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## **V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*: A Marathon Struggle against Heavy Odds**

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### **Abstract**

V.S. Naipaul, a novelist of Indian diaspora, preoccupies with the themes of dispossession, alienation, homelessness, rootlessness, fragmentation, mimicry and a relentless quest for identity. Literary output of Naipaul comes out of his personal experiences as an expatriate and his struggle to make his mark as a writer. Writing to him is an ordering of experience and the impetus behind his writing is a sort of compulsion to understand his own situation. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, is a much discussed novel which deals with the theme of a quest for identity in modern materialistic world where man feels all-alone and his worth is evaluated through personal achievements and worldly success. This novel delves deeper into the psyche of an individual to reveal the major problems of the dispossessed individual who ceaselessly tries to attain an authentic selfhood. It is the tale of a marathon struggle of Mr. Mohun Biswas against adverse circumstances to attain an independent identity. His struggle

is a long and traumatic one but he is successful in his negotiation for space and ultimately he is able to fulfill his long cherished dream of having a house of his own. This article aims to analyze how the protagonist of this novel, Mr. Biswas puts up a great perseverance in his marathon struggle against heavy odds to achieve his independent identity through the symbolic attainment of a house.

### **Keywords**

Indian Diaspora; Alienation; Homelessness; Rootlessness; Quest for Identity; V.S. Naipaul; *A House for Mr. Biswas*.



V.S. Naipaul mainly deals with the themes related to the problems of colonized: their sense of alienation, their identity crisis, the paradox of freedom, sense of dispossession, homelessness, mimicry, postcolonial crisis and a relentless quest for an authentic selfhood. The first four novels of Naipaul deal exclusively with the colonial society of Trinidad, the island where he was born, and are preoccupied with the themes of alienation, dispossession, mimicry, homelessness and identity crisis. The characters in these novels are incessantly in search of a room of their own. Most of Naipaul's literary output comes out of his personal experiences as an expatriate and a desire to understand his own position in the world. Writing to him is an ordering of experience and the impetus behind his writing is a sort of compulsion to understand his own situation. Bruce King remarks,

Naipaul's writing, with its concern for utility, consciousness of the material basis of society and culture, and identification with India and the Indian diaspora, offers a thorough, if at times, too pessimistic, examination of the problems of late colonialism, nationalism and the post-colonial. (19)

An undercurrent of melancholy runs through the novels of Naipaul and in his vision of the world, pessimism may be said to be a central strain. As his vision matures, it becomes more pessimistic with his own sense of disillusionment and frustration. His personal anguish, helplessness, disillusionment and a sense of loss set the tone of his all novels. Naipaul's funniest novels are fraught with pain as he himself acknowledges the fact in an interview, "Even my funniest novels were all begun in the blackest of moods, out of a sense of personal anguish and despair" ("People are Proud of Being Stupid" 38). However, a deep study of his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, reveals that there is optimism hidden under his pessimism and there is a ray of hope for fulfillment which demands constant efforts on the part of the individual. There is a marked difference in approach between the other novels and the novel under study as the latter endorses an affirmative approach to the problem of rootlessness, homelessness and displacement through hard work and perseverance.

*A House for Mr. Biswas*, written in 1961, is a much discussed novel which deals with the theme of a quest for identity in modern materialistic world where man feels all-alone and his worth is evaluated through personal achievements and worldly success. This novel delves deeper into the psyche of an individual to reveal the major problems of the dispossessed individual who ceaselessly tries to attain an authentic selfhood. It is the tale of a relentless struggle of Mr. Mohun Biswas against the heavy odds to attain an independent identity. His struggle is a long and traumatic one but he is successful in his negotiation for space and ultimately he is able to fulfill his long cherished dream of having a house of his own, which is a remarkable achievement for a man of his limited resources and circumstances. An optimistic attitude, a sense of self-respect and perseverance of Mr. Biswas enable him to fight against the forces that try to suppress his individuality.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* narrates the story of Mr. Biswas from birth to death. The novel is divided into some manageable sections and the plot moves forward progressively with each section dealing with a different phase of Mr. Biswas' life. The first section of the novel called Pastorals, describes the birth and childhood of Biswas. Right from his birth he is branded as unlucky because he is born the wrong way, he is six-fingered and the time of his birth is inauspicious. The *pundit* who is called in to see the horoscope of Biswas predicts that he will have the "unlucky sneeze" and "much of the evil this boy will undoubtedly bring will be mitigated if his father is forbidden to see him for twenty-one days" (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 17). All the instructions of the pundit are followed strictly. Nevertheless, Biswas proves unlucky for his father and becomes the cause of his death. Biswas is treated as a nonentity from his childhood. He is not taken care of and his infancy is a painful phase of his life. His body is left unwashed, becoming soiled and muddy. He is not properly fed and malnutrition stunts his growth, giving him a shallow chest, feeble limbs and a protruding belly. After the death of his father, Biswas and his mother, Bipti have to move to Pagotes and live as dependents on Tara, his mother's well-to-do sister, while his elder brothers are sent to a distant relation to work as labourers in the sugar estate. Biswas has to leave his father's house and henceforth the fragmentation of his life begins:

