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## Home and Identity V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

Anju Bala

Ph. D Research Scholar  
Department of English & Foreign Languages  
Maharshi Dayanand University,  
Rohtak, Haryana.

### Abstract

Present paper is an analysis of the twin themes of home and identity in V. S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Mohun Biswas, the central character of the novel, always hankers after and dreams of owning his own home. Mr. Biswas is homeless, penniless and jobless. He just worked as a sign painter. He does the mistake of marrying a girl named Shama in the heat of his emotions. He feels trapped when he gets no dowry or property. He is much humiliated and isolated when he has to live in his in-laws' home as a *gharjamai*. He does not fit in that traditional, orthodox, narrow-minded and joint family. He starts gabbling and he rebels immediately when he is said to become a worker on the Tulsi estate. He shows rudeness, fickle-mindedness and disloyalty to Tulsi family as he calumniates that he has been entrapped and exploited by the Tulsi family on the name of marriage. He moves from one house to another and ultimately buys his own home and fixes his identity.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Cultural-clash, Home, Identity, Tulsi-family, Rebellion

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is generally known as V. S. Naipaul who was born on August 17, 1932 in Chaguanas in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Naipaul's grandfather emigrated to Trinidad as an indentured labourer and settled there. Naipaul has written many fiction, non-fiction and travelogues including novels are *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, *Miguel Street*, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*, *The Mimic Men*, *Guerrillas*, *A Bend in the River*, *Half a Life*, *Magic Seeds*, *A Flag on the Island*, *In a Free State*, *The Middle Passage*, *An Area of Darkness*, *The Loss of El Dorado*, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, *The Return of Eva Peron*, *India: Million Mutinies Now* and *The Masque of Africa*.

V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a novel due to which Naipaul won the most coveted Nobel Prize in 2001 for his valuable contribution in the field of English literature. The novel revolves around its central character Mr. Biswas. His life is depicted from his childhood to middle-age until he dies at the age of forty seven. His life has been portrayed from his birth to death. Naipaul is called an unlucky sneeze and the pundit says that he will be the cause of death of his parents. He should be kept away from water. When one day Mr. Biswas is still a child and he loses the cow somewhere which he has taken for grazing. In terror he hides himself in his home and his father, Raghu thinks that his son has drowned in the pond. He dies in this rescue effort. After it Mr. Biswas becomes fatherless and he searches a job of a sign-painter. He was working in the Tulsi store in the Hanuman House and suddenly casts his glance on a girl named Shama and immediately falls in love with her. He gives her a love-letter and that love-letter, unfortunately falls in the hands of Shama's mother, Mrs. Tulsi. Mrs. Tulsi was a selfish lady who was on the lookout of such kind of boy who may become the groom for her daughter. He belonged to the Brahmin caste and he was not rich. Both these conditions are fulfilled by him. Dr. Amar Nath Prasad tells their purpose in these words, "In the house men were needed for two reasons—husbands for Tulsi's daughters

as well as laborers for Tulsi's estate" (Amar Nath Prasad 05). She wants a poor background boy for her daughter so that he may work on the Tulsi estate as a labourer that's why Mrs. Tulsi sends for Mohun Biswas the very same day as for the marriage proposal for her daughter through Seth, her brother-in-law. Mr. Tulsi and Seth do this in a hurry as if they were looking for a chance of entrapping somebody who may be suitable for Shama. Matrimonial negotiation is done in this way:

'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?' (Naipaul 91)

Mr. Biswas also becomes greedy and he says yes for it just because he finds Tulsi family an affluent family with a large work on the Tulsi estate. He also expects a good dowry as well as job from Tulsi family. Both the parties strike this deal in greediness. Mohan does not want to miss this golden opportunity to be rich by marrying Shama. He thinks that he would get good property and dowry. He starts bragging of establishing relationship with Tulsi family. He tells his friend Aleck, 'Good family, you know. Money, acres and acres of land. No more sign painting for me...Rich people you know. Big house! (Naipaul 93). Mr. Biswas proves very selfish and cunning. He does this marriage very silently. He even does not tell the members of his family also that he is going to get married. He just tells to his mother that he is going for a job for a short time: "And telling Bipti one morning that he would be away for a short time on a job. He took some of his clothes and moved to Hanuman House...As a guarantee of that return he left most of his clothes and all of his books in the hut; it was partly, too, to guarantee this return that he lied to Bipti" (Naipaul 97).

