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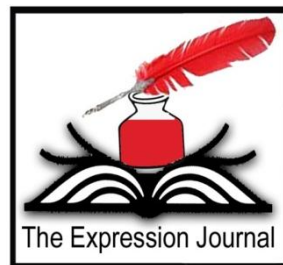
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**THE PARADOX OF BELONGING: ANALYZING MR BISWAS' CHILDHOOD TRAUMA
AND HIS RELATIONSHIPS WITH TULSI FAMILY IN
V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS***

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Abstract

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, better known as V. S. Naipaul, was a Trinidadian British novelist, short-story and travelogue writer who was well-known for his powerful and incisive works of fiction and non-fiction. He was born on August 17, 1932, in Chaguanas, Trinidad in a Brahmin family of Indian descent. Naipaul received his early education at Queen's Royal College in Trinidad before moving to England in 1950 to study at Oxford University. His first published novel is *The Mystic Masseur* (1957). After that he wrote many novels, stories, essays and travelogues. His novel *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001. Apart from it, Naipaul wrote several non-fiction works including a trilogy on *India: An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). He received several awards and honours as a writer. Apart from Nobel Prize in 2001, he has won the Booker Prize for his novel *In a Free State* in 1971. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1989 and he was also awarded the Trinity Cross, the highest honour in Trinidad and Tobago, in 1990. He gave some controversial stances and a few of his non-fictions were based on sensitive themes due to which he sprang into controversies many times. But despite his sexual pervasiveness and controversies, he was an influential novelist. The present paper attempts to explore Mr Biswas' childhood trauma and his relationships with Shama and Tulsi family in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* have been explored.

Keywords

V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas*, Childhood Trauma, Bad Luck, Identity Crisis, Social Hierarchy, Alienation, Rootlessness, Placelessness, Indian Diaspora.

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THE PARADOX OF BELONGING: ANALYZING MR BISWAS' CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND HIS RELATIONSHIPS WITH TULSI FAMILY IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS*

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The novel *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) is written by V. S. Naipaul, a reputed writer having his Indian roots. The novel follows the life of Mohun Biswas, an Indo-Trinidadian man, and his struggles to establish a sense of identity and belonging in a colonial society. When the novel opens, the environment for his birth is being created. Rob Nixon likes this novel and he praises it in these words, "Many readers would concur that *Biswas*, a tragicomic novel of epic scope delivered at age twenty-nine, remains his most remarkable work" (Nixon 3).

There is a quarrel between his father and mother. The novel opens with the following words, "Shortly before he was born, there had been another quarrel between Mr Biswas' mother, Bipti and his father, Raghu, and Bipti had taken her three children and walked all the way in the hot sun to the village where her mother Bissoondaye lived" (Naipaul 11). Mr Biswas is born with six fingers in a wrong way and his birth is considered inauspicious because he was born at midnight. Even the midwife also cries to see this type of baby. She says, "But what sort of boy? Six-fingered, and born in the wrong way" (Naipaul 11). His birth is not celebrated in the family like the birth of a girl generally in a traditional family. Mr Biswas' maternal grandfather also becomes sad to hear about this birth of a child with six fingers that's why he says, "I knew it. There is no luck for me" (Naipaul 13). His maternal grandmother seems to be much terrified with his birth in an inauspicious hour. She does not even care about the midnight and hurries to ward off the evil spirits. She walks to the next village and brings the leaves of cactus and cuts them into strips and hangs a strip over every door, every window and aperture so that evil spirits may not enter the house. But the midwife was much worried to see this baby that's why she proclaims, "Whatever you do, this boy will eat up his own mother and father" (Naipaul 12).

When Pundit comes in the morning to see the horoscope of the child, he puts the child's name Mohan but he also says that "The boy will be a lecher and spendthrift. Possibly as liar as well" (Naipaul 12). He warns the family members that this child should be kept away from water and trees, "The shocking thing I can advise is to keep him away from trees and water. Particularly water" (13). The pundit's prophesy comes true when this child becomes the cause

of his father's death. His father Raghu is also not allowed to see the child's face for twenty-one days.

Mr Biswas' actions not only cause problems for himself but also for his family. Even his sneeze can disrupt his father's work schedule, as seen when Raghu refused to work after Mr Biswas sneezed on one occasion. On another occasion, Mr Biswas' sneezing caused Raghu to suffer an injury, leading him to blame Mr Biswas for their family's misfortunes. His father aptly says, "This boy will eat up his family in truth" (Naipaul 16). Born under the shadow of a prophecy that his birth would bring about his father's demise, Mr Biswas is given the task of caring for a neighbor's calf. Although he is paid a penny per week for this responsibility, his negligence results in the calf going missing, and Mr Biswas fears punishment for his actions. Dhari, the calf's owner, accuses Mr Biswas of drowning the calf in a pond. He says, "Raghu's son has drowned my calf in the pond. A nice calf. My first calf. My only calf" (Naipaul 25). His father, Raghu starts searching Mr Biswas and the calf here and there. Ultimately, he drowns searching Mr Biswas in the pond. Dhari also exclaims, "That boy! He has murdered my calf and now he has eaten up his own father" (28). In this way, the pundit's prophesy proves true.

