

THE STRUCTURAL APPRAISAL OF V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS*

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ABSTRACT

A House for Mr. Biswas is one of the few novels of Naipaul in which the essential human condition and the leading themes are expressed through a central pattern of imagery and symbolism. It draws upon images and symbols largely to express the alienation and mental turmoil of the hero in search for form and meaning of experience. The deliberate, autobiographical structure of the novel in its chosen details and the recurring images of darkness, decay and death are remnants of Biswas's struggle. Naipaul's fictional technique is a mixture of several diverse qualities. He is a satirist with an insatiable appetite for commentary and observation; a comic writer who presents the Trinidad scene with its varied and multicoloured life and landscape; a serious and disillusioned spectator of the decadence of life in the ex-colonies.

Key Words: Structure, Panoramic Vision, Language, Symbols and Images.

A cursory reading of a novel by Naipaul is likely to give the reader an impression of an almost effortless and spontaneous writing. He strikes one as a writer with immense depth and range, and an exceptionally brilliant grasp over the nuances of language, syntax, metaphors, symbols and images to draw upon the complexity and richness of experience. Yet, for all his intellectual attainments and a brilliant literary career, Naipaul is a very careful and devoted writer - a writer who takes writing as a meditative act where one has to pay all the 'penalties of solitude' over long periods of isolation. He often shudders as he has spoken in interviews, at the idea of starting a new book; and yet he has never been anything but a writer. This has made him free from other people, rivalries, preoccupations, entanglements and competitions, such is his commitment to the art of fiction. Writing does not come easy to Naipaul according to himself. He does not see himself as a born writer despite the early influences he received from his father. As he said in an interview:

The act of writing, or devising a story or form, is such an artificial thing; you have to woo life into this artificial thing ...about people who may have never existed at all ... (Naipaul, *Interview* 222)

This indeed speaks a good deal about Naipaul's personal doubts and hesitations in giving form and substance to his own fictional matter, apart from his occasional cynicism about the fictional form as such. However, Naipaul's fictional technique is a mixture of several diverse

qualities. He is a satirist with an insatiable appetite for commentary and observation; a comic writer who presents the Trinidad scene with its varied and multicoloured life and landscape; a serious and disillusioned spectator of the decadence of life in the ex-colonies. And yet all these distinctive roles as a writer are a pointer to his honesty, intellectual freedom and moral integrity. What is more; he has not used one fictional technique repetitively; indeed he has been changing his fictional form and vision to reach new levels of intensity and exploration. Naipaul's prose suggests a near-inclusive intelligence that very often contrasts with the characters' speech or the locations in which they exist. In Naipaul's fiction, his prose becomes a means to sustain a value system through which he forces a judgement on people and societies. Indeed, a detached and cultivated irony is the key element in his sensibility.

As Naipaul has himself acknowledged, his fictional technique needs to be appreciated keeping in view the complicated background of his themes. In the beginning Naipaul's literary stature and the magnitude of his achievement, were generally obsessed by the seemingly traditional guise of his writing, and by his reputation as an unsympathetic satirist and negative purveyor of the social scene. The wit, irony and the sophistication of his early books were mistaken as irresponsible satire. As Naipaul has said, "You don't need to satirize some aspects of the West Indian scene" (Naipaul, *London* 20). In contrast, where he was serious and in right earnest, Naipaul's skill, subtle accuracy and observation was appreciated only by a few. As David Ormerod has observed in this regard:

This judgement implies, quite correctly, that the full impact of Naipaul's work cannot be judged in a vacuum, but must be seen against the background of the social forces he scrutinize, and Naipaul has consciously invoked comedy in order to say something deeply and seriously felt about a social predicament. (Ormerod 79)

The above statement contains something very significant because Naipaul's fictional form is closely related to his intellectual and artistic beliefs. While social comment and criticism are a part of his sensibility as a writer, his observation, like that of many other non-political writers from the West Indies, are aimed at the analysis and expression of West Indian society. An overview of his fiction seems to indicate that fiction for Naipaul, although an autonomous discipline, involves far reaching imaginative conclusions about many aspects of society and existence in the sense that one or the other quality is conveyed in an indirect, literary and elliptical fashion, though not in the form of a thinly disguised thesis. But at the same time, the famous literary quotation by Mathew Arnold that all poetry is the criticism of life may well apply to Naipaul's literary preoccupations and interests.

