

“We are all mad here”: The Changing Roles of Mental Illness in V. S. Naipaul’s Fiction

Madness and mental illness are common thematic elements across much of V. S. Naipaul’s fiction. What is interesting about Naipaul’s play with madness, is that he uses it in way that transcends cultures and nationalistic borders. Naipaul experienced his own battle with mental illness at an early age. It is an experience which had a philosophical influence upon him which he elaborates on in a 1979 interview with Linda Blandford. He states, “When I was 19 I was very, very ill. All my life since I recovered has been a great celebration of sanity, of knowing how a hair’s breadth separates one from mental torment. It’s too close” (52). Naipaul’s personal connection to mental illness makes the use of it in his fiction more profound. Considering the pervasive nature of the madness theme throughout Naipaul’s works, it raises the question, about how the madness functions within the works themselves. From a broad sense, and taking Naipaul’s canon as a whole, the madness has a type of equalizing power, since it seems to show little regard to race or nationality, however, it is important to analyze what role the madness plays in the individual works, and whether this madness, at the more micro level, is affected by the national demarcations. For this project I will focus on two of Naipaul’s works where the madness plays a significant role in both the plot and the character identity. By comparing the function and effects of madness in *A House for Mr. Biswas* and the later short story “Tell Me Who to Kill” we are able to isolate the nationalistic influence, as both stories contain deeply invasive accounts of their character’s mental breakdowns, but the most important aspect is the fact that both are told from the perspective of an Indo-Trinidadian, where the biggest divergence between the two stories comes from the fact that for the one, the mental breakdown occurs in Trinidad, and for the other the mental breakdown occurs in England.

During the “Green Vale” chapter of V. S. Naipaul’s deeply personal work *A House for Mr. Biswas*, we as readers are presented with a visceral and a rather invasive view of the titular character’s struggle with mental illness. The account is particularly uncomfortable due to its sheer interiority; we spend most of the narrative trapped by the ruminations of the eponymous Mr. Biswas as he falls further into madness. The account is both disorienting and intimate because we are experiencing it through Mr. Biswas’s own perceptions. The novel itself is a fictional appropriation of Naipaul’s father’s life, and while Seepersad Naipaul did experience a similar mental breakdown, this moment in particular takes on greater significance when we connect it instead with V. S. Naipaul’s own history with mental illness. In an interview with Charles Michener, Naipaul elaborated on his experiences and he explained what motivated his fits of hysteria: “The old fear of extinction, and I mean of dying, I mean the fear of being reduced to nothing, of feeling crushed. It’s partly the old colonial anxiety of having one’s individuality destroyed” (66). From this quote we can see how the mental illness was exacerbated by the colonial environment, and it also points to an inextricable link between the themes of madness and colonization.

The bout of madness experienced during the “Green Vale” chapter comes to be a defining turning point in the novel, just as the mental illness becomes a defining part of Mr. Biswas’s character. Considering the formative impact this mental breakdown has on Mr. Biswas, it raises the question about the role of mental illness in the novel as a whole. Much of the criticism surrounding this novel, and Naipaul’s work in general, concerns investigating the themes of identity and self-assertion in a postcolonial setting. Though many scholars reflect on the “Green Vale” experience, they typically use it as evidence to show the negative effects of the postcolonial loss of identity. Critics like Judith Levy, who argues along Lacanian terms that the

story is about Mr. Biswas seeking entrance to the symbolic sphere of words, ultimately asserts that Mr. Biswas is being torn between the symbolic and the real, and that is where his mental breakdown finds its source. The prevailing critical argument seems to view Mr. Biswas's bout of mental illness as a sign of his failure to successfully navigate diverging sources of identity. Though I do agree that there is an essential psychological rift caused by the postcolonial effects on identity, I diverge from the critical tradition by arguing that the way mental illness is portrayed in the "Green Vale" chapter shows that it is much more than just a symptom of the postcolonial fragmentation. On the contrary, the personal way that the mental breakdown is depicted shows how Naipaul is using the idea of mental illness as a type of identity assertion. Naipaul subverts the notion of mental illness as shameful by using it to show the legitimacy of his characters. Later, the mental breakdown becomes one of the key connecting factors between Mr. Biswas and his son, and the madness becomes a powerful legacy. In the end, the mental illness helps build the legitimacy of the cultural psyche by showing it through the perspective of a fractured mind. The constructive role that mental illness has on Mr. Biswas contrasts vividly with the damaging effects it has on the narrator in "Tell Me Who to Kill."

