



**V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS* : A HEROIC TALE OF
THE PROTAGONIST AGAINST ODDS**



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ABSTRACT

Naipaul has earned tremendous name and fame as a celebrated writer among the prominent literary personalities of the modern times whose contribution to literature is quite significant and distinguished. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is regarded as Naipaul's major achievement and the novel presents graphically the colonial situation in Trinidad around the time of World War II. The colonial set-up has been scrutinized quite comprehensively. Mr. Biswas, the protagonist has been set against the conventional and customary conservative Hindu ideas and ideology. He is completely isolated in a crowd and is the lone fighter against the powerful conservative system filled with rotten myths, customs and rituals.

KEYWORDS

Struggle, Oppression, Dominance, Hanuman House, Tulsidom.

RESEARCH PAPER

V.S. Naipaul is a writer to be comprehended and understood at several levels: autobiographical, racial, cultural, intellectual, political, and if I may say, psychological. There are many critical and strong opinions about him and his writings. Notwithstanding the scathing and sarcastic attacks from his critics, particularly in India and the Caribbean, his reputation has grown manifold. He has already won a string of prestigious and distinguished literary awards which might be the dream of several of his colleagues in England and other parts of the world. Each book written by him is published and proclaimed as a great literary event. The Nobel Prize eluded him on a couple of occasions, but finally was bestowed on him in 2001. The most striking thing about Naipaul is his relentless energy to hit upon a new problem every time he sits down to write. He has not forgotten his past, ancestry, his rootless status, the humble beginnings, and the uncomfortable feeling of being an outcast.

It is important to mention that with the publication of *A House for Mr. Biswas* in 1961; Naipaul has secured an honourable place among the prominent writers of the age. This work added to his glory as it dealt with all the major issues of the period just as the weaknesses of the society, the question of alienation, search for identity and its bitter attack on social problems. Memory and imagination here created an epic novel, richly variegated in its portraiture of felt life in all its vitality and tragic possibilities, which anticipate the dark seriousness of his later works. This novel highlights the socio-cultural and racial problems and complexities in Trinidad in a very graphic and illustrative manner.

Naipaul is a courageous and a daring traveler, with an exceptionally strong desire for observation. He has gone around the better part of the world in search of a basis for values in societies and civilizations. Ironically, he has created more trouble and produced greater enemies than friends in this dangerous quest. For instance, when he went to Indonesia and Malaysia a few years back, the countries were excited on his visit. However, when he published his sharp and harsh views, the reaction of A.N. Wilson is noteworthy, "we had welcomed Mr. Naipaul as a friend and a distinguished writer, but look what he has given us back" (Wilson 29). The readers and the people were annoyed but all this has never discouraged Naipaul to write what he wishes to; and he always keeps himself in high spirits of intellectual truth, morality and honesty. In the process, he has developed interest in journalism, which can be also depicted as a result of his fictional love and obsession. In this novel he has used his personal experiences as a writer with first hand knowledge about the Trinidadian society as a whole. As stated above, this facet of his literary career, which is as

formidable as his fiction, also brought him into conflict with intellectuals, thinkers and writers all over the world. It shows that all the writers use their own experiences and some or the other character reflects his thoughts and actions by becoming the mouthpiece of his philosophy. In other words, they try to express their own disturbance and experimental burden through observations. The following lines from *Finding the Centre*, fully express Naipaul's aesthetic and creative link with his own past:

A writer after a time carries his world with him, his own burden of experience, human experience and literary experience, and I do believe...that I would have found equivalent connections with my past and myself wherever I had gone. (Naipaul, *Finding the Centre* 10)

The present paper is an attempt to highlight the heroic tale of the protagonist, Mr. Biswas against the mighty Tulsi family and it will be significant to know the critical comments of prominent critics on this noted and brilliant colonial text. *A House for Mr. Biswas* has been hailed as Naipaul's major achievement as a work of art, and as a statement on the human condition in a rootless and underprivileged context. Almost every critic has commented upon it. The basic reason for its appeal lay in its warm and humane concern with sensitive issues such as poverty, alienation, the search for identity and human relationships. Francis Wyndham, while writing on *A House for Mr. Biswas*, eulogized its design as it is "conceived and executed within the great tradition of the humanist novel" (Wyndham 221). He goes on to state that "*A House for Mr. Biswas* is as subtle and comprehensive an analysis of the colonial situation as anything in imaginative literature" (223). William Walsh, who is the author of a monograph on Naipaul, and a number of articles, has noted the presence of 'inclusive sensibility, and a tense athletic tolerance in *A House for Mr. Biswas*'. This encompassing metaphor is heightened by a deep poetic truth which lies at the heart of the novel" (Walsh 30).