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 which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. For, with his mother's parents dead, his brothers on the estate at Flicity, 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. (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 40)

After coming to Pagotes Biswas and his mother live in a back trace sharing a mud hut with some of Tara's husband's dependent relations, who remain strangers to them. Biswas is not happy there and even after five years, he considers it to be a temporary arrangement. Now they live completely on Tara's charity. All the decisions related to Biswas are taken by Tara. It is Tara, who sends him to the Canadian Mission School, and then suddenly decides that he should be made a pundit. So he is sent to pundit Jairam to receive his training where he spends eight months with the eccentric man doing "the mechanical side of Jairam's offices" (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 51) and copying out "Sanskrit verses, which he couldn't understand" (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 52). Then he is thrown out by Jairam and he returns to Pagotes expecting his mother to console him but his mother being in a bad mood thrashes him. Tara again sends him away to help at her husband's rum shop, which is being looked after by Bhandat, her brother-in-law. Biswas is happy at the idea of earning two dollars a month. Bhandat does not like him. He accuses him of stealing a dollar, beats him up and turns him out. Reaching home, Biswas cries out pathetically to his mother: "why do you keep on sending me to stay with other people" (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 65). It is here that out of anguish, Biswas for the first time declares his resolution to have his own house: "I am going to get a job of my own. And am going to get my own house too. I am finished with this" (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 67).

After leaving Bhandat store Biswas takes up sign painting and develops the hobby of reading. He realizes that there is little he can do besides "opening a shop or buying a motorbus" (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 78-79). But he is so optimistic in his approach that he tries to rise above the mediocrity of the colonial people by inventing things. He purchases seven expensive volumes of Hawkins' Electrical Guide, but can not go beyond making rudimentary items like doorbells and buzzers because Trinidad can not furnish him with the equipments necessary to carry out more complex experiments.

Mr. Biswas has an unflinching faith in his own capability. He does not lose heart and continues his marathon struggle to be successful in life. In no other character of Naipaul's, one finds such a profound optimism and faith in life. Kenneth Ramchand refers to Mr. Biswas's unquenchable hope with these words:

But if Mr. Biswas finds his world a deterrent to ambition, as well as engulfing and repulsive, the faith in life with which author endows him ... is greater than the fictional character's impulse to escape. (204)

The next section of the novel describes a crucial phase of Mr. Biswas' life in which his long struggle with the Tulsi family begins. Cursed be his sign-painting which brings him into Hanuman House in Arwacas, where he happens to meet Shama, the daughter of Mrs. Tulsi whom he marries in course of time and starts living with the family members of the Tulsis. He is expected to merge into insignificance like the other sons-in-law, some of whose names even have been forgotten. He becomes an alien insider in the Tulsi family and its establishments. He is not happy there and he finds himself misfit in the Tulsi household. He becomes a nonentity, unwanted and unnecessary man. Gordon Rohlehr aptly remarks: "Tulsi-dom depends for its existence on the psychic emasculation of the men and on the maintenance of their sense of inferiority" (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 189). Once, Govind, one of the sons-in-law of the Tulsis, suggests that Mr. Biswas should give up sign-painting and become a driver at the Tulsi estate. Mr. Biswas at once expresses his dissent blatantly: "Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No, boy. My motto is: paddle your own canoe" (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 107). Mr. Biswas feels ill-at-ease in the house and longs for free and fresh air. He suffers from neurotic inertia. He is always tired and restless. He feels alienated from the Tulsis as there is no proper form of relatedness. As a Brahmin he does not get a becoming treatment. His designation as a labourer, his landlessness and joblessness

make him insignificant in the house. He revolts against the Tulsidom and adopts a combative stance. Out of frustration and mortification he leaves the Hanuman House. Moving away from the Tulsi household with pregnant Shama is a sort of personal triumph for Mr. Biswas as he feels a sense of independence.