But the result of this deal was not as good as Mr. Biswas has expected. To his dismay, he is not given any dowry. His marriage is also arranged in a court by Mrs. Tulsi so that she may save the money that was to be spent on marriage arrangements. What to talk about salary, Mr. Biswas does not get even his salary for the work he has already done as a sign painter at Tulsi Store. He is given just a residence in the Tulsi store and two scores meals there. Mr. Biswas is very disappointed to see that he has been entrapped on the name of marriage. He does not find his wife Shama cooperative. She always favours the members of Tulsi family. Moreover, Mr. Biswas finds a strange kind of environment in the Tulsi family. He finds that all the husbands of Shama's sisters work on the Tulsi estate. They feel no shame in living like a *gharjamai* in the Tulsi house. They have no identity of their own and they become Tulsis after their marriage: "Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis" (Naipaul 98). Mr. Biswas finds this place not suitable for him. Amar Nath Prasad says, "Very soon he finds the place just the otherwise of his taste and temperament. But his marriage life does not prove to be successful. He suffers from the unbearable taunts and mental complexes due to the uncongenial family atmosphere" (Amar Nath Prasad 04).

Mr. Biswas thinks that working on the Tulsi is in other words to succumb to the Tulsis. He finds this against his principles and he immediately rebels. He lives there all the time discontented and infuriated. He starts quarrelling with Shama and other members of the Tulsi family. His wife Shama was extremely loyal to her family and she condemns Mr. Biswas whenever he speaks negative against Tulsi family. Mr. Biswas warns her saying that he is not going to live there anymore. She does not stop Mr. Biswas to go rather insults her saying that he had been sheltered here just for free just because he is son-in-law of Mrs. Tulsi. She humiliates her saying that he came in this family with only a few rags: "Yes, take up your clothes and go." Shama said, "You come to this house with nothing but a pair of

cheap khaki trousers and a dirty old shirt” (Naipaul 99). Mr. Biswas refutes her and he leaves the home in anger.

When he goes to his home he does not find anybody angry with him that he has got married without telling them. His mother is a passive lady and she becomes happy to know that his son has got married in a well-to-do Tulsi family. She says with happiness and proud: “She could now die happily” (Naipaul 99). His uncle Ajodha also greets him and warmly receives him when he goes to his home for the first time after marriage: “Tara, Tara”, Ajodha called, “Come and look at your married nephew” (Naipaul 100). But on their advice he gets ready to return again to Tulsi family.

When Mr. Biswas returns in Tulsi house again, nobody says anything to him on his return. He is not much noticed and he has to live in Tulsi family as a neglected member. Mr. Biswas always finds fault in their life-style and eating habits of the members of the Tulsi family. He does not help in the estate either. He calls names to all the members of Tulsi Family. He calls Mrs. Tulsi ‘The Old Queen and The Old Hen’, Uncle Seth ‘The Big Bull’ and Shama’s two younger brothers ‘Little Gods’ and ‘Two Little Monkeys’ (Naipaul 106). Mr. Biswas and Shama keep quarrelling and don’t live a happy married life. Shama says: “Well, nobody didn’t ask you to get married into the family, you know” at this Mr. Biswas answers: “Family? Family? This blasted family fowl run you calling family?” (Naipaul 106). Mr. Biswas tries to persuade other sons-in-laws also not to work for Tulsi family and make their own identity and home. But he finds that the other son-in-laws are also loyal to this family. They pay no attention to his suggestion. When he gives this suggestion to Govind, he tells that Seth, Mrs. Tulsi and her two sons all are nice people and he likes to work under them. Not only this, he himself suggests Mr. Biswas to give up sign painting and start working for Tulsi family. At this Mr. Biswas replies, “Give up sign painting? And my independence. No boy. My motto is; paddle your own canoe” (Naipaul 108). He calls the members of the Tulsi family bloodsuckers and he is never ready to work under them: “so you say. But these people are bloodsuckers, man. Rather than work for them, I would catch crab or sell coconut” (Naipaul 109). Mr. Biswas finds another son-in-law Hari also very oppressed. He is all the time in bad health and he lives there as a pundit. He is always busy in his sacerdotal work. He never takes interest except his illness. Food and religious books: “He was obsessed with his illness, his food and his religious books” (Naipaul 117). Thus, this way of Mr. Biswas closes and the circumstances disappoint him.