In order to understand the role that mental illness plays in establishing identity in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, we must first understand the state of identity in postcolonial Caribbean culture. Scholar Min Zhou grapples with these issues in her book *The Transcription of Identities: A Study of Postcolonial Writings*, and shows that identity is a rather complicated entity, but she qualifies this by stating that identity is a cultural idea that only becomes problematic once it is shattered (11-12). Zhou states, "This shattered identity emerges with many new layers and facets that modulate each other, and invariably cause the subject to wonder who he really is, where he belongs or should belong, culminating in difficulties with understanding his place in the world

(11). The Trinidadian culture described in Naipaul's works is one that is pulled between three influences: the Indian heritage, the English colonization, and the native Trinidad environment. These competing spheres of identification make it difficult to form a stable identity in this culture. Peggy Nightingale in her book *Journey Through Darkness* makes a telling observation about Naipaul's work by stating that, "[His] fiction investigates the possible responses an individual may make to the dilemma of existence in a post-imperial world" (3). In essence, Naipaul's works are case studies of postcolonial discontent. The madness of Mr. Biswas becomes an important tool in his quest for post-imperial identity.

We can recognize the madness of the "Green Vale" chapter as an aspect of self-assertion through the way that Mr. Biswas relinquishes himself to the madness with a degree of self-awareness and agency. Critic Gora Chand Das succinctly renders Mr. Biswas's position at this point in the novel: "Mr. Biswas has always struggled to seek and define his sense of self but to no avail. *A House for Mr. Biswas* masterfully evokes a man's quest of autonomy against the backdrop of post-colonial Trinidad" (81). The entire novel has been detailing Mr. Biswas's attempts to take control of his own life; it is almost ironic that he displays the most sense of control when he begins to lose his mind. The madness comes upon Mr. Biswas during his first attempt at building a house. The longer it takes and the more disappointments he faces the more he slips into showing signs of paranoia and obsession. His discomfort builds until he realizes that he is afraid of people, and he lets this fear take over his life. The emphasis here is that he fully submits himself to the madness; it does not sweep him away, but instead he sinks into it: "The darkness filled his head. All his life had been good until now. And he had never known. He had spoiled it all by worry and fear. About a rotting house, the threats of illiterate neighbors. Now he would never more be able to go among people. He surrendered to the darkness" (255). What is

striking here is Mr. Biswas's uncommon self-awareness; he knows that his fears are ruining his life, but he does not fight against it, instead he resigns himself to it. At least at the beginning of his ordeal Mr. Biswas shows he has an element of control over the situation. Coming back to Nightingale, she quotes another critic, Gordon Rohlehr, who provides useful insight into why Mr. Biswas so readily faces the madness, and why he is able to maintain an element of control: "There is the necessary rebellion which the individual must make against society and the void which must be confronted. In the void are meaninglessness, non-entity, fear, lunacy and chaos, the storm within and the storm without. It is out of this confrontation that the new personality grows" (55). The madness is a type of social rebellion; it is a calculated confrontation with the void. However, in going against Rohlehr's final statement, I argue that it is within the void itself that he finds the new identity.

As the madness progresses Mr. Biswas begins to lose his grasp on reality, but uses the situation to begin asserting an active sort of control over his environment. The further we go into this account of madness the less coherent Mr. Biswas's mental state becomes, and it begins to take on an aspect of the sinister: "Every morning the period of lucidity lessened . . . Until there was no lucidity at all, and all action was irrelevant and futile" (258) Even in the presence of Anand Mr. Biswas's fears consume him until they become ingrained in his character, but in time he uses his fear to stimulate action:

There were many reasons why Mr. Biswas moved from the barracks to the finished room of his house. It was positive action; it was a confident, defiant gesture; there was his continuing unease at hearing people moving about the barracks. And there was his hope that living in a new house in a new year might bring about a new state of mind. (269)

This quote aligns with Seodial Frank H. Deena's assertion about the influence of place on identity. In his book *Situating Caribbean Literature and Criticism in Multicultural and Postcolonial Studies* he states, "Much of Caribbean literature is concerned with the importance of belonging to a place, and when this feeling of belonging is destroyed, a person's identity is lost" (34). Mr. Biswas's desire to build a house displays his active pursuit of control over his environment. It is this active element that sets apart Mr. Biswas's mental breakdown.

