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A Room of his Own: Quest for Identity vis-à-vis Female Hegemony in Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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“ . . . a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction ”

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*

A House for Mr Biswas is the story of a man who struggles throughout his life to own a house. It captures in a poignant way “the clash of culture between the old and the new in a multi racial society; a quest for identity in a conservative framework” (Prasad 1). The novel, at the same time, foregrounds the struggle of the male protagonist to emancipate from the shackles of patriarchy and create his independent identity. The story of Mr Mohun Biswas unfolds with his birth as the fourth child of Raghu and Bipti. Raghu torments his wife Bipti with his utter miserliness and she being fed up with his ways takes refuge at her mother Bissoondaye's place (Naipaul 11). After Raghu's death Bipti approaches her sister Tara, who arranges for Raghu's funeral and offers to take Bipti's daughter Dehuti to her home as a domestic help. Matrilineal affiliation is clearly evident in the fact that in the entire novel there is hardly any mention of relatives from Raghu's side and in any adverse circumstance Bipti seeks help and support from either her mother or her sister.

Further in the life of Mr Biswas the same pattern of matrilineality continues. Mr Biswas' meeting with his would-be wife Shama is quite amusing. He goes to her house on a sign-painting assignment and gets “enchanted by her smile” (Naipaul 83). What starts as a non-serious romantic fling soon takes the form of a serious matrimonial alliance. The Tulsi household has a long tradition of groom hunting for unmarried daughters. For them nothing matters as long as the boy is of the “proper” caste (Naipaul 99). They are ready to marry their daughters off to any ‘crab catcher’ or ‘coconut seller’. Mr Biswas, though initially in a state of fix, happily accepts the offer thinking that he is marrying into a rich family and will be offered “handsome dowry” (Naipaul 94). He, however, later gets to know that he was being trapped into the patriarchal system of Tulsi household where it is a general rule that all married daughters sooner or later shift to Tulsi House alongwith their husbands. Daughters and their children help in household chores; and son-in-laws “worked on the Tulsi land, looked after the Tulsi animals, and served in the store” (Naipaul 98). In return they get lodging and boarding facilities in the Hanuman House. Mr Biswas does not want to yield to the hegemony of Mrs Tulsi and Seth. He tries his best not to lose his individual identity in the all encompassing family structure of Hanuman House. He continues his sign painting job so that he can fend for himself and his family though living in the Hanuman House. He incessantly searches for a cohort among his fellow brother-in-laws so that he can accentuate his disavowal of Mrs Tulsi's authority. His attempt to strike a friendship with Govind, however, boomerangs on him as Govind divulges their secret conversation before Seth, who takes Mr Biswas to task for his bizarre nomenclature of Mrs Tulsi as ‘old hen’ and of Shanker and Owad as ‘two gods’ (Naipaul 110)..

Mr Biswas's trajectory from Hanuman House to The Chase, from The Chase to Green Vale, from Green Vale to Hanuman House and finally to Port of Spain, with a brief span at Shorthills envisages not only search for a house but also search for an independent identity out of the Tulsi clan. He constantly attempts to build a separate house at all these places but "the world contemptuously and consistently denies all of Mr. Biswas's attempt to find a home for himself and his family" (Udofia 58). Neither Lady Luck is on Mr Biswas's side, nor is his lady love, i.e. Shama. She never supported Mr Biswas's efforts of 'paddling his own canoe' (Naipaul 108). She calls Hanuman House as her home, so do Savi and Anand, but Mr Biswas could never do so. Son-in-laws always remain outsiders in Hanuman House a fact that becomes most apparent during Christmas, which is celebrated as "purely Tulsi festival" as all son-in-laws are expelled from Hanuman House (Naipaul 198).

