

Natural Elements in V S Naipaul's *A House For Mr. Biswas*

Mary Vijayam Alias Jinju V J

Asst. Professor of English, Malankara Catholic Collge, Mariagiri

Abstract

A House for Mr. Biswas portrays the life of Mr. Biswas, a protagonist inspired by Naipaul's father, as he struggles to find his freedom and a his own house. He is the son of a poor laborer in Trinidad, Mr. Biswas is forced to live as a guest in a crowded and an inhospitable house. After the death of his father, his family moves in with his mother's sister, Tara, and he is disgraced and crushed by Tara's brother-in-law Bhandat. Mr. Biswas vows, "I am going to get a job on my own. And I am going to get my own house too. I am finished with this" [p. 64]. As a sign-painter he goes to work for the Tulsi family, and there he begins flirt with Shama. After the discovery of his love letters by Mrs. Tulsi, Mr. Biswas is bullied into marrying Shama, thus begins a long unhappy marriage that bring into being four children, a constant struggle for money, and countless bitter quarrels.

KEYWORDS: Natural Elements, freedom, house, relations

After a brief of failed attempt to run a goods store, Mr. Biswas and his family return to live with the Tulsi family, a pattern that recurs throughout the novel. It is in Port of Spain that Mr. Biswas comes closest to happiness, working as a journalist, writing outlandish stories, and achieving a degree of local fame. Meanwhile, his son Anand excels in school and shows signs of talent as a writer. But Mr. Biswas's fortunes suffer several problems, and it is not until the very end of his life that he is finally able to buy a house—only to find the experience much different than he had imagined.

A House for Mr. Biswas is a largely autobiographical novel about V.S. Naipaul's own family. Mr. Biswas is based on Naipaul's father and the character of Anand on Naipaul himself. The specific experiences described in the novel, and especially the relationship between father and son, lead Anand to become a writer. At various points the narrative jumps ahead, describing an experience or situation years from the fictional present. When Mr. Biswas is cowed by the Tulsi family into marrying Shama, the narrator reflects, "How often, in the years to come, at Hanuman House or in the house at Shorthills or in the house in Port of Spain, living in one room, with some of his children sleeping on the next bed . . . Mr. Biswas regret his weakness, his inarticulateness, that evening" [p. 87]!

The characters in the novel switch between Hindi and broken English. This suggest about the hybrid nature of Trinidadian society and its colonial history. Throughout the novel Mr. Biswas battles the Tulsi family, engaging in one quarrel after another. Thus he find living with them so distasteful, so humiliating. The Tulsis, in turn, find Mr. Biswas unbearable. These arguments are inherently important and do mask more serious differences.

When Mr. Biswas moves his family to The Chase, he is puzzled by his wife's nagging: "Living in a wife-beating society, he couldn't understand why women were even allowed to nag or how nagging could have any effect" [p. 14]. And when Govind beats his wife Chinta, we're told that "her beatings gave Chinta a matriarchal dignity and, curiously, gained her a respect she had never had before" [p. 443]. Thus Chinta's status improve because of her beatings. This suggest about the power relations between men and women and between parents and children.

Mr. Biswas is highly critical of Hinduism—and indeed of all religions—for most of the novel. He chides Owad for worshipping idols and blames the failure of his shop at The Chase on Hari's ritual blessing. This novel as a whole seem to be saying about the role of religion in Trinidadian society. When Owad returns from his medical studies at Cambridge, he is filled with opinions about writers and artists such as T. S. Eliot and Pablo Picasso, both of whom he loathes. He also considers himself a communist. After a bitter quarrel, Mr. Biswas suggests, "communism, like charity, should begin at home" [p. 533].

The entire novel tells the story of an ordinary man with modest ambitions whose life is not marked by dramatic events and the story of a man's struggle to make something valuable out of a circumscribed and mediocre existence. It is a struggle symbolizes by the hero's efforts to own his 'own' house, which in a way, is to own his own his own life. Out of this a lone man's struggle himself to free from oppressive force of his in-laws and failing health, Naipaul creates an epic novel, powerfully tragic which the story argues can be the fate of everyman in a rootless society.

In novel , rootlessness of an exile and psychological effects of colonialism finds its fuller treatment.. When the novel begins , MohunBiswas, a sacked journalist dying at the age of 46 in his irretrievably mortgaged house in Sikkim Street, St. James, Port of Spain. He is penniless. He has had months of illness and despair, has a wife and four children. And yet he is struck again and again "by the wonder of being his own house, the audacity of it; to walk into his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wishes, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family." The substance of the novel has to do with the transformation of Mr. Biswas from a slave into a free man, the sign and emancipation of that emancipation being his house: "How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it... Worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth." Biswas' heroic struggle to attain dignity and fulfill his aspirations to own a house of his own becomes an allegory. Though he is aware of the implications of his odyssey within the small society, he apprehends the futility of his situation in his fascination for a memorable image of ignorance and placeless glimpsed from a passing bus. Even as a child in his parents' home, Biswas is regarded as an ill-fated child. He has had an inauspicious birth and his sixth finger of malnutrition has marked him out for misfortune. Everything he touches has unfortunate consequences and his many 'crimes' culminate in his indirectly causing his father's death. Though he is for the most passive, he is unable to escape from his assigned role as generator of tragedy. It is a fitting beginning to a life history of dependence and of dignity denied.

The universal implications can be detected in Biswas' personal struggles are: "Biswas is everyman, wavering between identity and nonentity, and claiming his acquaintance with the rest of them..." As an adult he is trapped into marriage with Shama, daughter of the wealthy Tulsis family and his life alternates between periods of dependence on the Tulsis and attempt to escape their clutches in order to regain his identity. The Tulsis who are keen on absorbing him and are ready to encourage him to surrender his identity in a way challenged Biswas to make something of himself. so that he can oppose them. In fact, his first real sense of himself arises from the need to oppose Tulsis. Mr. Biswas uses the word, 'tough' to insult the Tulsis especially, Seth and makes a virtue out of hairless hands as a sign of superiority.

The rebellious nature of Biswas is also highlighted in the novel . His eagerness to assert his individuality is quite firm. The way he adopts often seem absurd and comic. This probably be the inner awareness of Biswas for his own limitations and the truth to revolt of a weak man like him could but be a comic one. But the will to affirm one's identity and selfhood is unmistakably found in Biswas. Finally, he is duped into paying too heavy a price for an ill-made house at St. James. The ending of the novel, like that of no longer than, at ease is ambiguous in that though he has been cheated and the expense and worry eventually kills him. However, he has succeeded in his desire to "lay claim one's portion of the earth".

The nature of Mr. Biswas' life itself proves a story of the battle against his hostile environment and his wandering from place to place does not solve his problem of identity. By the time he gets to Sikkim Street where he constructs his house, his fear grows deeper and heavier . Soon after his entry into his house, he falls seriously ill and was put on half-pay by The Sentinel and after sometime, sacks him. Mr. Biswas though dies unemployed and unable to pay off the mortgage can be said to have found happiness in his last days since he has achieved a certain degree of freedom from human complicity by evolving an identity and continuity in the world for himself.

Works Cited:

Naipaul V.S. A House for Mr. Biswas. 1961. New Delhi: Penguin, 1992.

---. The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad. 1980. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.

Rohlehr, Gordon. "The Ironic Approach: The Novels of V. S. Naipaul." In Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul. Ed. Robert D. Hamner. Washington, D. C.: Three Continents Press, 1977.