

Dominated, Not Defeated: Studying Mr Biswas In V. S. Naipaul's *A House For Mr Biswas*

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Abstract:

In Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, Mr Biswas is everyman needing a house of his own as a mark of independence and dignity. In a colonial society in Trinidad, he had to face humiliation and abject poverty being a member of the family of an indentured labourer. He had to face cultural clashes with the dominating society. His continuous shift from one job to the other spoke a volume about the sense of alienation and insecurity of these workers. Mr Biswas's life started with an ill omen, and his repeated job failures made him restless. He was a rebel; he never succumbed to the Tulsis in his life. His act of buying a house of his own with many defects was due to his indignity and feeling of insecurity at several stages of his life.

Keywords: Mr Biswas, independence, rebel, clashes, failures

Before the abolition of slavery by the British Empire in 1833, slaves of African origin worked in the vast sugarcane fields in Trinidad. After 1833, innumerable Indians from poverty-stricken districts reached the island and agreed to work in the sugarcane fields as indentured labourers. V.S. Naipaul, the grandson of indentured servants was born in rural Trinidad and had first-hand experiences of the pathetic life of these workers. They had to bear in their minds a constant sense of fear, insecurity, and anxiety. They felt religiously and culturally separated from the dominating culture. So, an awareness of alienation and loneliness captured them, leading to emotional disorder and psychological disability in some cases. In *A House for Mr Biswas*, Naipaul chose to explore and analyze the life and achievement of a lonely man who struggled against the dense and changing socio-political background in Trinidad.

His journey from Hanuman House to The Chase to Green Vale to Shorthills to a rental in Port of Spain is futile and full of rebellions. Once Naipaul wrote – '*A House for Mr Biswas* is my most substantial piece of fiction, and it is the book for which I am best known. It happened early in my career' (625).

After his father, Raghu's unfortunate death, they had to leave their house in order to live with some dependent relatives of Tara's husband in a back trace away from the main road. What Naipaul expresses here is the key to the novel :

And so Mr Biswas came 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 he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. For with his mother's parents dead, his father dead, his

brothers on the estate at Felicity, Dehuti as a servant in Tara's house, and himself rapidly growing away from Bipti, who, broken, became increasingly useless and impenetrable, it seemed to him that he was really quite alone (Naipaul 38).

After the inauspicious birth at midnight, Mr Biswas was welcomed to the world by a fearful cry of the midwife: '...what sort of boy? Six fingered, and born in the wrong way' (Naipaul 11). The following day a Pundit came and, having examined the boy, had some predictions: 'First of all, the features of this unfortunate boy. He will have good teeth, but they will be rather wide, and there will be spaces between them. I suppose you know what that means. The boy will be a lecher and a spendthrift. Possibly a liar as well. It is hard to be sure about those gaps between the teeth. They might mean only one of those things, or they might mean all three' (Naipaul 12-13). When asked about six fingers, he said: 'That's a shocking sign, of course. The only thing I can advise is to keep him away from trees and water' (Naipaul 13). He was suffering from malnutrition, and so various diseases made him weak. His knees, ankles, wrists, and elbows were affected with eczema and sores. Sores left deep scars on the skin. He had 'shallowest of chests,' 'thinnest of limbs', 'a soft rising belly.' (Naipaul 18).

Mr Biswas had tried to adjust to frequently changing professions, but every time he ended up in a mess. Among his brothers and sisters, he had received formal education that enabled him to paddle his own canoe of life. He was admitted to the Canadian Mission School at Pagotes by his aunt, Tara. The little education that he had acquired changed the course of his life later. He also learnt sign-painting from his teacher Lal and his bosom friend Alec during his stay at the school. He was also sent to pundit Jairam to be trained as a pundit, but he was turned out of his house because of his bad behaviour. He was then installed in the rum shop run by Bhandat, but he could not last there for a long time. One Sunday, he had the two rooms to use according to his sweet will because Bhandat and his family had to go to attend a funeral of a relative. He found meaning in his meaningless life. Liberty drove him mad. Naipaul writes:

He wandered along the main road, and down side streets, he had never taken. He stopped buses and went for short rides. He had innumerable soft drinks and hard cakes at roadside shacks. He was accused of stealing a dollar from the shop.....Fatigue overcame him he began to long for the day to end to relieve him of his freedom. He went back to the dark rooms tired, empty, miserable, yet still excited, still unwilling to sleep (Naipaul 63).

Coming back from the funeral, Bhandat accused him of theft and hit Mr Biswas's head with his belt. Mr Biswas was howling, 'O God! O, God! My eye! My eye!' (Naipaul 64) With severe injuries, he returned to his mother and asked, 'Why do you keep sending me to stay with other people?' (Naipaul 64) He repeatedly requested her not to send him to Bhandat again. But Bipti was helpless. She asked him-where will you go then? (Naipaul 64)

It is obvious that Mr Biswas had to move from one place to another in search of employment. He cherished a dream of having a house of his own that would provide him with identity and security. One day he went to paint signs at the Hanuman House Store of the Tulsi family, and he was found passing a love letter to Shama, one of Mrs. Tulsi's daughters.

