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## Saga of Indian life in Caribbean: A study of a house for Mr. Biswas

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### Abstract

V.S Naipaul through his novels brings out suppressed histories of immigrant workers from India. In his novel 'A House for Mr Biswas' he has lent the profundity to the wing clipped characters in a Caribbean backwater and granted them dignity. Recurring themes of the novel are the collision of cultures and the resultant ambiguities in human adjustment. Hence the novel acquires a three dimensional significance-historical, social and psychological, understanding Naipaul is at once a chronicler, historian and biographer. The present paper is an attempt to analyse, evaluate and elucidate the saga of Indian life in the Caribbean. The novel has a tinge of autobiography as it highlights Naipaul's father's struggle for survival in the garb of an immigrant's quest for identity, house, home and a sense of belonging amidst trauma of culture clash and rootlessness. The novel attains universal appeal as Mr Biswas is every man.

**Keywords:** Immigrants, suppression, rootlessness, quest, identity, survival, trauma

### Introduction

The Nobel Prize in literature for 2001 was awarded to the British Writer, born in Trinidad, V.S. Naipaul "for having united perspective narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories" Naipaul was born on the West Indian Island of Trinidad as a descendant of immigrant workers from India, in a milieu whose people and culture from four continents mixed. In the book that made him famous, A House for Mr. Biswas, he lent the profundity of the major novel to the wing clipped characters in a Caribbean backwater and granted them dignity. Mr. Biswas who bears the traits of Naipaul's father, gained a place in the English literacy gallery of immortal tragicomic heroes. The novel is concerned with the complex fate of the individual, societies and culture. Recurring themes of 'A House for Mr. Biswas' are the collision of cultures and the resultant ambiguities in human adjustment. Hence the novel acquires a three dimensional significance - historical, social and psychological and understandably Naipaul is at once a chronicler, historian and biographer.

For Naipaul the West Indies consists of races that have been uprooted from their original societies and have not produced a new culture, to replace what was lost. Mr. Biswas is the saga of Indian life in the Caribbean, the career of Mr. Biswas in roughing out the obstinate substance of life in the West Indies is a testimony to an inheritance which is lost but not overcome. The novel is an analysis of the social conflicts of the colonial Hindu society of Trinidad which is rotten by contradictions, myths and rituals. This paper tries to highlight how an individual i.e. Mr. Biswas strives hard in quest for identity in a malignant, dogmatic society of conservative ideas and ideologies as we, the readers become active participants in his mechanical and monotonous journey replete with jerks and jolts.

V.S. Naipaul weaves such a plot in the novel that Mr. Biswas is married to Shama, a gullible, ignorant, immature and little educated daughter of Tulsis. The Tulsis represent dogmatic, outdated, rites and rituals of Trinidad Hindu colonial society. Mr. Biswas being simple and sensitive, intelligent and inquisitive suffers a lot for marrying in such a family as there are frequent cultural clashes and social conflicts. Being a penniless individual who had lost his father in his infancy only he struggles to possess a minimum basic necessity in the form of a house. His intense desire to own a house of his own is symbolic of his yearning to assert his identity in society.

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Predominant forces of rituals, myths and customs make him retaliate and he becomes a rebel. The birth and early life of Mr. Biswas is ridiculous because he is born in the wrong way with unfavorable horoscopic sign at the hour of midnight and is predicted by the pundit to be a lecher, a spendthrift and a liar and Pandit warns that he should be kept away from 'tree and water'. By the cruel design of destiny it so happened that Raghu, Mr. Biswas' father died when he was diving in the water to search for Mr. Biswas and Dhari's calf. As a result the family is split. His two brothers Pratap and Prasad are sent to 'Felicity' in sugarcane estate for earning bread. Mr. Biswas' sister Dehuti is sent to live at her rich maternal aunt Tara's place in Pagotes and he along with his widowed mother stays in humble lodgings as she has to sell her 'hut and the land' at a very low price and he; son of a poor labourer, becomes homeless.

"And so Mr. Biswas came to leave the only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years, he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own. It seemed to him that he was really quite alone" (Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, P.38) Mr. Biswas is admitted to a mission school where he learns mathematics and other things. Alec becomes his classmate and companion. He learns drawing and painting.

