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CLASHES AND QUARRELS IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS*: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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District Solan, Himachal Pradesh**

Abstract

In the past few years, the trend for migration has surged among the Indians. It has been noticed that people are migrating to different countries for their personal reasons. They have to face different problems in a new environment. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) is the story of Hindu migrants who migrated to Trinidad and Tobago as indentured labourers. *A House for Mr Biswas* is the story of such immigrant workers who lived in Port of Spain and followed the Hindu rituals and traditions. The novel *A House for Mr Biswas* is a story of struggles and quarrels of Hindu family. The novel is a series of quarrels or clashes between Raghu and Bipti, Mohun and Bipti, Shama and Mohun, Govind and Mohun, Owad and Mohun, etc. Mr Biswas' life also remains a constant struggle from his birth to his death. The present paper attempts to trace out how Mr Biswas has to face problems in his life and he has to quarrel with many people in order to assert his identity and pursue his quest for his own house. The disintegration of the Tulsi family is also a testimony how a big joint family also disintegrates due to outside factors.

Keywords

V. S. Naipaul, *A House of Mr Biswas*, Identity, Displacement, Quarrels, Hindu Traditions, Orthodoxy, Cultural Clashes, Indentured Labourers, Hanuman House.

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V. S. Naipaul, a foremost name in the writers of Indian diaspora and the winner of the Nobel Prize (2001), is the only writer of Indian origin who brought laurels to India through his outstanding works. Though he remained controversial due to his controversial themes, he depicted the real life of the Hindu migrants in Trinidad and Tobago. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his novel *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) and the Booker Prize (1971) for *In a Free State*. Naipaul has penned his novels on the life of Hindu indentured workers whose forefathers went to Trinidad to work on the sugarcane estates. The quarrels between husband and wife, the beating of the wife by her husband and the autobiographical elements are the core themes of his novels. Kunhambu K. also writes about Naipaul, "In his stories and novels, Naipaul transforms actual societies, he has known, their rulers and subjects, into fictional communities that generate narrators and characters more vivid than their models" (Kunhambu 233). The cultural clash also remains a core theme in his novels. Naipaul tells in an interview with Roland Bryden in 1973:

"All my works are really one. I am really writing one big book. I came to the conclusion that, considering the nature of the society I came from, considering the nature of the world I have stepped into and the world I have to look at, I could not be a professional novelist in the old sense." (Bryden 367-70)

A House for Mr Biswas is a beautiful novel with an amazing theme. Dolly writes about this novel, "Indeed, *A House for Mr Biswas* is one of the best novels in contemporary English fiction" (Dolly 829). The novel opens with the theme of quarrel between Raghu and Bipti, "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). This is the common theme that Hindu women go to

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their parents' home to give birth to their children. Mohun's wife, Shama also goes to Tulsi family to give birth to her children.

The problems of Mr Biswas begin with his birth because he was born in the wrong way with six fingers and the midwife cries to see this type of boy. She says, "But what sort of boy? Six-fingered, and born in the wrong way" (Naipaul 11). He is not welcomed in the world and he is considered an ill-fated boy for the family that's why his maternal grandmother also says, "I knew it. There is no luck for me" (Naipaul 13). She wants to ward off the evil spirits and that's why she goes to the next village and brings the cactus leaves and hangs a strip over every door and window but the midwife warns them, "Whatever you do, this boy will eat up his own mother and father" (Naipaul 12).

When the Pundit Sitaram comes the next day and casts his horoscope, he proclaims some sinister prophecies after reading his astrological almanack that Mr Biswas will have some undesirable qualities such as a spendthrift or a lecher, "The boy will be a lecher and spendthrift. Possibly a liar as well" (Naipaul 12). To ward off the bad luck, the pundit advises him that the boy must be kept away from trees and water. The pundit advises, "The shocking thing I can advise is to keep him away from trees and water. Particularly water" (Naipaul 13). He remains an unlucky sneeze for the family. That's why his father says, "This boy will make us all paupers" (Naipaul 17). Biswas suffers from malnutrition, a shallow chest, stunted physique and suffers from eczema and sores on his skin.

My Biswas faced another problem when he lost his neighbour Dhari's calf. In fact, he was given the responsibility to look after this calf but unfortunately, this calf gets drowned and Mr Biswas gets extremely frightened. He hides himself under the bed and Dhari raises hue and cry, "Raghu's son has drowned my calf in the pond. A nice calf. My first calf. My only calf" (Naipaul 25). Biswas' father, Raghu starts searching for Mr Biswas and the calf here and there but he could find neither Mr Biswas nor calf. He was a good diver and he brings out the dead calf from the river but he drowns looking for his son. Mr Biswas lived in a house made of mud and grass and there were no facilities in his house. He faces problems both in his school and home. That's why he could not continue his studies due to his poor background.

He is sent to Pundit Jairam to become a pundit but there also he does not remain successful. Pundit Jairam boxed his ears and gave him dozens of couplets from the Ramayana to learn. One day Mr Biswas steals bananas from Jairam's kitchen and the pundit gets angry and punishes him to give him many bananas which make him constipated. Naipaul writes about it, "A more immediate result was that he became constipated. He could no longer relieve himself in the mornings and he was aware of the dishonour he did the gods by doing the *puja* unrelieved" (Naipaul 54).

After this incident, there was no scheduled time for his relieving due to constipation. One night he has a natural call, and the latrine was at a distant place from him and Mr Biswas gets frightened of the darkness also. He decides to pass his stool at his handkerchief and throws it from the window but the window was heavy and the hands were short. He was holding the window by his left hand and flung the handkerchief as far as he could with his right hand, "He carefully unbolted the Demerara window, which hung on hinges at the top, and, keeping the window open with his left hand, flung the handkerchief as far as he could with his right" (Naipaul 55).