Mr Biswas's marriage with Shama proved to be an unhappy one as he was educated and of independent nature. He dreamt of a handsome dowry marrying into a rich family, but he got nothing. He felt that he was trapped. It contributed to make him more depressive. In the Hanuman House, he discovered himself as an enslaved person like other sons-in-law. He felt extremely humiliated. He also, as a sign of protest, did not establish any physical intimacy with Shama because he was planning to run away. He saw: 'The husbands, under Seth's supervision, work on the Tulsi land, look after the Tulsi animals, and serve in the Store. In return, they were given food, shelter, and a little money, their children were looked after, and they were treated with respect by people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis' (Naipaul 98).

His rebellious nature forced him to pack his brushes and clothes. On seeing him packing, Shama insulted him- 'Yes, take up your clothes and go...you came to this house with nothing but a pair of cheap khaki trousers and a dirty old shirt' (Naipaul 99). On his return to Hanuman House after a few days, he was greeted by Shama saying- 'You come back already? You tired catching crab in Pagotes?' (Naipaul 103) Mr Biswas wittily replied- 'I thought I would come and help all-you catch some here' (Naipaul 103). He felt weak and discouraged. He spent as much time as possible outside the Hanuman House because his presence or absence hardly mattered. He was so insignificant.

His life at The Chase was equally painful, although away from the Hanuman House. At The Chase he was working as a shopkeeper and proved to be a failure. Here he became the father of three children- Savi, Anand and Myna. His dream of a comfortable life like Jairam and Ajodha also came to an end. He ruined his prospects and finally disgracefully returned to the Hanuman House for safety and sanity. Journey continued. He was then sent to the Green Vale to work as a supervisor of labourers, and he was discontented. When he saw the life of the labourers at Barracks, he was gloomy. He decided to make a house for him as soon as possible. It is at the Green Vale that he contemplated deeply over a house of his own :

He wanted, in the first place, a real house made with natural materials. He didn't wish to mud for walls, earth for the floor, tree branches for rafters, and grass for the roof. He wanted wooden walls, all tongue-and-groove. He wanted a galvanized iron roof and a wooden ceiling.....The house would stand on tall concrete pillars so that he would get two floors instead of one, and the way would be left open for future development (Naipaul 219).

At this station in his life, he tried to build a house to identify him with it, but he had to leave it incomplete for lack of funds. Unfortunately, this house was destroyed in a storm. Once again, he was compelled to make a humiliating return to the Hanuman House. Bruce King Writes - "Biswas has become mentally unstable throughout undernourishment, solitude and the harshness of his life. Abandoned by his family, trapped in a loveless marriage, poor and unable to get a foot up the ladder of life, Biswas fears being murdered by the resentful estate workers he supervises; his angry, irrational behaviour towards his wife is the start of a nervous

breakdown (36)". But the desire for building up a house of his own was burning strongly in him.

While working as a journalist for the *Sentinel*, he was able to raise his status in the eyes of the Tulsi family and lived with Mrs Tulsi in her new house in Port of Spain. Driven by a sense of self-respect, he built a house at Shorthills, which also burnt in a fire. He was not blessed by fate. Repeated efforts met up with repeated failures. He sunk into despair and disappointment, but his spirit was unputdownable. His quarrel with Owad objecting to Owad's lectures on the communist revolution forced Mrs Tulsi to give him the notice to vacate her house. To fulfil his dream of owning a private house, he bought a house on Sikkim Street from a dishonest solicitor clerk. Although his long-cherished desire for a private place came to be true, he found many defects in the new house. 'The sun came through the open windows on the ground floor and struck the kitchen wall' (Naipaul 605). 'Mr Biswas discovered the absence of a back door. Shama discovered that two wooden pillars supporting the staircase landing was rotten, whittled away towards the bottom, and green with dampness.'(Naipaul 605-606). 'The landing pillars had rotted because they stood next to a tap that emerged from the back wall of the house. The water from the tap ran into the ground.'(Naipaul 606) 'They discovered that none of the windows downstairs would close. Some grated on the concrete sill; others had been so warped by the sun that their bolts could no longer make contact with the grooves.'(Naipaul 606) Anand discovered that the square pillars of the front fence, so pretty with Morning Glory, were made of hollow bricks that rested on no foundation.' (Naipaul 607).

To his bewildered son who asked him, 'Who are you?' he replied, 'I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man, you know.' He was sacked from his job for his prolonged convalescence, but Savi's financial assistance gave him peace of mind.

Mr. Biswas is a vivid portrait of a man who fought to free himself from the entanglements of family, custom, and religion. Throughout the novel, he battled the Tulsi family in his way and found living with them so distasteful and humiliating. He was also an artist, and his art was the only aspect of him that the Tulsi admired. But they did not realize that it was the expression of his independent personality they despised. Pant writes :

“His struggle to establish himself in the derelict colony of Trinidad through the ownership of a house apparently fails, but, despite the death in debt in a jerry-built house, he has, in fact, triumphed. In however insignificant a way, his attainment of a house ideal is an assertion of his will to be different, to control his environment rather than to be manipulated by it. He may not be a highly placed hero like Hamlet or King Lear, but his tenacious struggle to achieve identity and independence in a poverty-stricken colony is truly heroic”(357).

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