The novel attains the stature of a great multidimensional panoramic work, because Naipaul most brilliantly fused the several strands of his comic-satiric technique with a new seriousness of purpose, a much wider scope in his handling of the various themes, and a new emotional sympathy for those in search of balance, together with a will to humanize Mr. Biswas's context. *A House for Mr. Biswas* presents graphically the colonial situation in Trinidad around the time of World War II. The colonial set-up has been scrutinized quite comprehensively. Mr. Biswas, the protagonist has been set against the conventional and customary conservative Hindu ideas and ideology. He is completely isolated in a crowd and is the lone fighter against the powerful conservative system filled with rotten myths, customs

and rituals. The inherent power of these narrow ideas of the Hindu community has been instrumental for inciting the spirit of rebellion in Mr. Biswas, the man who stands lonely against these predominant forces of dogmatism and mechanical habits. This happens because he wants to liberate himself from the clutches of cruel, narrow ideas and ideologies of the so-called Brahmin socio-cultural system and tries to establish his own identity in the society which was denied to him intentionally by the principles of the Tulsi household.

Mr. Biswas has progressive ideas in contrast to sterile, obsolete customs and conventions in the colonial Hindu society of Trinidad. He has a clear thinking about the defective system of Hindu society. In order to go on with the crusade against the unreasonable thinking of the rotten colonial Hindu society, Naipaul weaves such a plot in the novel that Mr. Biswas is married to Shama, a gullible, semi-educated, immature daughter of the Tulsis. The Tulsis represent the then existent, narrow, irrelevant, unreasonable, dogmatic beliefs, customs and rituals of Trinidad Hindu colonial society who also belong to the powerful landed aristocracy in the Trinidad Hindu community. Mr. Biswas, being married to a simpleton of such a community, is but to undergo a lot of suffering and repression as there are many cultural clashes and social conflicts. It happens so because he belongs to a labourers' class which is powerless to show any resistance against the powerful and dominant ideology. That is why the shabby treatment meted out to Mr. Biswas from his in-laws due to his inconvenient circumstances of poverty and compulsion brings a lot of torture and agony in him. His suffering is that of a penniless individual struggling to possess a minimum basic necessity in the form of a house. As such Naipaul explores the struggle of a working class individual to have his own house, at least before his death. John Ball observes, "Knowingly or unknowingly, whether Naipaul is writing a travelogue or novel, he tends to trace a self-conscious sympathetic response to the need to discover an appropriate literary form to frame a psychic and symbolic sense of homelessness" (Ball 90).

Naipaul depicts Hanuman House as a symbol of inflexibility, harshness, ritual duty, strictness, orderliness and communal life. It is just like a slave society where Mrs. Tulsi and her brother-in-law Seth were influential who took advantage of the homeless condition of people like Biswas. In the views of N. Sharda Iyer, "The entry of Mr. Biswas into the Tulsi family creates a disturbance because his ideas are different. He had spent his childhood in an environment more liberal than the one which prevailed at Hanuman House" (Iyer 22). The incoherent Tulsi household, obscured, strangely hierarchical, eclectic in religious practice is, pious and generous to some extent. The entry of Mr. Biswas into the Tulsi household brings

about a turmoil and upheaval because his views and ideas are different and even opposite to the philosophy of Tulsi family.

