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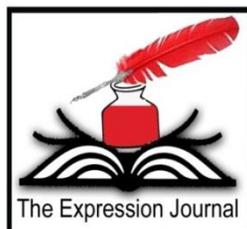
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## **V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*: A Re-reading of Mohun Biswas' Relationships with Shama and Tulsi Family Astha Mangal**

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### **Abstract**

V.S. Naipaul's literary oeuvre is much large as he has written many novels, short-story collections and travelogues, but among them few particular works made him famous worldwide. In fact, Naipaul's works are quite different from his contemporaries and his works have all those themes which are unique, rare and appealing. He is well-known for his non-fictional works also especially his Indian trilogy: *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. In this Indian trilogy, he has presented the one-sided view of India and that's why he was criticized for his acerbic stance and the flimsy image of Indian cities and the rural landscape. Like his travelogues, he has also written about some recurring themes in his novels. His novels, to much extent, present the diasporic images of the immigrants Hindus living in Trinidad and Tobago, and how they are inclined towards the Western culture furthering their rich heritage and culture. His novels also have autobiographical and semi-autobiographical stance such as her novels *The Mystic Masseur*, *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Mimic Men*, *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds*, etc. are its wonderful examples. In the present paper, V.S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr Biswas* has been taken for analysis in which Mohun Biswas' identity crisis has been projected through the critical camera keeping in view his relationships with his wife, Shama and other members of the Tulsi family.

### **Key-Words**

Postcolonial Literature, *A House For Mr. Biswas*, V.S. Naipaul, Identity Crisis, Trinidad and Tobago, Cultural-Clashes, Mutual Relationships, Tulsi Family.

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V.S. Naipaul is known as an internationally acclaimed writer who is well-known for his controversial ideas he has projected through his books and interviews. He can be called a man of nowhere just because he could not feel at home in any country he dwelt. His novels also carry the same themes of his life. In the words of Dr. Ashalata Raman, "One of the major themes of Naipaul's work is the colonial artist discovering his own artistic potentialities" (31). Dr Bijender Singh also holds the views that Naipaul's personal life is reflected through different characters in his works also, "Naipaul and his characters remain in the state of in-betweenness and they are unable to raise their voice against imperialism which makes them placeless and rootless" (18497).

Naipaul's most famous novel *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) delineates the autobiographical accounts of his life in which his father's life has been presented through the character of Mr Biswas. He is an Indo-Trinidadian character whose birth is called inauspicious because he was born at mid-night with six-fingers and the pundit foretells that this boy will bring bad luck for his parents, and he may be spendthrift and lecher also.

He can also be the cause of his parents' death that's why it is advised that his father Raghu should not see his son's face for twenty-one days. But one day his father dies due to drowning in a pond because he thinks that his son and a calf have been drowned in the pond. Due to his overconfidence in his swimming skills, Raghu dies and it was like a thunder-clapping to the family members.

Bipti's sister Tara comes to attend Raghu's funeral. Bipti's daughter Dehuti is sent by her mother to assist Tara in her household work. Later she elopes with a servant Ramchand. Dhari and six other people come at night and start digging thinking that Raghu has hoarded a lot of money. Ultimately, Bipti has to sell the hut and land to Dhari and she starts living at Pagotes at her relative's house. Mohun's brothers Prasad and Pratap also start working on a sugar estate. Mohun was left with her mother. He finds that his mother seems to be taking less interest in his life and she was showing the signs of selfishness.

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Mohun is sent to school where he becomes friend with Alec. He was feeling worthless in his life and he remains aloof from her. When Mr Biswas' schooling does not help him a lot, his mother thinks that he should be sent to become a pundit under the supervision of Punjit Jairam because it can give him better future prospects. But everything remains good for some time but after around eight months, one day Pundit Jairam insults him and he is sent out when he desecrates Pundit's holy oleander tree.

When his mother Bipti comes to know what has happened with him, she does not show any sympathetic attitude towards him. His uncle Ajodha and Tara remain lenient towards him and Ajodha sends Mohun to work in a rum shop where Ajodha's brother Bhandat beats him badly on the accusation of stealing money. Mr Biswas feels hopeless and helpless; and he thinks that people are behaving with him like this just because he is a fatherless child. Mr Biswas does not get any positive response from his mother and he becomes disappointed to meet Ramchand and Dehuti's poverty conditions.