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Unfortunately, his handkerchief falls on Pundit Jairam's holy oleander tree. The flowers of this tree were used by Pundit Jairam for *puja*.

The next morning Pundit Jairam comes to know about it and he starts cursing Mr Biswas for his act. He shouts at Biswas, "You are no Brahmin. [...] You are trying to destroy me. Go and look at your work. [...] I was talking the other day to Sitaram who read your horoscope. You killed your father. I am not going to let you destroy me. Sitaram particularly warned me to keep you away from trees. Go on pack your bundle" (Naipaul 55).

Mr Biswas faces problems one after another. He is sent to Bhandat's rum shop to help his uncle Ajodha. He was offered the salary of two dollars a month and free food and clothes. He lives with Bhandat's sons in a room. But Bhandat does not accept him as a worker and he considers Biswas as Tara's spy and did not trust him. One day Bhandat beats Mr Biswas with his belt saying that he has stolen one dollar from his pocket. His first stroke hits at Mr Biswas' head and when the buckle strikes a bone, it made a sharp sound. The buckle hit so hard that Mr Biswas's cheekbone started bleeding below his eye. Mr Biswas cries in pain, "O God! O God! My eye! My eye!" (Naipaul 64). In fact, Mohun Biswas had not stolen his dollar and it was lying at the bottom of his trousers pocket which he does not notice in the drunken state. Mr Biswas gets broken-hearted this time and he shows his resentment to his mother in the following words, "Why do you keep on sending me to stay with other people?" (Naipaul 64).

Mr Biswas now becomes a sign painter with the help of his friend Alec. He gets an assignment of painting from the Hanuman House. Bruce King writes about this house, "Hanuman House is initially described as looking like a fortress; but Hanuman House is not a solid society. It is a temporary refuge for those by circumstances or personality unable to find a place in Trinidad" (King 48).

It was a big house in which Mr Tulsi lived with Seth and her daughters. Mr Biswas notices a sixteen years old girl Shama. When she smiles towards Mr Biswas, her smile is taken as a love by Mr Biswas. He gives a love note to her which falls into the hands of Mrs Tulsi. She calls Mr Biswas after work and the marriage is fixed with Mr Biswas' consent.

This is the place where Mr Biswas quarrels with Shama just because she always takes favour of the members of her family just because Mr Biswas is given a long room in the Hanuman House and free meals by Mrs Tulsi. Mr Biswas notices that the other sons-in-law also lived in the Hanuman House and worked in the Tulsi Estate at different positions. Mr Biswas is also expected to work for Mr Tulsi but he does not want to work. Shama does not support him because he blames her family for his bad luck. When he beats and abuses her, she also sprinkles a shower of critiques on him "You come back already? You tired catching crab in Pagotes?" (Naipaul 103). There were around two hundred members in this family and it looked like a zoo to him. One day when a son-in-law Govind suggests Mr Biswas to work for Mrs Tulsi, he says, "Give up sign painting? And my independence. No boy. My motto is; paddle your own canoe" (Naipaul 108). At another occasion also, he criticises the members of Tulsi family saying, "But these people are bloodsuckers, man. Rather than work for them, I would catch crabs or sell coconut" (Naipaul 109). Mr Biswas' quarrels with Shama do not stop. She also remains angry with him that's why she says, "What you been doing and saying? You getting

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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 abuses and criticises all the members and when he is told to apologise for his words, he says, "The whole pack of you could go to hell, I am not going to apologise to one of the damn lot of you" (Naipaul 113). Mr Biswas calls Mrs Tulsi "Ro-man Cat-o-lie! Roman Cat, the bitch" (Naipaul 120) that cannot be expected from a son-in-law. At another occasion he says, "I was wrong about your mother. She is not a old hen at all. Nor a old cow. [...] She is a she fox" (Naipaul 132). He calls this family a "big low-caste bunch" (Naipaul 120). 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). Not only this, he does not consider it even a family; that's why he says, "Family, Family? This blasted fowl run, you calling family?" (Naipaul 106). Mr Biswas cross all the limits when he spits on Owad:

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)

Mr Biswas is beaten badly by Govind for this heinous act. He hits Mr Biswas with blows, cuffs and kicks. All this happened so suddenly that Mr Biswas could not understand how serious a mistake he had made. Mr Biswas writhes in pain, "God! I dead. I dead. He will kill me" (Naipaul 139). Ultimately, Mr Biswas is banished from the Hanuman House and after that his search for his house continues unabatedly. Michael Richard Kelly also opines, "Mr Biswas' quest for a house becomes a quest for wholeness, identity, and independence. The search gives his otherwise absurd life a purpose and direction and comes to fulfil his sense of his own dignified humanity" (Kelly 55).

Even after his new establishment, Mr Biswas keeps quarrelling with Shama and other members of the family. When Owad returns from England with his English wife after becoming a doctor, the clash arises between Mr Biswas and Owad. There are clashes among the Tulsi family also due to which this big joint family disintegrates. Seth also has clashes with Mrs Tulsi and starts living separately. Satendra Nandan also writes about Mr Biswas' suppressed personality, "Mr Biswas feels severely repressed and cowed down before the matriarchal sway of Mrs Tulsi and his agent Seth. His predicament in Hanuman House is the microcosm of a slave society" (Nandan 61). McSweeney also writes about Mohun Biswas:

A House for Mr Biswas is the life story of an unexceptional man different from the other members of his community only in his dissatisfaction with the conditions of his life and his longing for something better. The events in his life are framed by the domiciles of others in which he has to live, and the focus of his longing is simply a house of his own. (McSweeney 166)

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