The novel is symbolic of the colonial empire from which Biswas desires to have freedom for his individual existence and personal identity. As Manjit Inder Singh remarks: “Mr. Biswas is the unaccommodated man representing the outcast’s symbolic quest for a place in the hostile universe”(Singh 126). Hanuman House has its own law and order, religious rights and rituals, plans and men of their own choice to execute these plans for their financial gains. In this context of the novel, the comments of Amar Nath Prasad are noteworthy, “Mr. Biswas was trapped in the clutches of Tulsidom. He has his dream of owning his house and the house which he gets after marriage was nothing but a slave house and the novel graphically deals with the protagonist’s dry and monotonous journey full of jerks and jolts” (Prasad 5).

It was rather strange that Mr. Biswas remained lonely in the overcrowded Tulsi house and revolted against the system and his revolt is a blow to the old Hindu culture at Hanuman House and Biswas hurls a stream of revolutionary, radical views against this world. The Tulsis are proud of conformity among its members; Biswas on the other hand finds pleasure in asserting his own individuality because he has an inherent love for independence. He differentiates himself by speaking Creole English at Hanuman House while others speak Hindi. He ridicules Hari, the symbol of religious reference, he mocks at the young Tulsi sons by calling them ‘Gods’. When Govind, one of Tulsi’s sons-in-law suggests that to leave sign-painting and become a driver for the Tulsi estate, Mr. Biswas immediately voices his dissent: “Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No, boy. My motto is: paddle your own canoe?” (107).

Seth asserts his authority and informs Mrs. Tulsi that Mr. Biswas does not offer the desired respect to him and Mrs. Tulsi. Mr. Biswas also calls Seth ‘the big boss’ and ‘big bull’ in front of his wife Shama. Mr. Biswas is so angry that in a later scene that he calls this house is a monkey house “And what about the two gods? It ever strikes you that they look like two monkeys? So, you have one concrete monkey god outside and two living ones inside. Eh monkey, bull, cow, hen. This place is a blasted zoo, man” (123). For Biswas’s revolt, he was shunted to move to 'The Chase' as he could not be fitted into the Tulsi set-up and because of his subversive ideas and dangerous ideology, there was a great disruption in the Tulsi family. As a result, Mr. Biswas being fed up at 'The Chase' and without being able to cope with The Tulsis at Hanuman House, was sent to 'Green Vale' as a driver and supervisor of the workers of the Tulsi estate. By now he had four children and Shama along with the children were living at Hanuman House. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, when Mr. Biswas becomes a victim of

oppression, he has to leave Hanuman House to 'The Chase' and then to 'Green Vale' to work becomes aware about his position in the Tulsi family and starts thinking of owning a house at all cost. Wanting to build a house of his own, finally, Mr. Biswas thought of borrowing money from Tara, but failed to get that. Ultimately he decided to start a house of his own with immediate effect with a meager amount of hundred dollars. B. K. Das comments, "The House in this novel is a symbol not for rootedness but for freedom – freedom from slavery and oppression" (Das 102). By now, his son Anand was living with him. Mr. Biswas was suffering from mental agony as he was unable to build his own house. Surprisingly, the house was under threat due to heavy rain and storm and as a result lightning, thunder and rain helped the house to collapse and this incident became the cause of his mental breakdown. His revolt against the established order had brought for him a lot of suffering and Biswas was in a dilemma whether he should surrender to the dominant power structure of Tulsi family or not but an intensive study of the novel shows that his struggle against the mighty Tulsi family is remarkable and impressive.

Now I arrive at the conclusion that *A House for Mr. Biswas* is, therefore, a fictional text which basically explores the conflicting ideologies and social contradictions of different classes and communities, more specifically the conflicts between the landed aristocracy and the powerless working class. According to Sarah Blanton, "Naipaul's novels depict characters whose selves cannot connect with the others around them. Most often this outsider is the exiled colonial trying to find a place in a post-colonial world" (Blanton 66). In this novel, Mohan Biswas represents the consciousness of dignity of a man despite poverty and dereliction. Ultimately, the novel combines various thematic strands which dominate its structure and narrative - historical, colonial, identification politics, quest for dignity, accumulation, and finally a staunch element of resistance against the forces of oppression and dehumanization of an individual. The novel is indeed a heroic tale of the protagonist's struggle against all odds because he knows his limitations even then his resistance against the dominant forces is indeed appreciable and praiseworthy.

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