



THE STRUGGLE OF MR. BISWAS AGAINST POWER AND OPPRESSION: A STUDY OF V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS*

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ABSTRACT

A House for Mr. Biswas by V. S. Naipaul portrays the colonial situation in Trinidad around the time of World War II. The colonial set-up has been analyzed quite comprehensively. Mr. Biswas, the protagonist has been set against the conventional and customary conservative Hindu ideas, traditions 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 alone against these dominant forces of dogmatism and mechanical habits. This happens so because he wants to liberate himself from the power structure of cruel, narrow customs and rituals of the traditional society.

Key Words: *Power, Injustice, Oppression, Colonial Situation, Customs and Rituals.*

A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) is a celebrated and prominent novel by V.S. Naipaul which has gained world-wide recognition and is generally acclaimed as the superb creation of Naipaul's brilliant literary career. It also marked the major phase of his fiction. If we have a close look at Naipaul's photograph, his face reflects all those layers of personality as a writer, he is so well-known for: a face reflecting a mixture of tenderness and cynicism of a man deeply concerned with the human condition, but one who is harsh and sceptical about all kinds of popular cures and panaceas which hold out promise. It was with *A House for Mr. Biswas* that Naipaul started his major phase of fiction with which he also achieved an assured place among the great novelists of the twentieth century. This novel marks a turning point in his literary career since it was in *A House for Mr. Biswas* that Naipaul showed his traits as a writer; his obsession with failure, exile, alienation, the quest for identity and his later scathing attacks on underprivileged and vulnerable societies. Memory, autobiography

and imagination here created an epic novel which truly exposed the complexities and imponderables of the mixed cultural and racial existence in Trinidad.

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 remarks, "*A House for Mr. Biswas* is as subtle and comprehensive analysis of the colonial situation as anything in imaginative literature"

(Wyndham 223). Landeg White contends, "*A House for Mr. Biswas* is one of the most extended treatments on the parallel significance of Naipaul's art and life" (White 42). Helen Hayward remarks, "*A House for Mr. Biswas* is a great novel as it explores and conveys the fine and subtle growth of a literary sensibility coming into confrontation with the harsh and materialistic world" (Hayward 69). The writer himself says, "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 22). The novel attains the stature of a great multidimensional work, because Naipaul most brilliantly fused the several threads 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 portrays the colonial situation in Trinidad around the time of World War II. The colonial set-up has been analyzed quite comprehensively. Mr. Biswas, the protagonist has been set against the conventional and customary conservative Hindu ideas, traditions 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 alone against these dominant forces of dogmatism and mechanical habits. This happens so because he wants to liberate himself from the power structure of cruel, narrow customs and rituals of the so-called Brahmin socio-cultural system and tries to establish his own identity in a fast changing multiethnic society.

Mr. Biswas is certainly a mediocre type of a man and he is by no means a hero in the traditional sense of the word. A hero in the novel is generally portrayed as an ideal man, a man of all the qualities of head and heart - strong, brave, virtuous, kind hearted, courageous, highly intelligent, very skilful in his dealing with others, and so on. A hero generally triumphs over all the adverse circumstances of life, so that at the end of the story, we find ourselves sometimes envying him to some extent because of his heroic deeds. But in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the protagonist Mr. Biswas cannot be described as a hero in that sense, rather he is a kind of anti-hero, despite his strong self respect and his refusal to surrender to the clutches of Tulsidom, where Mrs. Tulsi and Seth are all powerful and they exploit the

members of the Tulsi family according to their desire and whims. There is no doubt that Mr. Biswas tries his best to assert his own individuality but there is much which is petty, absurd, ridiculous and totally unacceptable on the part of Mr. Biswas being the protagonist of the novel. He is fated like Oedipus, to kill his father; but unlike Oedipus, Mr. Biswas fulfils this prophecy in the most ridiculous manner. His father is drowned in a pool in the course of an attempt to rescue a calf and at the time of his birth, due to the ill-omens, it had been predicted that he would grow into a liar, a lecher and a spendthrift. No doubt, he does not grow into an immoral man of that kind, but he certainly does not attain any high distinction or dignity in any field.