In the novel women always seem to be the eternal source of authority. Mr Biswas, particularly, has the occasion of coming across many authoritative women in his life. Beginning with his maternal grandmother Bissoondaye, who provides all help and support to Bipti when she desperately needs it; his aunt Tara, a worldly wise woman with a knack for dealing affairs of her husband Ajodha's business; his sister Dehuti, who takes the bold step of eloping with a low caste yard boy Ramchand in order to emancipate herself from the miserable servility at her aunt Tara's place; Mrs Tulsi, the power-wielding Matriarch of the Hanuman House; his wife Shama, the supreme apostle of silent suffering that made others yield to her will; and finally his sensible and caring daughter Savi, who exceeds all Mr Biswas's expectations in taking up the responsibility of her family. Mr Biswas pins all his hopes on his meritorious son Anand and his flourishing academic career. Anand goes to England for higher studies after getting scholarship but does not come back even after the completion of designated five years. Savi has also been working diligently without making fuss and two years before Anand succeeds in getting scholarship for studying abroad. She, however, does not leave her family in the lurch and comes back to Port of Spain to support them in hour of need.

Women in the novel, though, clearly acquire pivotal position; there are instances which do not go well with the notion of matriarchy. The matriarchal structure of the Hanuman House has certain anomalies. Mrs Tulsi wields her absolute authority effectively enough only by the able guidance of her brother-in-law Seth, who at times seems to be the *de facto* head of the family, though later on he defects from it. Further, the proud mention of wife beating by the daughters of Mrs Tulsi bears testimony to the fact that women took violence on their body by their husbands as a necessary part of their "training and often attributed the decay of Hindu society in Trinidad to the rise of the timorous, weak, non-beating class of husband" (Naipaul 153). Mr Biswas, undoubtedly, belongs to this class which is more or less the result of his inability to live separately from his wife's family.

But then Mr Biswas is not the only one. The tradition of husbands' living in the family of their wives is taken forward by Mrs Tulsi's son Shekhar who marries into an even richer family and moves into his wife Dorothy's house after marriage and also takes care of his wives property. This tradition, however, is quite contrary to the conventional structure of Indian society which is largely patriarchal in nature and where after marriage wife goes to live in her husband's family and is expected to adopt its customs and manners. If one seeks possible reasons for this counter culture, the most obvious seems to be the financial factors. When Mr Biswas finally realises that he is soon going to be married he is confronted with the question where would he live with his wife after marriage? (Naipaul 96). He does not have a house of his own. In the

existing circumstances he is left with no choice but to assort to his wife's house. In the Hanuman House, nonetheless, he finds himself in the same situation as that of a girl in a patriarchal system. House here does not merely mean the concrete structure of four walls but it is a source of identity. Living in the Hanuman House means becoming a Tulsi, losing his independent identity and that becomes a problem for Mr Biswas due to his "innate sensitivity and adequate intelligence" (Fido 30).

When later in his career Mr Biswas attains name and fame and proves his mettle as a renowned journalist of the *Trinidad Sentinel* he comes back to Tulsi household to get himself acknowledged by his wife's relatives. His house at Sikkim Street is a concrete symbol of his identity. Though the house has many incongruities, they are covered up intelligently when his brother-in-law Mr Tuttle comes to visit him alongwith his family. Mr Biswas' biggest desire in life is to prove himself worthy of respect and commendation of the Tulsis for which owning a separate house is prerequisite. This desire, however, soon becomes a necessity for Mr Biswas when his growing children start feeling belittled living in their maternal grandmother's house at the cost of their self respect. Anand's growing restlessness and his ideological differences with his uncle Owad make him voraciously demand for a separate house (Naipaul 583).

A House for Mr Biswas, indeed, is full of paradoxes. The novel, though clearly revolves round the life of Mr Mohun Biswas, begins with the mention of his death. Further, the 'house' which is at the centre of Mr Biswas' universe hardly becomes a reality for him in spite of his best of efforts. Other than owning a house if Mr Biswas has an obsession it is the career of his son Anand, but here also all his expectations come crashing to the ground due to Anand's utter disregard towards his family. The dry garden of Mr Biswas's hope could only be revived by the return of his daughter Savi. Yet again a woman takes decisive position in Mr Biswas' life as it comes to its close.

A House for Mr Biswas is, thus, clearly a quest of the male protagonist for *a room of his own* in the overarching structure of patriarchy.

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