação em *A House for Mr. Biswas*

RESUMO. O presente artigo versa sobre os conceitos de letramento (*literacy*), imaginação e autonomia em *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), de V. S. Naipaul. O romance revela que a difusão da língua inglesa e da inglesidade (*englishness*) tornou-se inevitável durante o imperialismo britânico, na medida em que estes eram instrumentos de propagação dos valores do colonizador. Demonstraremos que, apesar de limitada e desvinculada da realidade retratada na obra, era a educação proporcionada pelas escolas de missionários que engendrava a imaginação, força motriz que permite ao protagonista, Sr. Biswas, alcançar o seu desejo de autonomia. O campo teórico é constituído principalmente pelos estudos de David Slater, Boaventura dos Santos e Diana Brydon.

Palavras-chave: letramento, imaginação, autonomia.

Introduction

This paper aims at discussing the concepts of literacy and imagination in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) by V. S. Naipaul. The novel reveals that the spread of the English language and of Englishness became inevitable within educated Trinidadian circles during and after the period of British Imperialism. One of the instruments for its propagation was the imposition of the colonizer's set of values provided by literacy, by the contact colonized peoples had with the English literary tradition through education, and by the imagining of other ways of life it enabled.

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, V. S. Naipaul is one of the best-known Caribbean writers. Of Indian ancestry, Naipaul was born on the island of Trinidad in 1932. His early novels share the setting of the writer's childhood and are comic accounts of Trinidadian society, like *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) that deals with the process of (de)colonization. Published in 1961, *A House for Mr. Biswas* is considered one of Naipaul's

most biographical works, for it narrates the life story of his father, Seepersad Naipaul. In the 1983 preface, Naipaul reveals a feeling of proximity towards the novel, "Of all my books, this is the one that is closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child". (NAIPAUL, 2003b, p. 128).

Naipaul's writing, like most Third World literatures, has "[...] a history and [is] heterogeneous, combining endogenous concepts and ideas with constructs and themes imported from abroad". (SLATER, 1998, p. 661). This is revealed, according to Mustafa, in the,

[...] foundation of his [Naipaul's] fictive base, which lies in his attempt to recreate, adapt and transpose a specific narrative tradition onto his locale, rather than look for alternative narrative categories that may stem from the more local and alternative habits of expression (MUSTAFA, 1995, p. 38).

For instance, at the same time Naipaul had chosen the European form of the 'Bildungsroman' to write *A House for Mr. Biswas*, this novel is concerned with the problematic of the postcolonial subject coupled to the issue of literacy.

The issue of literacy and imagination in *A House for Mr. Biswas*

A House for Mr. Biswas portrays the lifelong search of the protagonist, Mohun Biswas, in order to "[...] lay claim to [his] portion of the Earth [...]" (NAIPAUL, 2003a, p. 8) by possessing a house that he could call his own. Mr. Biswas had few prospects in life, for different from his brothers he was not fit for physical labor in the sugarcane fields. Therefore, after his father's death his aunt and mother decided that he should be formally educated. Mr. Biswas ends up attending a Canadian missionary school where Lal, a converted Presbyterian who used to belong to a low Hindu caste, was his teacher. Even though Lal spoke 'broken English' - a typical way of describing how people from India spoke the language of the metropolis - he taught young Biswas how to read and write in the English language. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the narrator discusses the limited reach of the disciplines taught in missionary schools:

Mr. Biswas was taught other things. He learned to say the Lord's Prayer in Hindi from the 'King George V Hindi Reader', and he learned many English poems by heart from the 'Royal Reader'. At Lal's dictation he made copious notes, which he never seriously believed, about geysers, rift valleys, watersheds, currents, the Gulf Stream, and a number of deserts. He learned about oases, which Lal taught him to pronounce 'osis', and ever afterwards an oasis meant for him nothing more than four or five date trees around a narrow pool of fresh water, surrounded for unending miles by white sand and hot sun. He learned about igloos. In arithmetic he got as far as simple interest and learned to turn dollars and cents into pounds, shilling and pence. The history Lal taught he regarded as simply a school subject, a discipline, as unreal as the geography; and it was from the boy in the red bodice that he first heard, with disbelief, about the Great War (NAIPAUL, 2003a, p. 44).

In this extract, we find that there is a huge gap between what was taught in school and the students' reality. They learned to recite Christian prayers in Hindi, with the obvious purpose of conversion, the books from which Lal dictated approached unimaginable issues concerning World History and Geography that were either stereotypical, like the oasis, or hard to picture, as the geysers and igloos. His mathematics were limited to converting dollars into pounds and, whereas important events, such as The Great War, whose consequences could already be felt on the island, were not even mentioned in class; instead students had to memorize English poems, which meant little to them.