One major thematic strand runs through all the novels of Naipaul, whether set in the West Indies or elsewhere, they are satirical demonstrations of individual and social limitations. Repeatedly he shows the frustrations of energy and ambition. As *A House for Mr. Biswas*

illustrates, the individual rebellion or non-acquiescence proves a futile exercise in a world beset with oppression and power-politics. Rarely do the characters achieve anything worthwhile or lasting, such is the counterpoint of his satirical demonstrations of the shoddy, the absurd and the ridiculous. What the characters cannot surpass is not their personal limitations in the final sense; their society and environment has never demanded or conditioned any possibility of upliftment above the mundane or the ordinary. In the light of this, Mr. Biswas's rebellion against the Hanuman House is an aberration, a rare departure that strikes its members as an abnormality. Given Naipaul's ironic comprehension of the Trinidad set up, his detachment and deflating wit hardly suggest a compassionate understanding of human weakness and failure. In this context, Gordon Rohlehr has provided a view which supports Naipaul's literary quest as a satirist, considering his odd position as a writer:

Satire is the sensitive measure of a society's departure from a norm inherent in itself. Since Naipaul starts with the conviction that such a norm is absent from his society, his task as a satirist becomes doubly difficult. Not only must he recreate experience, but also simultaneously create the standards against which this experience is to be judged. (Rohlehr 63)

The above details might be more appropriate in considering *The Mystic Masseur*, *Miguel Street* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, where Naipaul creates a motley array of figures deliberately deflated and unrealized against the vacuum in which they exist, for nothing can lift them above their state of fantasy, mimicry and self-failure which are generated by the poverty and the backwardness of the environment itself. Here Naipaul chooses appropriately enough, a fictional form to illustrate his ideas and beliefs about a part of the world he had left forever. However, even here, the technique shows how complex a writer's task could become in the face of a derelict and inauthentic society as his subject matter. Successively, *The Mystic Masseur* illustrates the absurdity of life in an acculturated set-up. *Miguel Street* brilliantly etches out the complexity of laughter in the lives of Trinidadians, where *The Suffrage of Elvira* shows the farcically mixed-up world of unscrupulous politicians.

However, it was in *A House for Mr. Biswas* that Naipaul was able to fuse several subtle strands of his art as a novelist. Far from creating merely a distanced and dwarfed satiric portraiture of a society, he managed something on a grand epic scale. The novel successfully recreates a sociological and historical scenario, one that has the qualities of fact and fiction, and like a true work of art creates a pattern of experience full of promise, fulfilment, disillusionment, defeat and the inherent ambiguity of life. It might be logical to concede that *A House for Mr. Biswas* does not reach out to any fresh innovations in the fictional form, neither does it venture anything spectacular purely on the plane of technical experimentation. Yet, the novel structurally reinforces a dense and absorbing pattern of existence, and the one which has to be followed on the special ground of the mixed West Indian experience. Naipaul might have been writing like Fielding, Dickens or Thackeray to reach out to an inclusive



sensibility of the 18th and 19th centuries masters. Structurally this might be nearer the truth, for *A House for Mr. Biswas* excels in explorations of types - social, personal, familial, existential and conjugal. Yet, this kind of social world one sees in Dickens and other writers is in any case far removed in terms of its ethos and culture. Thus, Naipaul took up the old technique of exploration and panoramic portraiture, to match it with the modern ironic twist of perspective, one where happy endings or consolations are tragically rare. Again, the story contains some significant double perspectives, the life of the hero pitted against that of the Tulsis. Obviously, Naipaul uses his narrative technique to organize a world he had seen as mixed and confusing, and like several great works of fiction, it sandwiches between the Prologue and the Epilogue, the several stages of Mr. Biswas's struggle for self-realization and existential freedom.

On the simpler level, *A House for Mr. Biswas* takes the form of a fictive biography beginning with the inauspicious birth of Mr. Biswas in an obscure Trinidad village, and ending with the death in the city of Port of Spain forty-six years later. Inevitably, the novel has to be seen as providing a picture of East Indian life in Trinidad, with the Tulsi family and the Hanuman House as a microcosm of its varied socio-cultural and historical elements. Far from being merely a satirized or negative comment on poverty, illiteracy and dispossession of the West Indian scene. *A House for Mr. Biswas* has to be seen as a New World epic, celebrating the struggles of an immigrant towards acculturation and socio-economic sources. Naipaul structures his vision around those born unnecessary and unaccommodated in the New World. the development of Mr. Biswas's consciousness is kept abreast with his increasing disillusionment and annoyance at the treatment meted out to him by destiny and the outside world. It is the viability of its reaction to situations that creates a human condition in *A House for Mr. Biswas* which also accounts for its greatness and contemporaneity. F. R. Leavis, while writing about the fictional form and its relationship with the writer's preoccupations in *The Great Tradition*, asks a very pertinent question:

Is there any great novelist whose preoccupation with 'form' is not a matter of his responsibility towards a rich human interest, or complexity of interests, profoundly realised or responsibility involving, of its nature, imaginative sympathy, moral discrimination and judgement of relative human value.