In the end, the greatest way that Mr. Biswas's mental illness serves to assert his identity is the way it defines him as distinct from both of his conflicting cultural ties; by being able to understand himself in isolation, he is able to see the legitimacy of his existence in the broader culture. Min Zhou states, "The dominant power of the imperial regime positions the colonial to see himself as an 'other'. This 'otherness' is inscribed in the colonial discourse" (34). What Mr. Biswas's mental breakdown gives him is the chance to become even further removed from the toxic association between the "self" and the "other"; he becomes an "other" that is distinctly removed from the "otherness" of his native culture. He becomes an aberration, but this allows him to become a distinct entity outside of the conditioned social order. By gaining an outside view of himself and the culture Mr. Biswas is able to more fully understand his situation. Upon reflection Mr. Biswas achieves a moment of epiphany that he declares to his dog: "You are an animal and think that because I have a head and hands and look as I did yesterday I am a man, I am deceiving you. I am not whole" (256). By denouncing his "wholeness" Mr. Biswas is essentially promoting the possibility of its existence. By understanding himself in his broken state, he is able to see his own legitimacy. It is the affirmation of presence through absence; through the absence of his lucidity, he gains a consciousness of the presence of a definable

identity. His fractured mental state allows him to assert himself within the stringent confines of his own culture.

We have seen the ways that Mr. Biswas's mental illness helped to form his identity, and ultimately it is this madness that becomes the legacy which he leaves to his son. The relationship between father and son is such an important aspect of this novel, and the ordeal at Green Vale seems to be a major connection between these two characters. While Anand watches over his father during the most trying time at Green Vale he begins to assimilate his father's fears. At the end of the novel, after Anand has gone to England, the fear seems to be the only thing linking the two across the seas: "He missed Anand and worried about him. Anand's letters, at first rare, became more frequent. They were gloomy, self-pitying; then they were tinged with a hysteria which Mr. Biswas immediately understood" (561). At first we are alarmed by Anand's inheritance of his father's hysteria, but looking at the text as a way to come to terms with mental illness as an element of identity, this final detail shows Anand asserting his presence in a foreign culture. The madness is his father's legacy, but it is also precisely what Anand needs to survive. Dagmar Barnouw supports this idea in his book *Naipaul's Strangers*, in it he elaborates on a moment in V. S. Naipaul's *Prologue to an Autobiography*: "Writing *Biswas* out of the father's writing, the son shaped that story with the help of the father's 'gift' of fear to him—a gift that would prove as important for his becoming a (good) writer as would his father's love, which was inseparable from his fear" (31). We see how this fear, this mental unrest, becomes a source of strength with applications both inside and outside of the novel.

Both Mr. Biswas and Anand are able to appropriate their mental illness to establish their individual identities under the pressure of postcolonial preconceptions. They assert the legitimacy of their presence by showing it in its fractured state. Critics who only view the

madness displayed in the novel as a symptom of the colonial disease are missing the ways in which it can be turned into an element of rebellion and strength. The madness becomes the legacy of Mr. Biswas, a type of cursed inheritance perhaps, but one that allows for true freedom and individuality. For at that moment, though he may be considered a “madman,” at least he is considered a “man.”

As we move towards “Tell Me Who to Kill” we are faced with the jarring difference that the role of madness plays in this short story. Mr. Biswas uses the madness as an assertion of his identity, but the narrator’s madness in “Tell Me Who to Kill” completely consumes him and erases his identity. This shift is particularly peculiar when we consider the fact that the essential nature of madness shared between Mr. Biswas and the narrator is the same. Mr. Biswas talks about his fear of people and locking himself away in the “Green Vale” chapter, which is a sentiment echoed by the narrator of “Tell Me Who to Kill” when he states, “I don’t want to be out in the streets now. It isn’t that I don’t want people to see me; I don’t want to see people” (59). In both cases the fear is connected to people. In the case of Mr. Biswas it is an external fear; a delusional sense of being threatened by an imagined malevolent force. The narrator’s fear is drastically different, it is an internalized fear reflected back at himself; a sense that his presence is somehow pernicious or rotten—he often repeats the phrase “My life spoil.” The narrator cannot get over the fact that he is an aberrant force in the settled English culture. Right after the narrator discloses the fact that he does not wish to see people, he states, “Frank tell me it is because they are white. I don’t know, when Frank talk like that I feel he is challenging me to kill one of them” (59). We see a type of violent reaction on the part of the narrator when he is faced with his cultural “otherness.”