Naipaul argues in his non-fictional text *Jasmine* (NAIPAUL, 2003c, p. 46-47), that Trinidad was an

island without a 'mythology'; therefore, for Trinidadians, all literatures were foreign, since during the colonization period Trinidad lacked a literary tradition and all books came from abroad. Therefore, as stated by Naipaul, in order to read a book, they had to 'to be able to adapt' the context of the novel to their own narratives. The re-creation and adaptation present in most of Naipaul's oeuvre carries traces of hybridism (BHABHA, 1994 apud SLATER, 1998) as a consequence of his colonial upbringing.

In a similar way, the fictional text *A House for Mr. Biswas* discloses the importance of literacy, whereby the narrator discusses the process of re-creation and adaptation upon which Biswas relied during the act of reading literary works produced in the Empire. Thus, he managed to make sense of foreign works by transposing their contents to his own personal colonial narrative, "Then it was that he discovered the solace of Dickens. Without difficulty he transferred characters and settings to people and places that he knew". (NAIPAUL, 2003a, p. 394).

The education Biswas received was part of the Empire's civilizing mission; therefore, it was the one accepted, while the knowledge and cultural values of the colonized were disregarded. Boaventura Santos states that "[...] the colonial zone is 'par excellence' the realm of incomprehensible beliefs and behaviors which in no way can be considered knowledge". (SANTOS, 2007, p. 51). This manner of thinking was implicit in the imperial discourse and it revealed how culture and knowledge produced by colonized societies was not considered as such. Consequently, when Biswas chooses to incorporate the dominant knowledge to the detriment of his own Indo-Caribbean cultural background, he realizes that he is in fact excluded from the possibilities shown in the books. The protagonists of Samuel Smiles, a British writer of self-help books and heroic biographies, were able to work hard and be rewarded in the end, whereas Biswas remains at a standstill because of the limitations of his colonial background:

He stayed in the back trace and read Samuel Smiles. He had bought one of his books in the belief that it was a novel, and had become an addict. Samuel Smiles was as romantic and satisfying as any novelist, and Mr. Biswas saw himself in many Samuel Smiles heroes: he was young, he was poor, and he fancied he was struggling. But there always came a point when resemblance ceased. The heroes had rigid ambitions and lived in countries where ambitions could be pursued and had a meaning. He had no ambition, and in this hot land, apart from opening a shop or buying a motorbus, what could he do? What could he invent? (NAIPAUL, 2003a, p. 189).

Nevertheless, it was by means of his colonial education that Mohun Biswas became familiar with the dominant values and culture through canonical literary works, to which the protagonist turns as a means of escape by imagining other worlds and a different life. Unlike his father and brother's fate as sugarcane field laborers in rural Trinidad, Biswas's life takes a different turn once he moves into the urban setting, the capital, Port of Spain, and he convinces the editor of the *Trinidad Sentinel* - after having worked there as a sign painter - to hire him as a freelance reporter. Becoming part of the newspaper staff gave him a glimpse of autonomy, for he could now accumulate capital in order to buy a house. Biswas's activities make it clear that while he incorporates capitalist values of individuality, he rejects his roots, portrayed as the collective Indian microcosm from which he felt more and more distant, due to the socioeconomic changes that arose along with modernity.

The newspaper itself was not randomly chosen by Naipaul as 'the' means of communication within the colony of Trinidad depicted in his novel. According to Benedict Anderson (apud MUSTAFA, 1995, p. 39), the newspaper represents a notion of stability and participation within an imagined community, which, in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, is represented as the product of three different geographical spaces - Imperial Britain, an imagined India and the Caribbean. An imaginative geography, such as that symbolized by the *Trinidad Sentinel*, is essential for the creation of expatriate imagined communities as is the case with the Indo-Caribbean peoples in Trinidad depicted in the novel.