When he meets Alec, he comes to know that Alec has taken up sign painting. Mr Biswas also takes this profession but this work does not give him good income because he it was an irregular work. One day Mr Biswas gets work from Hanuman House to paint signs for the Tulsi store where he saw a girl named Shama. Her smile towards him is taken for a love signal and Mr Biswas passes a love note to her. Unfortunately, this love note is noticed by Mrs Tulsi and she scolds Shama for playing a trick on her customer. Shama becomes embarrassed and she leaves the store immediately. Mr Biswas returns to his work again but before the closing of his work, Shama's uncle Seth comes with a message that Mrs Tulsi wants to see him.

Mr Biswas goes to meet Mrs Tulsi. He was hesitating and terrifying to face her because he has done immoral act to give a love note to Shama; but unexpectedly, he gets good response from Mrs Tulsi who instead of getting angry with his act, proposes to marry her daughter Shama if he like the girl.

'You don't like the child?'

'Yes, I like the child.'

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

'You are not forcing me.' (Naipaul 91)

Mrs Tulsi was looking a suitable groom of Brahmin bloodline. Mr Biswas thinks that he will get a good dowry from Tulsi family because it was a rich family. He speaks these words to Alec, "Good family you know. Money, Acres and acres of land. No more sign-painting for me...I ask to see the mother. Rich people, you know. Big house" (93). But Mrs Tulsi arranges this marriage in the registrar office and saves her money. Mr Biswas thinks that he may get property, money, job and house from Mrs Tulsi but Mrs Tulsi says that they do not believe in ostentations. Mr Biswas is given a big room in the Tulsi family to live with Shama and he is offered to work for the Tulsi family. Mr Biswas is shocked to know that all the other sons-in-law were living in the Hanuman House and they were working for the Tulsi family. Champa Rao Mohan writes about this novel, "In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the story is portrayed through a series of homes which symbolize Mr. Biswas' personal identity. Mr. Biswas was trapped in the clutches of Tulsidom" (Mohan 5).

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Mr Biswas feels trapped to marry Shama because everybody thinks him just an outsider and he is considered merely a poor Brahmin who is in the dire need of money. Nobody wants to talk to him and his wife Shama also favours Tulsi family all the time. She does not get attached with him emotionally, and that's why there are often quarrels between Mohun and Shama. Mr Biswas warns to leave the house and Shama also does not care for his words. She criticizes him for his destitution and passes sarcastic comments to him. Mr Biswas is not given money even for the sign painting done for the Tulsi store. Ultimately, Mr Biswas leaves the house and goes to his house and tells his family members about his marriage. He gets a mixed response from them as his mother feels happy because he has married in an affluent family; Ajodha teases him while Tara is not happy with this marriage. She goes to Hanuman House and comes back with a positive news for Mr Biswas that Mrs Tulsi wants to set up a shop for Mr Biswas in a village called The Chase.

When Tara induces him, Mr Biswas has to concede that he has married Shama without any pressure and he should start thinking about his family and future now. That's why he comes back to the Hanuman House again. But he does not remain cooperative and supportive to the Tulsi family and takes his own decisions. He eats free meals there and does not do any work except criticizing Tulsi family, abusing them and giving them some disparaging names. Mr Biswas calls Mrs. Tulsi 'an old hen' and 'a cow'; he calls that Mr. Seth is 'a bull'. He says that Shama's younger brothers are 'two little monkeys'. He laughs out on this house calling it a zoo, "Eh, monkey, bull, cow, hen. The place is a like a blasted zoo, man" (123). He further says, "Family, Family? This blasted fowlrun, you calling family?" (106). Thus, he does not consider it a family.

Mr Biswas' the second entry in the Hanuman House remains with the same attitude. Nobody pays any attention towards him because everybody is familiar with his idiosyncrasies and whims, and that's why all the members prefer to stay away from him. When he is offered to work for Tulsi family, he turns down their proposal and says that he will do his work himself and he does not want to be depended on the Tulsi family. Mr Biswas fails to adjust himself in his own family and in Shama's family and the same image can be seen from his life also. He writes in *India: A Wounded Civilization*, "India is for me a difficult country; it isn't my home and cannot be my home, and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it" (18).