The narrator's fear of his own deviant status coupled with the fear of rejection comes out in his disorienting depiction of the accidental murder of his brother's school friend. The fractured nature of the narrative and the unreliability of the narrator's mental state make this scene a difficult one to understand. The tone of the description is delirious, and the weird mixture of cinematic references, makes it difficult parcel out reality from delusion. For my purposes, I will consider this scene as merely a projection of the narrator's mental unrest. The narrator describes being "strangers in the house" (57), applying this to the narrator's larger situation we get a sense that he is overly self-conscious of his strangeness and the feeling of not fitting in in the English culture. This sentiment is echoed by the narrator when he first arrives in England as he states, "The mystery land is theirs, the stranger is you" (75). The narrator fixates on this quality of estrangement, and this fuels his internalized fear of himself in society. Going back to the house, the narrator discloses his trepidation over the negative aspect of his presence in this foreign environment. He states, "It is as though because you are frightened of something it is bound to come, as though because you are carrying danger with you danger is bound to come" (57). The narrator views himself as a dangerous entity and fears the inevitable rupture. The narrator goes on to describe the death of the white boy and the surreal experience of eating with the boy's parents while hiding the dead body. Reading this as symbolic of the narrator's English experience, we see that the narrator's madness has its roots in this idea that he has done some kind of violence to the English society. He views it as a fact that is a barely contained secret which will presage his ultimate rejection from society.

This fear of rejection, or the sense of holding a negative place in society, has connections to the cultural moment in which this story is based and written. Matthew Whittle provides a telling description of the role of immigration in Naipaul's works in his article "Hosts and

Hostages.” In it he describes how the fluctuating opinions on immigration lead to the damaging disconnect between expectations and reality on the part of the immigrant: “Naipaul’s novels articulate the experience of those migrants who came to the imperial ‘motherland’ from the Caribbean. Rather than finding a welcoming nation, in which all citizens of the Commonwealth were seen as equals regardless of skin colour, [the] Caribbean characters remain on the margins of mainstream British society” (78-9). To understand this effect, we must first understand the timeline of immigration sentiment, and how “Tell Me Who to Kill” fits within this timeline. This story was published as part of a collection in 1971, but the narrator places the pivotal moment in the house as occurring sometime in the mid-fifties. Britain experienced a massive in-flux of immigration in the post-war era. The British Nationality Act was passed in 1948, which established, “‘equality of status and rights throughout the empire’ and the entitlement of all subjects of the British crown ‘to live and work in Britain’” (qtd. in Whittle 79). Whittle goes on to outline how this act encouraged the immigration of mainly non-white Caribbean subjects. We can infer that the narrator and his brother are both part of this initial wave of immigration—a group of immigrants lured by the promise of opportunity and equality. The validity of this push for immigration was explained by the necessity of labor for post-war reconstruction. However, after the first wave of open immigration from the Commonwealth, the situation quickly turned more hostile, Whittle describes that, “Many in Britain resisted the presence of non-white migrants and mass migration became known in public debate as Britain’s ‘colour problem’” (79). Race riots in 1958 and other problems eventually lead to the passing of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962, which established stricter regulations on immigration. Naipaul writes this story knowing the unstable state and the conflicted history of immigration in England. The

narrator's feelings of being unwanted and his prophecy of a future rejection are not completely off the mark.

One of the most telling differences between Mr. Biswas's experience and the narrator's experience is the ways in which they fall into the madness. As mentioned with Mr. Biswas, he has an almost active role in his mental breakdown, "he surrendered to the darkness" (255). This description contrasts directly with the narrator's own depiction of his first intimations of madness: "And the next morning again I wake up in the darkness at four o'clock, but this time I am frightened, I only feel like crying and praying for forgiveness, and I begin to know something gone wrong with me, that my life and my mind not right" (73). The narrator has no sense of control over his situation, and unlike Mr. Biswas who surrenders to the darkness, he wakes up in it; he is already mired by the madness before he is even consciously aware of it. This passivity is what gives the narrator's madness such destructive power, and his passivity is only further exacerbated by the feelings of displacement that come with his relocation to England. We see this through the narrator's contemplation of the train station: "Everybody is brisk then, and happy, no time for talk, because they can see where they are going. Since I come to this country that is something I can't do. I can't see where I am going. I can only wait to see what is going to turn up" (55). The narrator is in a state of complete submission in England, and he relies on Frank for all of his direction.