Naipaul has imaginatively portrayed the perils of immigration within the themes of rootlessness, dispossession, and isolation. One of the memorable representatives of this forced movement from one's roots and tradition in Mohun Biswas, who represents a classic struggle for individuality in a chaotic and rootless society. Fighting for identity and freedom against the oppressive forces in the strong Tulsi household, Mr. Biswas represents the individual's life in a placeless context. As his mother Bipti leaves her house in small village and shifts to 'Pagotes' early in the novel, Naipaul gives us the feel of the emptiness and squalor that awaits Mr. Biswas:

And so Mr. Biswas came to leave only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place to call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. For with his mother's parents death, his father died, his brothers on the estate at felicity, Dehuti as a servant at tar's house and himself rapidly growing away from Bipti, who impenetrable, it seemed to him that he was really quite alone. (40)

A House for Mr. Biswas is a tragedy of a man who wears himself out trying to adjust to a profound change in his society, and in his personal outlook, and who, before he is forty, considers his career closed, and rests his ambition on his children. Mr. Biswas himself achieved little even the house is jerry-built and only fractionally paid or when he dies, but he leaves his children in a better position to go into a changing society. He himself is first generation causality of the change. He begins with nothing, and achieves only a little. Early in his book, he had been taught to recite the idea 'nothing will come of nothing' haunts his life. It is his achievement to make a small house come of nothing. There are two obstacles Mr. Biswas had to overcome in order to achieve more than 'ought'. The first is to conquer the fatalistic, passive attitude bequeathed from his ancestors; the second is to break away from an oppressively traditional narrow society, itself in the process of decay. The hospitality or indifference of fate is an idea handed over to Biswas's family, his maternal grandfather having greeted Mr. Biswas's own birth as manifestation of it:

Bipti's father, futile with asthma, propped himself up on his string bed, and said, as he always did on unhappy occasions, 'Fate'. There is nothing we can do about it. (13).

Mr. Biswas spends most of his life struggling against the dominating forces of the Tulsi household in order to assert his individuality. If Mrs. Tulsi is the prototypical colonizer, the master, then the while exercise is clearly aimed at subjugation and colonization. However, it is easy to romanticize Biswas's rebellious nature and his much touted rebellion against the conformity-subsistence/master-slave syndrome so meticulously built up and maintained by the Tulsi family. In his efforts to set up an independent home with his wife Shama, we observe Biswas's epic struggle against threatened poverty and economic dependence on the Tulsis. Mrs. Tulsi's arrogant domination over those whom she shelters is too much for this independent, sensitive and relatively more educated son-in-law who cherished secret romantic dreams of heroism and adventure nurtured by his reading of the English Classics. Fantasy though it is, enables him to survive himself from the clutches of Tulsi's domination:

The organisation of the Tulsi house was simple, Mrs. Tulsi had only one servant, a negro woman who was called Blackie by Seth and Mrs. Tulsi...Miss Blackie's duties were vague. The daughters and their children swept and washed and cooked and serve in the store. The husbands, under Seth's supervision, worked on the Tulsi land, looked after the Tulsi animals, and served in the store. In return they were given food, shelter and a little money---Mr. Biswas had no money and no position; he was expected to become a Tulsi; at once he rebelled. (97)

So the Tulsi household was run on the object form of barter system - severe and survive. As long as the Tulsi's aid him to 'paddle his own canoe' each attempt to set up his own, ends in failure. For his literary aspirations to read and write are not an integral part of the independence, they offer him as a shopkeeper at 'the Chase' and a supervisor at 'the Greenvale' sugar estate. his sensibility revolts against book-keeping and the squalor in which the labourer live.

