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Postcolonial Socio-cultural aspects in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

V. S. Sankara Rao Chinnam

Abstract

This Article presents Naipaul's attitude toward Indian joint family system culture, slavery system, religious and social life has been observed by Mr. Biswas in the Hanuman house run by Mrs. Tulsi. Religious and social life is one of the major themes of *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Naipaul expressed and distinguished difference between Hindu culture and Roman Catholic Christian culture. He explores the eastern and the western cultural variations and traditional values. In this novel Naipaul displayed ancient traditional Indian joint family system and domination of woman, Mrs. Tulsi. She was the central character of the joint family. Biswas was the protagonist of this novel, he loves freedom. He is the man of strong desire for independence. The novel depicts the rebellion of a weak mediocre man, a rebellion which started Mr. Biswas and the same time he was the victim of his own thoughts and actions. Naipaul expresses his ideas of slavery suppression of the slaves and their struggle to confront. Mr. Biswas thought that the Hanuman house is nothing but the slavery system maintained by Mrs. Tulsi. Naipaul is least interested in preaching ethical values rather than simply satisfied in presenting the true picture of society, with historical and a literary touch. In fact, this theme falls into sub-themes and divisions, about which Naipaul has provided detailed information to illustrate the real life of the Hindu migrant community in the Caribbean. Religious and social life is one of the main significant socio-cultural aspects that Naipaul has closely recorded of varied postcolonial cultures and civilizations. Naipaul has depicted socio-cultural aspects in most of his fiction and travelogues, namely *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Key Words: *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Colonialism, post-colonialism

Introduction

In this paper, I shall concentrate on Naipaul's representation of the religious and social life in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. This novel contains many implicit statements and scenes, which are ambiguous for non-Indian or Caribbean readers to fully grasp imprecise statements and vague passages of the brilliant prose in the novel. This paper tries to manifest and clarify the ambiguity of such customs and traditions to present their real meaning and advance an authentic

understanding of the novel. The attempt to a genuine comprehension of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is connected with the understanding of the socio-cultural elements, which are interwoven in the structure of the novel. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* depicts the rebellion of a weak mediocre man, a rebellion which originates from the man's strong desire for independence. Mr. Biswas is against of the traditional protagonist. He is the protagonist of the novel. At same time he is the victim to his

thoughts and actions. The idea of slavery, suppression of the slaves and their struggle to confront this idea keeps floating in the works of Naipaul.

A House for Mr. Biswas unfolds a story of three generations; it exposes the social and psychological tension that arises within a typical Indian family transplanted in an alien environment. Mr. Biswas makes an ambitious attempt to maintain his individuality but it's just beating the air. Sujan estate workers class is the social background of Mr. Biswas, has a child, he is scraggy pot bellied boy, with six fingers on his foot. It's no Delphi oracle but something of his status come a mid wife a pundit predicting his unfortunate life. He from the very early stage proves to be miserable both to himself and to people related to him. He is given the responsibility of looking over a calf. The mischievous boyish nature loses trace of the calf in one fine day. To avoid the coming problems, creeps unnoticed under his father's cot.

The loving father left no stone turned. In order to trace, in this search he pays the cassette on his life. As age advances, he thinks of joy and sense of responsibility counts on him. When the measure amount as a scaled imperial for a newspaper start seemed inadequate, he took sign painting. Although not financially better he enjoyed job satisfaction in controlling the brush and shaping the lines and curves. An unimagined turning point takes place in his life; every individual needs a strong social support to be identified in the society. This yearning while burning within he enters into love with a girl Shama, a member of the well established Tulsi's family.

A beginning of a rebel protagonist and the end as a victim to the family's bossism enters the pattern of the novel. Tulsi family entitled as Hanuman's house, it is totally dominated by lady Mrs. Tulsi ruled the house individually. They have only one black servant, the joint family with sons, daughters, sons-in-law. Mr. Biswas enters the atmosphere and gradually realizes that he is not mere slave but an official slave. The Hanuman's house does not possess any quality to be recognized as a home. It all appears like nothing but a slave society in miniature. The men are necessary as sheer husbands to their daughters and laborers to the family's estate. They are left with no alternative; none of them including the daughters have little voice in the affairs of the family. Fun is the scramble for the favors of Mrs. Tulsi, there is competition even for this.

