

V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*: A Study of the Main Characters and Their Mutual Relationships

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Abstract:

V.S. Naipaul was born in Chaguanas in Trinidad on 17 August, 1932. He was the eldest son of the second generation Indian father Seepersad – a correspondent. Naipaul worked for the BBC London as a broadcaster for some period for their programme “Caribbean Voices”. His first three books beautifully describe the Caribbean lifestyle, culture and problems. His first novel is *The Mystic Masseur* which is based on the life of Ganesh Ramsumair and he wrote his second novel *The Suffrage of Elvira* also almost on the theme of the identity crisis of its main protagonist Srajpat Harbans. The characters of these novels change their names. So far as Naipaul's magnum opus *A House for Mr. Biswas* is concerned, this novel has many characters and the novel was published in the later edition in the form of a big volume. This novel has Mohum Biswas as the main character. Apart from him, the other characters are his parents, his wife Shama, Mrs. Tulsi, Seth and other members of the Tulsi family. The present paper is an attempt to describe the mutual relationships of different characters in this novel. The concept of house and its importance for a man has been another main theme of this novel apart from many other themes.

Keywords:

Post-colonialism, V.S. Naipaul *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Indian Writing in English, Diasporic Literature, House, Identity Crisis, Cultural-Clash, Autobiographical Elements.

V.S. Naipaul is an epoch-making figure for the Indians. He has written many books on different genres. His novels are based on the immigrant Hindus and their identity crisis. Nyla Ali Khan observes about the author, “Naipaul delineates this painful split in diasporic consciousness for his readers” (Khan 28). He got his education from Tranquility Boys School

and Queen's Royal College in Port of Spain (1943-49). Later he got his English Honours degree in English from University College, Oxford where he met his own would be wife Patricia Ann Hale. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001.

His novel *A House for Mr Biswas* is based on the postcolonial issues. It deals with the theme of assertion for selflessness, placelessness and rootlessness. This novel was published in 1961 and the novel deals with the importance of a house for a person in his life. Roger Celestin comments about Naipaul's' works, "Naipaul and his work enable us to see an evolution: from "colonial" to "postcolonial" ... (Celestin 179).

Mr. Biswas is the main character of this novel whose real name is Mohan. He seems to be the representative of the real character – His father. Mr. Mohan Biswas is one of the Indo-Caribbean ancestors of Indian labourers from Uttar Pradesh who migrated to Trinidad to work as indentured labourers on the sugarcane plantations. It was the poverty of his parents that led them to migrate in because there was no good future in Uttar Pradesh for them. Kenneth Ramchand comments in his review "The World of *A House for Mr. Biswas*":

After Negro Emancipation, India became the main overseas source of cheap labour for the British sugar islands; between 1839 and 1917 no fewer than 416000 indentured Indians were imported as substitutes for the freed Negroes" (Ramchand 95).

The entire novel has been written in different parts and then in different sections. The first part describes Mohan Biswas, his birth and childhood. V.S. Naipaul has tried to mock at the Hindu way of life, its traditions, rituals, practices and hypocrisy of the people.

The main character, Mohun Biswas, was born with six fingers at midnight. It was a bad time for birth according to the midwife. The pundit comes in the morning and he tells that this boy has been born in a wrong way and he must be kept away from both water and trees otherwise there may be the risk of the life of his parents.

Thus, after his birth, even his father was forbidden to see his face for 21 days. He is not allowed to see his face due to his mangalik status. Not only this, when the novel opens, but there is also a quarrel between Biswas' father and mother and his mother who goes to Mohun's maternal grandparents' home. She was pregnant at the time and gave birth to Mohan Biswas there.

This shows in the background of the novel that the situations are already tense there. Mohun Biswas is called an unlucky sneeze and whenever he sneezes his father does not go to work. One day his father was about to go and Mr. Biswas sneezes, his father ignores his sneezing that day. When he comes back home, he is brought on the cot and profusely

bleeding because he was met with an accident that day. Pundit has rightly predicted that “The boy will be a lecher and spendthrift. Possibly a liar as well (12). It also comes true in the latter part of the novel with his relationships with the Tulsi family.

Mohan Biswas is not accepted in his home and he becomes an outsider. His two brothers Pratap and Prasad do some work and keep roaming around the village. They keep swimming in the ponds and river but Mr Biswas is never allowed to go swimming in the ponds and rivers according to the restrictions given by the pundit. He was allowed to play only with his sister Dehuti.

Biswas was assigned the responsibility to graze the calf of his neighbour Dhari because his cow had given birth to a calf. His responsibility was to take care of and feed the cow and calf. One day Mr Biswas took the calf towards the river. He starts fishing there and his calf gets lost somewhere. He was afraid that his father would scold him for losing his calf. Mr Biswas hid in his room.

When Dhari’s calf does not return in the evening, he becomes worried and he goes in the search of the Biswas. The news of the calf missing spreads everywhere and Mr Biswas’ father Raghu tries to find the calf and Mr Biswas. When he reached the pond, he thought that perhaps Mohun and calf had drowned in this pond. He was fully confident that he would bring the calf and boy back into the pond. He dives again and again but unfortunately, he dies by drowning.