The second phase of Mr. Biswas' life can be seen as an apprentice since he is sent to Pandit Jayaram, a hindu priest but there too he mechanically performs all the rituals without understanding their significance. He fails to relate to false notions of religious ritual. He is accused of theft there and leaves his guru in disappointment. Mr. Biswas' first name Mohun ironically means 'the beloved, and was the name given by the milkmaids to Lord Krishna" (17-18) and he has a variety of absurd and morbid experiences. John Thieme aptly observes "By giving Biswas a name accorded to one of the avatars of Vishnu, Naipaul ensures that his central character is viewed in an ironic light; he establishes him as a Hindu Mock-heroic figure" (Thieme: 507) Turned away by Pandit Jairam he is employed by Tara, in a rum shop run by her husband's brother, Bhandat, a man who was addicted to drinking and cheated his customers by giving them unmeasured drinks. Here too, Mr. Biswas is falsely accused of stealing a dollar from Bhandat's pocket, so is sent back to Tara's place.

Search for work and money led him to Hanuman House at Arwacas, where he works as sign board painter. Here he happens to meet Shama, the sixteen years old daughter of Mrs. Tulsi of Tulsi Store. He is attracted towards Shama and writes her a note confessing his love for her which falls into hands of Mrs. Tulsi, who quickly arranges a marriage between two. Mr. Biswas had presumed that rich Tulsi will help him in settling in life but to his shock, he is rather expected to become a Tulsi, 'at once he rebelled' (97). There was a lot of conflict between Mr. Biswas and Shama, who was replica of mother in being narrow, conservative in ideas and dogmatic in beliefs. The daughters had no position in the Tulsi's family, whereas Mrs. Tulsi, Mr. Seth and the "two Gods". Mr. Shekhar and Owad, Mr. Tulsi's sons were to live comfortably with privilege and luxury. A special room is assigned to Mrs. Tulsi and is called 'Rose Room' where she is taken whenever she has attacks of being 'faint'. Because of Mr. Biswas' ideas and ideology, there is a great disruption in the Tulsi family. The Tulsi structure is founded on a system of classic slavery; food and security are bartered for independence. It powerfully limits maneuverability of an

independent minded individual. Any demonstration of individualism is treated with exemplary ruthlessness. The Tulsi custom in respect of a married daughter is revolting enough "According to Hindu practice, the new bride should join her husband's family and accept her mother-in-law's dominance. Biswas accepts the role of the Hindu wife in the Tulsi household (Throps: Scottkilvert 389). Mr. Biswas' open revolt and confrontation makes Seth remark "This was a nice united family before you came, you better go away before you do any more mischief and I have to lay my hands on you" (*A House for Mr. Biswas*:141)

So he is sent to 'The Chase' and runs a shop. The Chase was a long, struggling settlement of mud huts in the heart of the sugarcane area an unattractive and remote place "The world beyond the sugarcane fields was remote and the village was linked to it only villagers' carts and bicycles wholesaler's vans and lorries and an occasional private motor bus that runs to no timetable and along no fixed route" (ibid: 145). He was disappointed and consoled himself by thinking that real life was to begin for him and this place was sojourn, a preparation. On Shama's insistence, a House Warming party is organized where all place is replete with Tulsi sisters and their kids creating chaos and Mr. Biswas feels lost and outworn in Tulsi crowd, a stranger searching for his moorings. He lives at The Chase for six years and becomes father of a girl Savi. Soon he is sent to Green Vale as a driver and supervisor of the workers of the Tulsi estate. By this time he had become father of four children but stability in life still alludes him and his search for the same 'continues'. Shama stayed at Hanuman House and he wants a house of his own. His gift of a Doll House to Savi on Christmas symbolizes his inner desire of a house of his own. The house also suggests the sense of his freedom, stability, safety, security and celebration of self. So at Green Vale he starts building a house and shifts in his new house, though it is not constructed properly and is incomplete for want of money. In this lonely, secluded and remote place he gets depressed and in a dark rainy night he loses his mental equilibrium and is taken to Hanuman House where again he feel suffocated as iron rule of Mrs. Tulsi recoils his inner self-respect. Bhagabat Nayak aptly observes "Mr. Biswas' story is largely an odyssey of restless questing where the shifting locales are metaphors or analogues for his soul states" (Bhagabat Nayak: 57) Soon as he nurses back to health, he leaves Hanuman House and reaches Port of Spain. He lives with his sister Dehuti and searches for job, finally is appointed as a sign painter for The Sentinel. In the course of time Mr. Biswas was regarded as the best reporter of The Sentinel for which he was appointed and his salary was fixed at 50 Dollars a month. As his name is published everywhere in newspaper, so he is now recognized a learned, sensible gentleman by Tulsis. So "Mr. Biswas is the first of his family to break with the fental-capitalist hierarchy and forge an individual identity" (Walsh 1973:30) Gradually, Mr. Biswas caves a niche for himself and is regarded as the best reporter of The Sentinel and is paid a handsome amount of 50 Dollars a month. Now, he along with his family shares a lodging with Mrs. Tulsi's at her place in Port of Spain. Owad goes to abroad to study medical sciences and Mrs. Tulsi returns to Arwacas but soon because of 'views-oriented news, there is a change of guard in The Sentinesl and Mr. Brunett, the editor departs and Mr. Biswas' sensational news are of no use now, so he is shifted to 'Sunday Magazine'. At home front Seth takes charge of