Accordingly, the newspaper is a space where the local and the global fuse as a kind of 'glocality'¹, in the sense that it stands for the imagined geography of Trinidad, or rather, it encompasses in the physical space represented by its pages, local happenings and events once they are transformed into news, such as obituaries and domestic accidents, as the article entitled, 'Four Children Roasted in Hut Blaze Mother, Helpless, Watches' (NAIPAUL, 2003a, p. 341), that describes a fact that took place in Trinidad. Concomitantly, international issues are also approached, as interviews with English writers, winners of scholarships to Oxford, unusual happenings as the American explorer that died on his way back in 'Daddy Comes Home in a Coffin: US explorer's last journey ON ICE' (NAIPAUL, 2003a, p. 344), and the impacts of the Second World

War, as Biswas was made a shipping reporter and was put in contact with Nazi ships from Germany,

[...] he [Biswas] was made shipping reporter, taking the place of a man who had been killed at the docks by a crane load of flour accidentally falling from a great height. It was the tourist season and the harbour was full of ships from America and Europe. Mr. Biswas went aboard German ships, was given excellent lighters, saw photographs of Adolf Hitler, and was bewildered by the Heil Hitler salutes. (NAIPAUL, 2003a, p. 343)

In the context of the novel, the newspaper is revealed as a product of early globalization, for it is primarily a Western means of transmitting the news. In the context of the colonial Trinidad portrayed in the novel the sensationalist and appellative format the newspaper undertakes, together with a hint of fiction demanded by the editor, allows it to pursue its main objective, which is to gather more and more readers on an island where being literate is not the rule, but the exception:

For the facetiousness that came to him as soon as he put pen to paper, and the fantasy he had hitherto dissipated in quarrels with Shama and in invective against the Tulsis, were just the things Mr. Burnett wanted. 'Let them get their news from the other papers' he said. That is exactly what they are doing at the moment anyway. The only way we can get readers is by shocking them. Get them angry. Frighten them. You just give me one good fright, and the job is yours (NAIPAUL, 2003a, p. 340).

Hence, the function of the narrative of the newspaper revealed in *A House for Mr. Biswas* corroborates Brydon's positioning that,

Fictional imaginings, stories and poems remain some of the most powerful modes we have for entering and engaging difficult ways of knowing and thus stretching our imaginations in the ways that will be necessary for addressing the challenges now facing our interconnected world with globalization (BRYDON, 2009a, p. 10).

A point may be made if we consider the newspaper as the space from which the islanders in the novel could be in contact with global issues. The latter were transformed into news tainted with fiction, as is the case with the *Trinidad Sentinel*. Thus, imagination becomes more flexible and dealing with real world challenges would become easier to the readers of the newspaper since it can be perceived as means of creating a national imaginary and generating nationalism.

Literacy also engenders imagination, which is a fundamental force for the maintenance of the postcolonial imaginary. For instance, according to

¹Diana Brydon's term in "Difficult Forms of Knowing: Enquiry, Injury and Translocated Relations of Postcolonial Responsibilities" (BRYDON, 2009a).

Appadurai, it is the imagination that “[...] allows people to consider migration, resist state violence, seek social redress and design new forms of civic association and collaboration, often across boundaries” (APPADURAI, 2000, p. 6). As a result, the immigrants must be able to imagine ways of life that are better than the reality in which they are inserted. In the novel, immigrants from India – as is the case of Biswas’s predecessors – came to Trinidad as indentured laborers to replace the African slaves in the sugarcane crops after Emancipation. It is obvious that the ones who chose to immigrate were able to imagine better life conditions than those in India which was still occupied by the British. In a way, Biswas’s journey is similar to that of his ancestors, given that imagination, provided by literacy, acts as a driving force that keeps the character searching for his house and preventing him from giving up his dreams of becoming an autonomous subject, both by means of his contact with the English culture through literary works and by means of his working tool, the newspaper *Trinidad Sentinel*.

This leads us to Glissant’s conception of the imaginary adopted by Mignolo (apud BRYDON, 2009bp. 1), who states that the imaginary “[...] signifies all the ways a culture has of perceiving and conceiving of the world [...]”, which makes us consider Naipaul’s novel as part of the realm of the ‘postcolonial imaginary’, for its own conception, as well as Mr. Biswas’s journey are only possible because of that specific historical moment of the imperial encounters of Britain, India and the Caribbean. It would be difficult, otherwise, for us to imagine such a rich and hybrid account of colonial literacy – its role, and its purposes – as it is portrayed in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, this article deals with the different ways in which literacy is approached in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* – primarily by colonial education and also by the newspaper. The novel works within two different spatial dimensions: that of imagination – represented not only by Biswas’s dreams of autonomy by working for the *Trinidad Sentinel* and owning a house; and that of reality – expressed by his colonial limitations: his job was in fact at a dead end, and he is only able to afford a makeshift house at the end of the novel.

Consequently, the spread of English as of the British Empire is a double bind in the sense that as the

colonized incorporates the language of the colonizer the result is the creation of something new, neither entirely metropolitan, nor essentially native. Therefore, the result of this encounter in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the emergence of cultural and geographical imaginaries which undermine essentialist conceptions of literacy and literature, that are continuously being transformed and adapted according to different postcolonial translocations.

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