After the death of Biswas’ father, the life of the family members became full of troubles because his father Raghu was the earning hand in the family. His mother was merely a housewife. Now it was the duty of Pratap and Prasad to earn something. Mr. Biswas was also growing young and he also decided to do some work so that he may help his family members to earn something. Mr Biswas had no good attachment to any family members. He did not like to work like his brothers and he was much different from the other members of the family.

The life becomes much miserable in the village for them because their neighbour Dhari keeps digging in the courtyard in the hope that Raghu had hidden some money. It happened to them because there was no young man in the house. Their mother Bipti tells his children, “Your father always warned me about the people of the village (35). Their life became full of problems for them and finally, they had to sell the hut to their neighbour Dhari. In this way, Mr. Biswas loses his hut also and he is moved to Pagotes. Thus, he is bound to leave the:

...only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. (Naipaul 38)

Mr Biswas's sister Dehuti was sent to his wealthy aunt Tara's house because she was issueless. Bipti thinks that Dehuti will be happy there because she will not face any problem of money but unfortunately, Mr. Biswas' sister elopes with a servant of Tara's home. Mr Biswas is sent to Pundit Jairam so that he may become a Pundit but his experience does not remain very good at Pundit's house for a long time because of one day Mr Biswas defiles the pundits' oleander tree. When Pundit Jairam notices that Mr. Biswas has done this immoral task, he immediately becomes angry and expels Mr. Biswas from his house. He cries with anger, "You killed your father. I don't want you to do that for me" (55).

After that, he goes to the rum shop of his uncle Ajodha but his experiences at that rum-shop also remain very bad because Ajodha's business partner Bhandat Bandit beats him black and blue with his belt and he puts the Blame on Mr. Biswas that he has stolen his money. Mr. Biswas was crying in pain and he comes back to his her mother and he complains that she is sending him to strangers' doors. By now he thinks that he will have to start his own profession otherwise his life will become a series of tragedies.

Mr. Biswas starts working as a sign painter. One day he was working at the Hanuman House. So far as the Hanuman House is considered, it is metaphorically a miniature postcolonial world. Mr. Set and Mrs. Tulsi are the colonizers and other members of the family are the colonial slaves who are working for the Tulsi family. It was our very big family. There were sixteen sisters in this family and there was a strange thing that the daughters' husband must live in their house.

Mr. Biswas comes into the trap of the Tulsi family. One day when he was doing the work of a sign painting in his home. He notices a girl in the store who smiles to see him which is taken by him as a love proposal. He writes a love note for Shama and hands it over to her but unfortunately, it comes in the notice of Mrs. Tulsi.

Mr. Seth comes that afternoon with a message to him that he must come to see Mrs. Tulsi before leaving the place. Mr. Biswas was shivering with fear because he had committed a big mistake. But when he goes there, he is entertained like a guest and Mrs. Tulsi asks him very softly whether he likes the girl. Mr. Biswas does not respond and his silence is considered a positive response by Mrs. Tulsi.

Mrs. Tulsi says that she has agreed to marry her daughter with him but Mr. Biswas was in the misconception that Mrs. Tulsi will give him a lot of dowry articles. When he

comes back, he is very happy and tells his friend very proudly that is going to marry in an affluent family and he will get a large amount of money in dowry.

But Mr. Biswas's dream dreams are shattered very soon when it comes to realise that she is being offered to work on the sugarcane estates. Mr. Biswas is given a large hall to live and he is married in the court. No much dowry is given to him. He is given only food to eat and a room to live in.

He becomes hostile and starts quarreling with the Tulsi family. He starts calling the names to Mrs. Tulsi “the old Queen” and “the old cow”, the old hen, for Seth he uses the words “the Big Boss”, he calls Hari “the constipated Holy Man” and likewise he does not treat well with Shama’s brothers also. He becomes much troublesome for everyone in the family. One day she spits on Shama’s brother Owad, one of Mrs. Tulsi’s sons-in-law Govind beats Mr. Biswas very harshly.

When Seth comes to know all about this, he sends him out from the home. Mr. Biswas’ problems become severe now and he goes to other places and starts earning bread for his family and searching his own house so that he may realize his dream of owning a house. He tries many times but one or another type of problem comes on his way. Ultimately Mr. Biswas remained successful in buying and owning a house. Bhabha writes that “a house” is such meaningful to Mr. Biswas as it gives me to achieve authentic selfhood in the ‘unhomely’ space where his individuality is threatened. (Bhabha 120). Kumar Parag writes that:

A house is not just a matter of getting a shelter from heat, cold or rain. In fact, it is both an imposition of order and a carving-out of authentic selfhood within the heterogeneous and fragmented society of Trinidad. (Parag 139)

Mr. Biswas died peacefully in his own house but this house was on the borrowed money and that is why after his death, this house was taken in the custody by his uncle Ajodha and Bipti and the other children are deprived of the house.

In concluding remarks, it can be stated that *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a novel on the postcolonial dilemma, identity crisis, selflessness, placelessness and cultural clash. The novel has been written in an autobiographical manner and he has described his father in the role of Mr. Biswas. Like Mr. Biswas, Naipaul also could not settle in one place due to his rootlessness. Mohit K. Ray writes about Naipaul that he is “an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England, and a nomadic intellectual in a postcolonial world” (Ray 208).

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