things at Port of Spain and all Tulsis decide to move to Shorthills.

Mr. Biswas' story is largely an odyssey of restless quest for assertions & recognitions where the shifting locales are metaphor for his soul states. Being alienated from all walks of life, Mr. Biswas becomes a man without moorings, surrounded by buffoons like Seth, Hari, Govind etc. he is impelled to be a tragic clown. As he moves to Shorthills, "for him Shorthills was an adventure, an interlude. His job made him independent of Tulsis, and Shorthills was an insurance against the sack" (A House for Mr. Biswas: 402). Shorthills brought many problems for Tulsis as children had to travel a long distance for schooling and Mr. Biswas now was worried for Anand's studies. His investing in children's happiness is a sign of his having travelled a long way from the restlessness and lack of focus of the Tulsis dominated days.

Since his boyhood, Mr. Biswas has been moving from one house of strangers to another and since his marriage he had been weighing down with Tulsidom and its obligations, in the decaying wooden house at Short hills, in the clumsy concrete house in the Port of Spain, he has been longing for a house of his own. His quest for identity and struggle for personality is best summoned up by Mr. Biswas himself. To his bewildered son who asks him "who are you?" he replies "I am just nobody. Nobody at all, I am just a man you know" So to him house is not a simple living place, it is one's identity, national cultural and spiritual. It is a symbol of all that has been lost, of ancient certainties of faith of security. The very use of the title 'Mr' for Mohan Biswas in the novel acknowledges the dignity and struggle for identity by owning a house is both existential and universal. That is why, Mr. Biswas decides to purchase a house by incurring a debt of five thousand and two hundred dollars. In the meantime Anand goes to England for Higher studies after getting a scholarship. Savi too attain independence. But tragically, as he basks in the glory of children's rising success graph he falls ill. "After illness Mr. Biswas came to his own house and lived quite satisfactorily" (A House for Mr. Biswas: 587) The tall square house on Sikkim Street is the synonym for Mr. Biswas' success. For despite the debt burden and defects of the house itself, the house saves him from Tulsidom, the fear of confinement and alienation. How much the house means to children can be felt in utterances of narrator "Soon it seemed to the children that they never lived anywhere but in the tall square housed in Sikkim Street. From now on their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent" (Ibid: 601). The house cements the family bond. "That is why "the House" in this novel is a symbol for 'rootedness' but for freedom – freedom from slavery and oppression" (Das: 102) The story of Mr. Biswas is the general story of a man. As Mr. Biswas dies in this house, he has a sense of satisfaction that family has a shelter. So the novel succeeds in transcending the individual self by universalizing the issue of alienation and rootlessness. Thus the novel has universality as well as contemporaneity. In this regard Bruce King pertinently remarks Naipaul "has become the voice of the modern expatriate and of our time in feeling unattached, unillusioned, without purpose and observer of the world follies, especially those problems which have resulted from the end of empire and the withdrawal of European rule from the Third World. Naipaul's work appeals to those, who have felt the effect of rapid secularization, mobility and social

change; the resulting world is large, overcrowded and yet an empty space" (King: 6-7).

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