Mr. Biswas is the second son-in-law of this family, he being a man of individuality could not get along with the bossism. He bluntly refuses to obey the established code in the house. He is of the opinion that Govind his co-brother to be a silent suffer, but to his shock, he is simply advised to confine to the rules and regulations of the family. Biswas says that Tulsi's are blood suckers and he would watching crabs or sell coconuts, that work and die here as a slave.

He packs his bag and baggage but is forced to stay back by the pleading of Padma and Chitra, wives of Seth and Govind respectively. Intentionally Biswas turns out to be more arrogant with an intention to bag them; he changes to support Arya Samaj and later Christianity. As an out let to vengeance, he throws food on the head of

owed, from a window. For this he is thrashed and later sent to a village called 'The Chase' to be in charge of a Tulsi shop. Yet fails to make use of the given freedom, he returns to continue the menace. He is again shifted to maintain the Tulsi estate. From here he disturbs the norms of the house; on a Christmas day he takes a gift exclusively so is daughter the policy of equality of house hold. Shama his wife is harassed by the rest of the inmates; she runs out by breaking the gift. The incident is like adding fuel to the fire. Biswas goes off with his daughter; he constructs a house of his own, one never to be completed. He dies at the age of forty six in mortgaged house. William Wash comments all our lives "stiffening in a rented mansion."

The centre of the novel is always the character of Mr. Biswas and the themes are closely linked two cultures and unable to settle fully either. There is an interaction between the old Hindu cultures represented by the city Port of Spain. Mohan Biswas is a person who's subject to misfortune as the ill omens present at his birth suggest. His family is scattered after his father's death. He gains a job, writing on the central newspaper under Mr. Biswas where his talent for fantasy and humors writing gains expression. His marriage with Shama introduced Mr. Biswas to the Tulsis of Hanuman house filled with illusions; he entered the world of the Tulsis unaware that his romantic ego would be crashed by a hierarchal order. Mr. Biswas is horrified at the hierarchal organization of the house where the daughters' husbands' names are forgotten and they simply become "Tulsis."

Mrs. Tulsi is a powerful mother and rules through an understanding of the psychology of slavery. For Biswas Hanumans house reveals itself as a slave society created by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth.

The rebellion starts when the deep cynicism of paying the emotional black mail which Mrs. Tulsi constantly demands. The Tulsis refer to Biswas as a create descent, the worst insult for an Indian. He clings sensuously to his self surpassing humor and his occupation as a sign of painter. His independent nature and man hood are further threatened members of the family there by disruption the order and unity of Tulsis house hold. The next act of Biswas disobedience occurs when he attempts to subvert the Tulsi organization by introducing foreign doctrines. He advocates the education of girls.

The feudal order gives way to the new capitalist order where the new life emphasis the slow demise of the old society. The older bonds of solidarity cease to exist replaced by fragmentation and disloyalty. Mr. Biswas inability to reconcile his essence with his existence constitutes the major source of tensions in the first part of the novel. The role of education plays a vital role in the decay of the traditional Hindu society. Mr. Biswas differentiates himself by speaking English where the other speak Hindi. He mocks at the younger Tulsi sons by calling them Gods. As the students of Roman Catholic college, the two young men have started wearing crucifixes which are a sacred symbol of orthodox Christianity. Seth is the pillar of the Tulsi organization leaves Hanuman house to live in a back street nearby Bandit takes a mistress of another

race. After his wife's death, his elder son has an affair with a woman of mixed Negro-Spanish blood.

Even Mrs. Tulsi sends Sushila to burn candles in Roman Catholic Church. She puts a crucifix in her room and had pandit Tulsi's grave cleaned for all saints day. The two younger gods of Tulsi dynasty marry two Christian women. With the birth of his fourth child, Mr. Biswas began to feel trapped by a future. The uncertainty he feels in the wilderness is exemplified by a feeling of raid. The Tulsi family also leaves to live in new castle at short hills in North Eastern part of the island. Mr. Biswas moves to his own house in Sikkim treat in part of Spain.