(Leavis, *The Great Tradition* 29)

To the above critical poser, Naipaul has given a positive illustration of his imaginative and moral interests in the novel under consideration in his creation and then shaping of a unique human destiny, which while criticizing and satirizing, blends with an inclusive sensibility and a concern for essential humanity. Likewise, the form or the structural aspects are ineluctably linked with a vision of displacement, dispossession and the search for an order; which is the controlling metaphor that sustains the novel.



A key feature of Naipaul's fiction is that it invariably related with the past with the present and the individual's link with both. Mr. Biswas looks back at his own background of failure and disenchantment to see a fresh possibility of things to come in the Trinidad society which is vivacious, exuberant and competitive. This is a world which is more particularized and rounded into which the hero finally climbs. The novel in a way re-centres the displaced and disoriented experience of the hero in the long second half of the novel with a clear line of lucidity and concentration. Along with, it is the restructuring of Mr. Biswas's self that is significant; relationships now exist where there was none, and Mr. Biswas gradually brings them around to the point where he centres them. The full panoramic vision of the novel is structured in such a way that it brings about the meaning of human frailty, corruptibility and failure, while it recognizes the value of hope and a thin possibility of reconciliation against odds. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, with its multidimensional interests, details and background presents as experience centred around the principle subject, its hero. Indeed, despite Naipaul's main thrust of technique that suggests the futility and absurdity of Mr. Biswas's struggle against a dark and diseased society, the novel excess in a rare insight into the nature of experience. The novel portrays man's agonizing and tormenting situation in slavery - overt or covert - his resistance of that condition is made explicit by the idea of the house and the search for accommodation.

A House for Mr. Biswas is one of the few novels of Naipaul in which the essential human condition and the leading themes are expressed through a central pattern of imagery and symbolism. It draws upon images and symbols largely to express the alienation and mental turmoil of the hero in search for form and meaning of experience. The deliberate, autobiographical structure of the novel in its chosen details and the recurring images of darkness, decay and death are remnants of Biswas's struggle. The stifling dictatorship and the extreme conservatism of Hanuman House, for instance are reminiscent of Dickensian prison house:

Among the tumbledown timber and corrugated iron buildings in the high street at Arwacas, Hanuman House stood like an alien white fortress. The concrete walls looked as thick as they were and when the narrow doors of the Tulsi's on the ground floor were closed the House became bulky, impregnable and blank. (80)

The atmosphere inside has a death-like quality. The sickness in Hanuman House is reflected in the extensive insulation of its inhabitants from any sense of human freedom and progressive ideas. The visions of Mr. Biswas are arrested in this overall deterioration, both physical and spiritual. "Likewise the vegetation in 'Green Vale' and elsewhere is damp, dark and closed. the rotting leaves choke the green gutters; on the trees, half the leaves are dead, the others a dead green. yet the leaves never fall dark is forever held in check" (240). This is symbolically marked by Biswas's increasing sense of failure and his psychologically imprisoned state. At times the imagery parallels the nature of Tess's trouble in *Tess of the*

D'Urbervilles though it is different context to evoke the harshness and the inexorable nature and circumstances faced by Mr. Biswas. In both cases, the human degradation is reflected in the decay rootedness of the vegetative life around. Just like the decay of the vegetative and natural life, there is also the accompanying dereliction and show breaking up of ways of life; in the sense, the old Indian customs and rituals. The action of the novel essentially moves on symbolic planes, both individual and socio-cultural. In his attempts to build a house, we can observe his desire to assert his own significance and establish a small centre or order in a society that has no rules or norms. There might have been many like Biswas who wanted to build a houses, to impose an image of necessity on the world. But this wish also reflects the incompleteness of the life of the hero and of his generation.

Thus *A House for Mr. Biswas* offers extremely rich descriptions bearing a philosophical and metaphysical relationship with human fate. Mr. Biswas often experiences a blankness in which his past, present and future are engulfed. His journey is also an endless one, for at this stage, life for him is one long tunnel with no hope of arrival. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the images and symbols of decay, dereliction and rootlessness stem from Naipaul's deep sense of loss as a writer who is estranged from all permanent places. Man's infructuous relationship with society, landscape and countries is therefore, at once a personal and universal problem in Naipaul's works. It would be apt to conclude with an impressive statement in this regard of V.Y. Katak:

Naipaul is not wholly deficient in the experience of the larger background of nature. But the way he integrates that presence tells its own story. It is not so much joyousness that such a yielding to nature express as menace. The world of nature is apt to make itself felt in his novels rather as an ominous presence. The natural background serves as a complement and confirmation of that sickening cloud - the chill sense of dereliction, decay and death that settles on the scene of man's activity. (Katak 44)

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