Though Mr. Biswas rebelled against the rank abnegation of individuality and freedom as he internalised the negative view of the Tulsis about individual freedom, has rebellion which never assumes his copybook character. It is channeled into expressions of anger and at worst, abuse of behaviour and language, e.g. his throwing of food out of the window on to Owad's head, referring to Mrs. Tulsi as the 'old she fox', kicking the pregnant Shama etc. He launches his rebellion at the holistic level and wants to elevate it to the heroic by seeking the support of Govind whom he thinks as a fellow sufferer, but reverts to the former when he realizes that Govind is a willing bondman who is used by Seth to prevail upon him to give up sign painting and accept the job of a driver. Therefore, rebellion in Mr. Biswas is defined by his

state as a cultural, psychological and social orphan. So, often his revolt contains a child-like rage and grief at violated innocence; and a child-like need to prove that his suffering is always the fault of someone else. Indeed, he assumes that because he is oppressed and exploited, he is therefore innocent. His elaborate poses, daydreaming, assertion of the self and evasion of responsibility, are a result of the cultural, social and psychological nowhere-ness produced by his position as an untalented second generation Hindu in poverty-stricken colonial Trinidad. As an orphan, Biswas is insecure and perhaps needs the support of the family or the clan. At no time of the novel is he, or the Tulsis able to come to any meaningful and harmonious compromise into the Tulsi family, he is offered protection, job, which he could scarcely get anywhere else, given his limited talents and lack of drive. Even then, he rebels and makes the Tulsis - a target of revolt. Moureen Warner Lewis rightly comments:

In spite of the clash of culture in Tulsidom, Mr. Biswas struggled for asserting his identity into this apparent monolith of conversions, prejudices and conservatism, then, Mr. Biswas barges. He openly disapproved of many of the Tulsi practices and policies. He even challenges their religious belief and associates with Hindus of another sect with whom the Tulsis disagree...The religious ambiguity and syncretism and, in some case, even neglect of traditional religion, is one of the earliest aspects of cultural confrontation with which Naipaul deals in the novel. (Lewis 97)

In order to understand Biswas's rebellion, one must understand the social structure of Hanuman House reveals itself not as a coherent reconstruction of the clan, but as a slave society, erected by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who need workers to help rebuilding their tottering empire. Therefore, they exploit the homelessness and poverty of their fellow-Hindus, and reconstruct a mockery of clan which functions only because they have not completely grasped the psychology of a slave system. Like the West Indies, Hanuman House is constructed of a vast number of desperate families, gratuitously brought together by the economic need of the high caste minority. Men are necessary here only as husbands for the Tulsi daughters and labourers on the Tulsi estate. To accept Hanuman House is to acquiesce in one's slavery. He is the rebellion of the small, the weak, the acculturated but his quest is nonetheless worthwhile. At the beginning, he tries to convert the rank and file of the Tulsi to the cause of his own house, since he instantly realises that he cannot adjust himself by surrendering his individuality in the Tulsi household. He even tries to convince people like Govind that his fight is actually theirs, and his revolt will surely bring revolution and many of them will get freedom from the slavery of Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. For this reason, Mr. Biswas continues his struggle against the power structure of the strong Tulsi household though he gains only partial success towards the end of the novel.

Conclusively, *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 working class. Mr. Biswas's great obsession with establishment of his own identity brings out a superb conflict with conservative ideas of Tulsi set-up. In this novel, Naipaul attempts a subtle and comprehensive analysis of the colonial situation in Trinidad through his fine imagination and sensibility. This marvellous prose epic finally attains a tragic grandeur despite the superb comic insight throughout. The protagonist's love for natural human liberty and individuality inspire him to fight against the lifeless, rotten rituals, myths and customs of a degenerated Brahmin cultural system represented by the Tulsis in the novel. Despite his marriage into the Tulsi family through Shama, he remains an outsider and does not follow the family in their habitual devotions. he does not submit and remains grand I his stature in the different contexts and situations in the novel whenever he takes a solitary stand against the mechanical, stereotyped and obsolete Tulsi ideas and ideologies. The colonial set up has been analysed quite comprehensively. Mr. Biswas, the protagonist has been set against the conventional and customary conservative Hindu ideas and ideology. He is completely isolated in the crowd and the lone fighter against the 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. This man stands lonely against the predominant forces of dogmatism and mechanical habits. This happens so because he wants to liberate himself from the cruel narrow ideas and ideologies of the so-called Brahmin socio-cultural system and tries to establish his own identity in the society.

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