Mr. Biswas starts living independently with his wife at The Chaze. But he has the feeling that the Chaze is just a temporary arrangement and “real life was to begin for them soon and elsewhere. The Chaze was a pause, a preparation” (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 147). Mr. Biswas’ first attempt to paddle his own canoe meets with failure when his shop incurs heavy losses and he is forced to accept the job of a sub-overseer at a salary of twenty-five dollars, in one of the Tulsi estates. But Mr. Biswas is not dismayed in his efforts to achieve his independence. He starts building a house at Green Vale which is the embodiment of his aspirations as he is still dependent on the Tulsis. He moves to the finished room of his with the hope that living in his own house will bring about a change in the state of his mind rather he has a nervous breakdown. Once again he is taken to Hanuman House where he is informed that his house has been burnt down by dispossessed labourers. On recovering, he finds that “his position was as it had been when he was seventeen, unmarried and ignorant of the Tulsis” (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 303). Then Mr. Biswas arrives at Port of Spain which provides him the foothold he has long been in search of. His sign-painting proves helpful in finding the way for a job at the Trinidad Sentinel, where he is taken in as a reporter at a salary of fifteen dollars a month. This job establishes his identity as a person to some extent. But the temporary nature of his job compels him to move to Shorthills where his ambition of having his own house finds fulfillment. He completes the house within a short period and shifts into it. But he has to abandon this house too because of its inconvenient location. He sells this house for four hundred

dollars and manages a loan of four thousand dollars from Ajodha and finally decides to buy the solicitor's clerk's house in Port of Spain.

After moving into the new house in Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas and Shama discover its many flaws and realize that they have been cheated. But the only thing that gives them satisfaction is that it is their own house—an independent house. Shama prepares the house to receive the Tuttles and proudly tells them: “I don't want anything bigger. This is just right for me. Something small and nice” (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 580). Mr. Biswas too feels a sense of coziness, oneness and familial affection in this new house. As Madhusudana Rao points out:

In his own house, which is incomplete like his own syncopated individuality, he has come to respect the feeling of love,—that state of consciousness which recognizes the value of gifting one's self away to meet another's human need. In a sense, Mr. Biswas has at last arrived (*A House for Mr. Biswas* 99).

With the passage of time, his children, Savi and Anand go abroad on scholarships for further studies. Savi fares well in her studies but Anand sends gloomy letters which disturb Mr. Biswas and the old streak of morbidity seems to arise again. He continues his job with Trinidad Sentinel; he suffers a heart attack and spends nearly a month in the hospital. After recovery, he again takes up the job at the daily but due to excess of work and tension, he suffers another heart stroke. Consequently, he is dismissed from his job with Trinidad Sentinel with a salary of three months as compensation. But to redeem the situation, Savi, his daughter comes back and gets a job at a bigger salary than he could ever have got. Now he is happy and satisfied with his life. His daughter has taken all the responsibilities and he is free from the worldly tensions and cares. But it is a strange irony that his days of happiness and satisfaction in the company of his daughter can not last long, He dies



peacefully all of a sudden which is his final triumph after an epic struggle with fate, circumstances and society.

The novel ends on a positive note, a rarity in the fiction of Naipaul. A perusal of this novel reveals that optimism is implied in pessimism and a marathon struggle yields positive outcomes. The protagonist, Mr. Biswas struggles from the beginning to the end to achieve an independent identity. His efforts and plans to achieve selfhood are frustrated by fate, circumstances and postcolonial setup, but he hopes against hope and ultimately wins after a lot of setbacks and failures. A heroic struggle of the protagonist against adverse circumstances and the subsequent success to own a house, teach a lesson that a dogged perseverance wins at the end even if the struggle continues for a long period of time.

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