The dream of yearning a house becomes true for him. It has been said that Mr. Biswas problem is not just to live, but first of all to make for himself a world to live in a house of his own become the focus his quest to imbues his life with meaning permanence and dignity. It is made clear in these lines. "How terrible it would have been at this time to be with out it" To have deep among the Tulsi amid the savior of that large disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room, worse to have lived without attempting to lay claim to one's as one's portion of the earth to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated.

A House for Mr. Biswas, to begin with, depicts the way Hindus conduct religious ceremonies at the time of birth, marriage, funerals and like. There are many examples about Hindu customs and traditions, performed on these occasions. It is made

clear throughout the novel that most of the Hindu migrant families are very religious as well as traditional. Although those migrants were removed from their native land and culture for many generations, they still perform and practice their religious rituals as per the original instructions. Hindus are interested in religious ceremonies and; therefore, the way they perform the rituals is perfectly recorded by Naipaul.

In the novel we observe ordinary people making their offerings to god through the guidance of Brahmins; religious and high-caste men. The presence of Brahmins while conducting religious ceremonies is very important. The person who conducts a religious ceremony has to feed the Brahmins and reward them when the rituals are over. In the novel, Ajodha holds a religious ceremony and, "he needed Brahmins to feed..." (47). On such occasions; however, ordinary food would not be served, but what is served should be excessively rich food. To be specific, when a religious ceremony is held by the orthodox Tulsi family, they: "Thought appetizing food should be served for religious festivals" (203). Furthermore, a Brahmin is treated with respect and honour.

We notice that Mr Biswas is homeless and is not liked by Ajodha but the opposite is true when he acts as a Brahmin: "In Tara's house he was respected as a Brahmin and pampered; yet as soon as the ceremony was over and he had taken his gift of money and cloth and left, he became once more only a labourer's child" (47- 48).

Naipaul has demonstrated his knowledge about the Hindu traditions and customs and presented them throughout the novel, which

is considered as a product of his Hindu sensibility. He explains that each Hindu family has links with a particular pundit, who guides it to perform the rituals and offerings to gods or goddesses. This religious tradition has been inherited from the native Hindu culture of the migrants. In the Hanuman House, for example, Hari is the only pundit, who instructs the Tulsis in their prayers, religious ceremonies, rituals, etc.: “Everyone had to seeing Hari as the officiating pundit at religious ceremonies; everyone had been receiving the consecrated foods from him every morning” (438).

In this connection, Naipaul is very critical of the migrant family’s belief, say, Tulsi family. In the first place, after the death of Hari, the Tulsis could not find any other pundit to take his position. For instance, when Mrs. Tulsi gets sick, she cannot stand offering rituals with any other pundit. In the second place, Naipaul displays the fact that inhabitants have adopted some traditions from other cultures and religions. He shows the effects of the contiguous dominant Christian culture. Mrs. Tulsi’s sickness is a case in point that her faith becomes weak, especially after the death of Hari. She seeks help from another religion, Christianity: “For every puja Mrs. Tulsi tried a different pundit, since no pundit could please her as well as Hari. And no pundit pleasing her, her faith yielded. She sent Sushila to burn candles in the Roman Catholic church; she put a crucifix in her room” (551).

In Hinduism also priests are supposed to be scholarly persons, well versed in the scriptural texts. A Brahmin is a person who knows Brahma (the creator in Hinduism). However, originally, a person becomes a

Brahmin not by birth, but by his virtues and actions.

Whenever Naipaul mentions the performance of religious ceremonies, house-blessings, rituals... etc, he refers to the physical cleanliness of the performer or the pundit. According to Hindu religion, the performer has to put a mark of sandalwood on his forehead, to put on sacred thread and white dhoti, in addition to having his head shaved in big ceremonies or occasions. Naipaul describes the performance of the religious rituals and how the migrants are stuck to them. On the other hand, the novelist expresses his dislike of such rituals. This is evident in Mr Biswas, the narrator of the novel, and his son, Anand, the replica of Naipaul: “Though Anand shared Mr. Biswas’s distaste for religious ritual, he was immediately attracted by this ceremony. His cousins had their heads shaved; they were invested with the sacred thread, told the secret verses” (403).