Mr Biswas is unable to establish good rapport with Shama and he keeps quarrelling with her. Shama also refutes him back and they keep quarrelling like a cat and dog. Mr Biswas remains unsuccessful to take Shama in his good faith and he decides to talk to Govind, his brother-in-law who is married to Shama's sister Chinta. Govind suggests Mr Biswas to give up his sign painting work and it would be better for him to become a driver on the Tulsi estate. Mr Biswas says that he wants to paddle his own canoe and when Seth also comes to know about it, he calls Mohun 'a paddler' in a mocking style. There are many instances in the novel when Naipaul misbehaves with the members of Tulsi family and he gives warning to leave the house also. Seth's wife and Chinta request him to stay there. Mr Biswas' Aryan ideas supported by the Missionaries especially by Misir also become a problem for the Tulsi family. When Misir writes article for the newspaper and attacks on the orthodoxy and mentions Mr Biswas' name and address, Seth comments that Mohun Biswas is a disgrace to this family.

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When Mr Biswas comes to know about it, he starts criticizing the false ideals of the Tulsi family. He further says that this family tries to show off themselves as Hindus but their habits are just like Christians and Mrs Tulsi's two sons are not working on the Tulsi estate, instead they have been sent to colleges for their education while Mrs Tulsi wants to keep her sons-in-law in the house so that they may become her assistants throughout life.

Mr Biswas notices that the Tulsi daughters are committed to their mother Mrs Tulsi. When Mrs Tulsi faints, the daughters attend her properly and they follow a ritual. Mr Biswas abuses Mrs Tulsi but he shows double standards when Mrs Tulsi gains consciousness. He asks her if she was feeling well and Mrs Tulsi also replies him very mildly that she is feeling better. But Mr Biswas keeps changing his color like a chameleon. When Mrs Tulsi tell Owad to take the camphor flame to Mr Biswas, the latter declines and he insults Owad and Mrs Tulsi again. He feels elated when he humiliates Mrs Tulsi and other family members.

Mr Biswas quarrels with Shama about the bad food and how the food is served in the brass plates. He crosses the limitations of morality when he spits out from the window humiliating Owad. He does not do it by mistake and he tries to spit second time also which makes Owad extremely infuriated. When Govind comes to know about it, he beats Mr Biswas very badly. Other family members also gather there and they save Mr Biswas from Govind's anger. Govind gets afraid when Mr Biswas starts crying from beating. When Seth comes to know about this whole incidence, he orders Mr Biswas to leave the house and Mr Biswas moves to the shop in The Chase.

Though this shop was in a bad condition yet Mr Biswas shows an optimistic attitude and he performs well as a shopkeeper. There is also a change in Shama's attitude towards Mr Biswas when she is away from Tulsi family. She wants the house should be blessed by the pundit Hari and takes Mr Biswas's consent. Shama becomes stranger again in the companies of Tulsis. Mr Biswas faces monetary problems because a lot of amount was spent in the food in the house blessing ceremony and some customers had not settled their accounts.

Shama goes to Tulsi family for her delivery and gives birth to a girl named Savi. Seth and Hari call her Basso, Mr Biswas put her name Lakshmi but Shama calls her Savi. A son Anand is born after three years of Savi's birth. Shama tells Mr Biswas to sell the shop and move back to Hanuman house but Mr Biswas does not agree and Shama goes to Hanuman House alone. Mohun Biswas goes to Hanuman House and he comes to know that Shama has given birth to Myna. Shama does not show any response to him. Seth employs him at the Green Vale at the Tulsi estate as a driver at Shama's recommendation. He plans to build his own house but his scuffles with Shama do not come to an end completely.

We see the tensions and quarrels in the chapter "The Void" also wherein Mr Biswas picks quarrel with his wife Shama and reproaches her saying: "I tell you what your philosophy is. Catch him. Marry him. Throw him in a coal barrel. That is the philosophy of your family. Catch him and throw him in a coal barrel." (546). Finally, Mr Biswas succeeds in owning his house but he could realize his dream in his forties. He works as a correspondence for some time and then dies at the age of forty-seven only. The novel presents the image of Naipaul's father through the character of Mr Biswas.

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As a conclusion, it can be stated that V.S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr Biswas* is a must read novel just because it is a wonderfully commentary on the social life as well as the familial life also. Characters like Mr Biswas are rare who want to remain aloof from their comfort zone. In this novel also, there are few characters who feel isolation and helplessness. Shehla Ali and Alka Gopal comment about the theme of alienation in this novel, "Alienation is usually defined as a feeling of separation or isolation, associated with minorities, the poor and other groups of periphery who have limited power to bring about changes in society" (2).

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