Following her husband's death by drowning, Bipti refrains from mourning and quickly sends messages to her relatives. The burial ceremony is portrayed comically in the novel, as Bipti's sister Tara arrives heavily adorned with silver bangles and other jewelry, as if attending a wedding. Tara takes control of the situation and offers the family a place to live behind her house in Pagotes, where Mohun's sister Dehuti works as a servant. Tara prefers to have family members as servants rather than strangers, stating, "If you are going to have someone, it is better to have one of your own family. That is what I always say. I don't want strangers poking their noses into my kitchen and bedroom" (Naipaul 32). Eventually, Mr Biswas attends the Canadian Mission School and befriends Alec after Dehuti elopes with one of Tara's servants, Ramchand.

Mr Biswas was born in a rudimentary dwelling made of mud and grass, devoid of any modern amenities such as hospitals, schools, or birth and death registration offices. When his aunt sought to enroll him in a Canadian Mission School, he was asked to furnish his birth certificate as a prerequisite for admission. However, Mohun had no record of his birth. Bipti engaged the services of a solicitor, M.F. Ghany, who encountered several discrepancies in Mr Biswas' family traditions. Nonetheless, after overcoming some challenges, a birth certificate was ultimately procured based on Bipti's approximation of his date of birth, proof of his identity, and existence. Subsequently, Mr Biswas received six years of education at the aforementioned school.

The teachers at this school provided education that was worthless and irrelevant to the students' lives. They were taught about stocks, shares, and transactions, which frustrated Tara to the point of withdrawing her child, Mr Biswas, from the school. Instead, he was sent to learn about Hindu scriptures from Pundit Jairam, a knowledgeable and respected man among the Hindu community. Pundit Jairam did not use physical punishment but would reprimand Mr Biswas by boxing his ears or confining him to his home until he memorized a set number of couplets from the Ramayana. While in the company of Pundit Jairam, Mr Biswas received gifts of fruit and sweets. However, he became tempted by some ripening bananas and ended up eating two when Pundit Jairam was out and his wife was away from the kitchen. Pundit Jairam noticed the missing bananas and punished Mr Biswas by making him eat an entire bunch of

bananas until he was sick. This resulted in stomach pain and constipation, which made it difficult for Mr Biswas to perform his daily worship.

After suffering from constipation, Mr Biswas found himself without a scheduled time for relieving. One night, he had the urge to go but was frightened of waking Pundit Jairam and the darkness outside. He attempted to use his handkerchief as a makeshift toilet and threw it out of the window, but it landed on Pundit Jairam's holy oleander tree. When Pundit Jairam discovered what had happened, he berated Mr Biswas and declared that he was not worthy of becoming a pundit due to his defilement. Mr Biswas lost his opportunity to become a pundit and was forced to leave Jairam's house, with his neighbours seeing him depart with a bundle on his shoulder.

Upon reaching his home, Mr Biswas is met with unexpected anger and frustration from his mother, who accuses him and his siblings of being ungrateful. She reveals that Dehuti has eloped with Tara's trained servant, Ramchand, but this news doesn't affect Mr Biswas much. His attempt to work at Bhandat's rum shop also proves to be a failure, as Bhandat sees him as a spy for Tara and beats him brutally over a misunderstanding about a missing dollar. Despite the pain, Mr Biswas returns home and expresses his resentment towards his mother for constantly sending him to stay with other people. Bipti, however, doesn't take offense and instead expresses her concern for his future, lamenting her bad luck with her children and admitting that Sitaram's criticisms of Mr Biswas may have been true. Mr Biswas never seems to find a stable job until he meets his friend Alec, who suggests he work as a sign painter. This job brings Mr Biswas a lot of satisfaction, but the work comes in sporadically. Despite the hardships he faces, Naipaul's protagonists often achieve great success in their lives, and Mr Biswas is no exception. He manages to buy his own house, which becomes a symbol of his identity and a quest for wholeness, independence, and dignity.

Mr Biswas meets his future wife, Shama, when he goes to Hanuman House to paint signs. He is enchanted by her smile and falls in love with her despite her not having a sweet voice and being of medium height and thin build. Shama comes from a wealthy Hindu family who own a lot of land, and the entry of outsiders into their house is not allowed. Mr Biswas is surprised when he is offered a job at Hanuman House, as it is not for his sign-painting skills, but because he is an Indian Hindu Brahmin. The house is named after an idol of the money god, Hanuman, and it belonged to Pundit Tulsi, who died in a motor car accident, leaving behind a large family. At the time of his death, only one of his daughters was married and two sons still needed to be educated. Mr Biswas notices a sixteen-year-old average-looking girl Shama and falls in love with her when she smiles. One day, he goes to Shama's counter at the store before noon and proposes her, not telling her directly what he wants, but through a slightly crumpled and dirty love note, "I love you and I want to talk to you" (Naipaul 85). Unfortunately, this love-note falls into the hands of Mrs Tulsi who abuses Shama and says, "Shama, that was a shameless thing to do" (Naipaul 86). Mrs Tulsi has been shown as a matriarch who knows a high level of manipulation. She calls Mr Biswas through Seth before evening and instead of asking about other things, she asks whether he likes Shama or not. The conversation goes thus:

'What is the matter? You don't like the child?'