In his novel Naipaul: a materialist reading’ (1988), Selwyn Reginald Cudjoe aptly comments: Naipaul, like his father, was forced to reshape some of the epics and other religious texts of his people so as to examine their attitude toward their former home and their present reality. The short story, the prose-tragedy, the novel, and the nonfictional text became means whereby Naipaul could examine his people’s reality in their new world. (12) Religious flag is important in Hindu rituals; it is put up after conducting a religious ceremony. Hindus believe that such flag will keep evil spirits away from their houses. Mr. Biswas criticizes his religious teacher, Jairam, who pretends not to like such a custom while he

himself is stuck to it: "He attacked the custom some families had of putting up a flag after a religious ceremony; but his own front garden was a veritable grove of bamboo poles with red and white pennants in varying stages and decay" (49). The migrant families are stuck to and have preserved their inherited customs. For instance, when Mrs. Tulsi gets sick, "More and more prayer flags went up in the yard, the white and red pennants ..." (551).

Naipaul has presented puja as an important religious ritual in the novel. Religiously, puja is a kind of prayer offered by Hindus to their deities. Many characters in the novel perform it on various occasions such as birth, funerals, taking exams, sickness ... etc. For instance, when Mrs. Tulsi gets sick, she makes offerings and performs pujas to god to help her recover soon: "She had pujas austere rites aimed at God alone... without feasting and gaiety of the Hanuman house ceremonies" (551). Here, Naipaul's representation of these rituals is sarcastic. When learning to be a pundit, "Mr Biswas collected marigold and zinnias and oleanders ... for the morning puja, and sat without religious fervour before the elaborate fire" (51-2). Puja is performed every morning either in a temple or at home in a specific room (pujaghar), where some idols are kept: "The brothers [Owad and Shekhar] often did the puja in the prayer room" (106).

The traditions and customs from birth to death in the Hindu society are well interwoven in the novel. Here, we come to know the manner in which a Hindu migrant family celebrates the birth of its child. Generally, birth celebration is held on the

ninth day, either the birth is abnormal like Mr Biswas's or normal like his children: "Bissoondaye ... decided to have a celebration on the ninth day. She invited people from the village and fed them. The pundit came ... the barber brought his drum, and Selochan did the Shiva dance in the cowpen, his body smeared all over with ash" (15).

Holding the celebration on the ninth day may be a local variation, because in the original Hindu culture they celebrate a normal birth on the twentieth and the abnormal on the twenty-seventh. The theme of house-blessing and house-warming contributes to the development of the main theme of the novel. House-blessing is held at the time of house foundation. The owner of the house asks a pundit to perform rituals to god to make the house strong. Shama is very much influenced by such an inherited custom.

Therefore, she always nags on Mr. Biswas to have a house-blessing ceremony whenever they build a house: "You didn't even get a pundit or anything before you plant the first pillar ... I not going to live in that house or even step inside it if you don't get Hari to come and bless it" (267). Shama continues insisting on Mr Biswas to have a house-blessing and a shop-blessing when they live in their separate house, given by Mrs. Tulsi, in The Chase. Naipaul is sympathetic to the miserable poor condition and inability of Mr. Biswas to conduct a ceremony. Mr. Biswas interrogates Shama: "What the hell you think I look like?' he asked in English'. The Maharajah [king of kings] of the Barrackpore?" (152)

On the other hand, house-warming is held when the family enters a new house, cooks to warm it and invites others. For instance, in *The Chase*, Mr. Biswas invites his in-laws to a house-warming ceremony. Mr. Biswas is suffering because Tulsi family is too big to feed. He tells Shama that the blessing-ceremony “is bad enough as it is. To feed your family on top of all this is really going too damn far” (152).