There is something ultimately toxic about the British system and we see this through the narrator's characterization of Frank, a man we assume to be some kind of caretaker for the narrator. Where Mr. Biswas is able to use his mental breakdown as a way to assert his independence, the narrator's madness traps him within the system that has been causing him harm. Mr. Biswas's condition is treated by putting him into isolation, but through this isolation

he is able to gain a sense of his own individuality. The narrator of “Tell Me Who to Kill”, on the other hand, is forced into a form of institutionalized control. Frank pushes the narrator into society and the narrator describes how Frank takes satisfaction when people see him with the narrator; it is possible to read this as Frank taking satisfaction in his position of power, “we are never quite certain whether Frank is attempting to break down barriers or whether he is merely goading the narrator into making an interesting display” (Nightingale 157). This is a thought further reinforced when the narrator muses on his relationship with Frank:

He is my friend, the only friend I have. I alone know how much he help me, from how far he bring me back. But he is digging me all the time because he prefer to see me weak, He like opening up manholes for me to fall in; he is anxious to push me down in the darkness. His attitude, in the café and then at the bus stop and then in the bus, is: keep off, this man is weak, this man is under my protection. (82)

The system that is meant to be protecting him and helping him is only further exacerbating the narrator’s condition. The narrator is never allowed to develop on his own and therefore his character becomes consumed by the character of Frank.

The situation in “Tell Me Who to Kill” is almost a complete inversion of Mr. Biswas’s experience, and unlike Mr. Biswas, the madness serves to destroy the identity of the narrator instead of creating it. The important question to consider is what makes these two experiences so different? How can the same type of madness engender progress and identity on one hand and then become a force of complete cessation on the other? Although *Mr. Biswas* is a deeply personal work and it is known that Naipaul drew on his own experiences with mental illness to inform on Mr. Biswas’s breakdown, the situation in “Tell Me Who to Kill” more closely mirrors the conditions surrounding Naipaul’s own breakdown. Naipaul describes his breakdown in an

interview with in 1987 after he is asked if he had experienced a type of “emotional crisis” at Oxford: “I had a mental disturbance owing to the strangeness of where I was, to loneliness. One was so far from home . . . so far from what one knew. It was an alien world, Oxford . . . it was clear one would remain a stranger” (101). This description of the experience seems to resonate with the situation in “Tell Me Who to Kill” as both are concerned with the feeling of displacement and the effects of the English environment on their madness. Judith Levy also explains how the description of the journey to England in “Tell Me Who to Kill” echoes Naipaul’s own voyage, and she goes on to state that within the story, “[the arrival] stands as a symbol of rupture that is not understood by the protagonist and can lead only to impotence and rage” (70). I agree with Levy’s reading and I argue that it is at this moment of rupture, or displacement, where we find the key difference between *A House for Mr. Biswas* and “Tell Me Who to Kill.” The Trinidadian environment in *Mr. Biswas* gives Mr. Biswas an outward direction for his madness, and he is able to use it to rebel against the Tulsis, and in some greater degree, the culture he feels is holding him back, but feeling displaced England leads to the narrator’s madness and stagnation.

The narrator in “Tell Me Who to Kill” does not have a clear direction for his madness. We get a sense of the narrator’s desperation at the end of the story when he is contemplating the guests at his brother’s wedding. The narrator is suddenly seized with a panicked and unheard plea: “O God, show me the enemy. Once you find out who the enemy is, you can kill him. But these people here they confuse me. Who hurt me? Who spoil my life? Tell me who to beat back . . . Tell me who to kill” (98). The narrator is desperate for some kind of direction, a type of outlet for his madness. Nightingale contributes a similar interpretation when she states that, “Naipaul suggests that history does not answer the personal need of victims such as the narrator to affix

blame and direct an attack” (161). The problem with the English environment is that there is no tangible enemy, the things that are holding the narrator back are all conceptual or ideological, and without a form to rebel against, the madness simply pushes the narrator further and further into the darkness.

Thus we see how the environment greatly affects the role of madness in V. S. Naipaul’s fiction. In *A House for Mr. Biswas* the madness acts as a turning point in the novel and Mr. Biswas’s life. It gives him the power to assert his identity in an oppressive culture. Through his actions, the madness becomes Mr. Biswas’s legacy. However, transcribe that same mental breakdown into the English system and it becomes a force that annihilates both identity and agency. The madness of the narrator in “Tell Me Who to Kill” forces him into nothingness. Madness is a characteristically fractured concept, and we can see through these works of V. S. Naipaul that it is a force that is always precipitously balanced between creation and destruction.

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