'Yes', Mr Biswas said helplessly, 'I like the child.'

'That is the main thing.' Seth said, 'We don't want you to force you to do anything. Are we forcing you?'

....

'No,' Mr Biswas said. 'You are not forcing me'. (Naipaul 91)

Mr Biswas replies her immediately that he likes Shama just because he thinks that he will get a good amount of dowry but Mrs Tulsi does not give him any dowry and even the marriage of Mr Biswas and Shama is fixed in a registrar's office in order to save the expenses of money. Mr Biswas and Shama is given a long room and free food to eat. Mr Biswas comes to know about the complex structure of the family because he notices that Mrs Tulsi's other sons-in-law were also working in the sugarcane estate for Mrs. Tulsi. Landeg White comments about this novel, "A House for Mr Biswas is as subtle and comprehensive an analysis of the colonial situation in the Caribbean as anything in imaginative literature" (White 80). One day, of Mrs Tulsi's sons-in-law, Govind suggests Mr Biswas to give up this work and he advises him to work under Mrs Tulsi but Mr Biswas gets angry at it and he comments, "Give up sign painting? And my independence. No boy. My motto is; paddle your own canoe" (Naipaul 108). He further says that he would like to catch crabs or sell coconut but he will never work for Mrs Tulsi.

Mr Biswas fails to have good relationships with his wife Shama. He criticizes all the Tulsi family and Shama does not like it. She knows it well that he belongs to a poor family and is not able to earn properly for them. Moreover, he finds fault in all the members of Tulsi family. Shama also refutes when he quarrels with her. At one such occasion, she shows her frustration in the following words, "What you been doing and saying? You getting everybody against you. You don't mind. But what about me? You can't give me anything and you want to prevent everybody else from doing anything for me" (Naipaul 109). Mr Biswas does not listen to his wife and he merely says, "I ain't got a damned thing. But I not going down to see Uncle. I not at his beck and call, like everybody else in the house" (Naipaul 109). Mr Biswas calls Seth a leather worker and Mrs Tulsi and Shama Roman Catholics. His words for Mrs Tulsi are very derogatory, "Ro-man Cat-o-lic! Roman Cat, the bitch" (Naipaul 120). He further comments that he has done a favour by marrying with Shama, a Roman Catholic girl. He further criticizes the whole family, "It look to me that your whole family is just one big low-caste bunch" (Naipaul 120). He criticizes Shama's brothers in these words, "And what about the two gods? It ever strikes you that they look like two monkeys? So, you have one concrete monkey god outside the house and two living ones inside. They could just call this place the monkey house and finish. Eh monkey, bull, cow, hen. This place is a blasted zoo, man" (Naipaul 123).

Thus, Mr Biswas does not regard anyone in Shama's family. He calls Mrs Tulsi 'an old hen,' 'a cow,' Mr Seth 'a bull' and Shama's younger brothers 'two little monkeys.' His words for the whole family are not justifiable when he says, "Eh, monkey, bull, cow, hen. The place is a like a blasted zoo, man" (Naipaul 123). He crosses all the limits when she spits on one of Shama's brothers:

Owad: I marking what you doing, Mr Biswas. But I standing up right here and if spit on me again I going to tell Ma'.

Biswas: Tell, you little son of a bitch. (Muttering spits on him)

Owad: O God!

You luck little monkey. (When he misses the target) (Naipaul 136)

This time Mrs Tulsi's another son-in-law gets so angry to hear about the whole incident that he starts hitting Mr Biswas with blows, cuffs and kicks. All this happens so suddenly that Mr Biswas does not get any chance to rectify his mistake. He thinks that nobody can save his life this time. He cries in pain, "God! I dead. I dead. He will kill me" (Naipaul 139). Ultimately, he is banished from Tulsi family. Mr Biswas works to create his own identity and searches for his

home. The remaining part of the novel describes how he struggles in his life and in the end of the novel, he dies of heart-attack at the age of forty-six. Michael Richard Kelly writes about this novel, "Throughout the novel Mr Biswas' reach continues to exceed his grasp, and his dream house remains elusive" (Kelly 62). Peggy Nightingale also opines about this novel:

Like the earlier fiction, this novel chronicles and exposes flaws in Trinidad society, but this time, in spite of humorous treatment of separate incidents and characters, the effect of the society as a whole on an individual's life is seen as deeply tragic. And yet, Mohun Biswas' struggle for self-respect and freedom provides one of the most optimistic notes in Naipaul's writing. (Nightingale 44)

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