Nonetheless, death occurs several times in the novel from the first sentence to the last paragraph. Hindu funeral rituals in the Caribbean are somehow different from those in India due to the effects of the contiguous cultures. For example, the dead body is dressed in a strange way. In the funeral of Mr. Biswas's father: “He lay in a coffin in the bedroom, dressed in his finest dhoti, jacket and turban, his beads around his neck and down his jacket” (29-30). After that, traditionally in a Hindu funeral, the dead person's eldest son does the last rites, walking around the coffin and lighting the fire to cremate the body.

Here, the novelist shows the domination of the Christian culture, in which the rulers force Hindus, especially the elder generation, to bury the deceased instead of cremating them. For Mr. Biswas's father, “Cremation was forbidden and Raghu was to be buried” (29). Naipaul points to the fact of their having stayed away from certain kinds of possible confronting situations. They make a few adjustments to the rulers' prevailing culture. This is evident in the young generations, who have rights to perform their funeral rites. Unlike his father, when Mr. Biswas dies, his body is cremated: “The cremation, one of the few permitted by

the Health Department, was conducted on the banks of a muddy stream and attracted spectators of various races” (623). Naipaul also refers to an old Hindu tradition, sati (In Hindu mythology, Sati, the wife of Dakshya, could not bear life after the death of her husband. As a result, she threw herself on his funeral pyre and burnt herself to ashes. The name 'Sati' was being given to a widow, who commits self-immolation).

All the same, traditionally, in some parts of India, when the husband dies, the wife has to cremate her body together with her husband's in order to demonstrate her love for him, but not vice versa. Fortunately, it does not exist any longer due to the enlightening movements and intellectuals. In fact, India owes the abolition of this deplorable practice to the crusading efforts of Raja Rammohan Roy, the 18th century social reformer. In the novel, one of the old generation ladies is about to commit Sati: “Sharma's widow shrieked, fainted, revived and tried to fling herself into the grave. The villagers watched with interest. Some of the knowing whispered about suttee” (437). As a social gesture, people treat Mr. Biswas, the orphan, with compassion and pity after the death of his father: “As the baby of the family Mr. Biswas was treated by the mourners with honour and sympathy” (29). As a mark of condolence, the dead person's family does not cook for about twelve days. They eat simple food without spices or sugar.

The neighbours cooperate and make food for the dead person's family: “Because no cooking could be done at their house, they ate at Sadhu's. The food was unsalted” (30). The novelist indicates that Hindu migrants

are not influenced by the Christian culture in certain circumstances. That is to say, when consoling a person, Christians put on black clothes. However, Hindus are not affected by this Christian custom: “A son-in-law who lived away died, and his groom came to Hanuman House, where they were distinguished and made glamorous by their mourning clothes of black, white and mauve. This Christian custom did not please everyone” (192).

Conclusion

An ordinary man with an ordinary desire is none but Biswas. He strives for freedom, he is considered to be the central figure for the struggles to keep up his inner dignity, because none would be ready to sacrifice one's individuality. The sprawling account of forty six years of man's life spanning three generations is tightly held together by number of subtle and complex devices. The prologue in the prescribed epic manner gives a summary of the entire action of the novel. The title of the novel points out clearly to the central and dominant symbol around which it has been centered. The house represents Biswas's search for freedom of dependence in which he dies. It leads him into heavy depth as is over priced but he is

over enjoyed possessing his own house. Mr. Biswas seems much closer to his son Anand than he is to his wife Shama.

The relationship between father and son is intensified by the many traits they have in common. The identification between them adds greatly to the richness and psychological realism of the novel. The effect of the prologue and the epilogue provide a distinct frame work for a narrative which is only deceptively simple and sequential. The double edged device of the epic prologue enables Naipaul to elevate Biswas's stature to that an epic protagonist. This novel can be called a novel for excellence about footlessness human quest for human quest for place and personality. On the whole, it can be said that Naipaul is a powerful commentator on the cultures and nations of the modern world and that his ironical and satirical statements do contain an element of truth. The diversity of the overlapping customs and traditions in the A House for Mr. Biswas expresses Naipaul's views on Hindu migrant community in the Caribbean. I can conclude that those migrants are still stuck to their forefather's culture and traditions, though they are far away from their mother land, India.

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