One days Mr. Biswas Insults Shama’s younger brother, Owad while he was doing the morning puja. Mr. Biswas does not like idol worshipping and he denies accepting the worshipping plate for puja. He insults the members of Tulsi family for their hypocrisy and ostentation. Owad is angry with Mr. Biswas and he says to her mother in complaint when Mr. Biswas insults Mrs. Tulsi also: “Ma. You choose your son-in-laws and they treat you exactly how you deserve” (Naipaul 112). Owad expects that Mr. Biswas should say sorry to Mr. Tulsi for his misbehavior. He condemns Mrs. Tulsi also that she has brought a wrong person as her son-in-law in Hanuman House. He says to Mr. Biswas to apologize to Mrs. Tulsi: “Is not because my father dead that people who eating my mother food should feel that they could call she a hen. I want Biswas apologize to Ma (Naipaul 113). But Mr. Biswas is never ready for this. He says: “The whole pack of you could go to hell, I not going to apologize to one of the damn lot of you” (Naipaul 113). Mr. Biswas starts packing his clothes and threatens to leave the house: “I not staying here a minute longer. Having that damn little boy talk to me like that! He does talk to all your brother-in-laws like that” (Naipaul 113). Mr. Biswas proves disloyal to Mrs. Tulsi. He eats from their house for free and condemns them.

He wants to search his own home and identity and when he finds no hope of this, he starts calling names to Members of Tulsi family. He calls Seth “a leather worker, little god...road sweeper, little washer boys or barbers” and he calls Mrs. Tulsi also not a Hindu but a “Roman Catholic” (Naipaul 119).

Not only this, he calls the whole Hanuman House a zoo: “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). Shama does not swallow the insult of her family. She also calls her a dog saying that if this house is a zoo, then he is also a member of this zoo family and he is a dog who always keeps barking. Mr. Biswas rudeness does not end here on, one day he spits on Owad from the window while gargling after eating food. Mr. Biswas does this advertently. At this there is an exchange of words between them in this way:

“Marking what you doing, Mr. Biswas. But I standing right up here and if you spit on me again I going to tell Ma”.

‘Tell, you little son of a bitch’. (Mr. Biswas spits on him again)

‘Man’!

‘O God! You lucky little monkey.’ (Naipaul 136).

Shama tries to reconcile and she drags Mr. Biswas from the window but Mr. Biswas remains adamant. Owad goes to his mother Mr. Tulsi and complains all this to her: “Ma, come and see what your son-in-law do to me. He cover me down with dirty food” (Naipaul 137). It was Govind, another son-in-law of Mrs. Tulsi when he comes to know about this he goes to Mr. Biswas and hits him, blows him and kicks him badly. Mr. Biswas and other all frighten that Govind will kill him. Mr. Biswas cries in pain when he was beating him badly: “O God! I dead. I dead. He will kill me” (Naipaul 139).

This was the last mistake that was not digested in the Tulsi family. Very next morning expulsion orders are given to Mr. Biswas from Hanuman House by Seth. He says: ‘I hear is that you try to beat up Owad. I don’t think we could stand you here any longer. You want to paddle your own canoe. All right, go ahead and paddle. When you start getting your tail wet, don’t bother to come back to me or Mai, you hear. This was a nice united family before you come. You better go away before you do anymore mischief and I have to lay my hand on you” (Naipaul 144). From the very first day Mr. Biswas creates problem in Tulsi household. Sharada Iyer also has the same views: “The entry of Mr. Biswas into the Tulsi household creates a disturbance because his ideas are different.” (N. Sharada Iyer 22).

After this Mr. Biswas shifts from one house to another house and he faces the problem of adjustment and identity. When has offspring, then also Shama goes to Hanuman house to conduct each delivery under the guidance of her family. She does not rely on Mr. Biswas. She thinks him an inefficient person. Mr. Biswas lives his whole life in tension. His own son Anand fulfills his desire when he becomes an educated person. His daughter Savi also loves him. Mr. Biswas does not like the non-vegetarian habits of Mr. Tulsi family and that’s why he never likes to send his children to Hanuman House.

Mrs. Tulsi’s family helps Mr. Biswas all the time when he is in any problem but Mr. Biswas shows no gratitude towards them. He shows the same rudeness and rusticity towards them. He just wants to settle in his own house which may give him identity and ultimately he succeeds in creating his own identity and having his own house. Over all, Mr. Biswas can never be called a wise man. He does whatever his heart allows. He is loyal neither to his own family nor the family in which he is married. His act of marriage was a bad choice and he is

badly betrayed there. He starts behaving awkwardly and rustically after his marriage like “a mentally punctured personality” (Singh 6). Mr. Biswas forgets his bad time after getting his own house because his new house for him is like a palingenesis or re-birth which palliates all his woeful time.

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