



A House for Mr. Biswas: A Chronicle of a Man's Search for Identity

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Abstract:-

In 1961, Naipaul published his fourth novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, regarded by many critics as one of the best novels in English fiction. The story of the protagonist, Mohun Biswas captures authentic West-Indian life, but it also transcends provincial boundaries and suggests concepts which are universal in their human implications. Mr. Biswas' desperate struggle to acquire a "house" of his own is symbolic of an individual's need to develop an authentic identity. This novel marks the climax of the early phase of Naipaul's artistic development. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a tragic comic novel set in Trinidad in 1950s. This paper highlights the chronicle of a man's search for identity through the character of its protagonist Mr. Biswas.

Keywords:-

authentic identity, transcends, West-Indian life, fiction.

Introduction:-

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born on 17th August, 1932 in West Indian Trinidad. He is regarded as the mouthpiece of displacement and rootlessness by critics and scholars. He is a novelist, a travel-writer, and an essayist. It was Naipaul's father who provided him the first models for the literary and journalistic interests. His novels are mainly light, satirical comedies, some centred on politics and elections, some on frustrated meaningless life of urban poverty. He was awarded the Booker Prize in the year 1971, the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001. Some of his notable works are *The Mystic Masseur*, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, *Miguel Street*, *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Naipaul, the British writer of Indian heritage is well known for comical but satirical novels. Interestingly enough, Naipaul dedicated his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* to his first wife Patricia Ann Hale, unfortunately, Patricia died in the year 1996. Almost all his novels deal with a sense of alienation and displacement. Naipaul is best known for his pessimistic novels.

A House for Mr. Biswas, in many ways, brings together the central tenets of the picaresque novel. Through Mr. Biswas' various associations and experiences with people in different places and of different positions, Naipaul satirises the social classes. Novel is predominantly realistic with its vivid details of circumstances. The novel gains its symbolic eminence because of its background of deprivation, crowding, and insecurity which make the possession of a private dwelling and ideal goal for an inhabitant of Trinidad. The various lodging places have all their drawbacks. Hanuman House is authoritarian and oppressive in its organisation, the houses at The Chase and Greenvale are unbearable burdens because of the uncertainties surrounding their constructions, the Shorthills and Port of Spain buildings are dispiriting because of their rapid deterioration under the hands of exploitative Tulsi's family. These houses form a backdrop and they, at the same time, motivate Mr. Biswas towards his goal to own a house for himself and his family. The novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, is autobiographical in one sense. Naipaul based *A House for Mr. Biswas* on his own experiences on Trinidad. Mr. Biswas is a prototype of Naipaul's father, Seeprasad and Anand, Mr. Biswas'

son, for Naipaul himself. In his book, *Letters Between Father and Son: Family Letters (1999)*, Naipaul says that the relationship between him and his father is similar to that of Anand and his father Mr. Biswas. For instance, both Naipaul's father, Seepasad and Mr. Biswas were born in a village. Both of them change many houses until they have one of their own. Living with wealthy relatives, working as a sign painter, getting married with the daughters of conservative wealthy Hindu families, holding a series of jobs are some of the similarities. Again, Seepasad Naipaul too finds works on a newspaper after moving to Port of Spain as Mohun Biswas does. The events in the life of Mr. Biswas' son Anand reflect those of Naipaul's himself. Anand, like Naipaul, is an Oxford educated, instilled with the idea of reading, being incited to be one of those students who achieves to win a scholarship a school and to share his father's involvement with writing. Naipaul too says that "A House for Mr. Biswas was very much my father's book".

The novel takes its subject matter from the excluded people who have been alienated from societies to which they apparently belong, and who are in search of an identity. Naipaul portrays the West Indian lives in the novel. Mr. Biswas is in a state of 'unhomeliness'. He is in a psychological limbo which is caused by the cultural displacement. Naipaul's works consist of both fiction and non-fiction; he has a strong feeling of unhomeliness, although he has a home in Wiltshire, England. Naipaul made his protagonist to be in a psychological limbo having been alienated from the culture of his people. Alienation and exile are the concepts which the writers of post-colonial literature discussed as they themselves are in the dilemma of divided culture. We notice a note of self-criticism made by Naipaul:

"Of all my books, A House for Mr. Biswas is one closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child".

A House for Mr. Biswas deals with two dominant themes. One, the theme of development of the individual and of society, the other is the theme of family disintegration or dissolution in the face of new forces and trends. The novel describes the protagonist's painful 'quest for identity'. After having failed in his efforts to establish himself either as an assistant to Pundit Jairam or as an assistant to Bhandat's rum-shop, Mr. Biswas finds himself married to Shama, a daughter of the wealthy Tulsi family living at Hanuman House. At Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas finds that it would be necessary for him to lead a life of servility and of utter subordination to Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. As a man of rational-minded, he rebels against this system which demands his unquestioning obedience. Hanuman House is a symbol of traditionalism, conservation, and the old Hindu culture with its emphasis on the joint family system according to which the head of the family is the principal authority. Mr. Biswas' rebellion against this system is the first step in the development of his personality and his quest for identity.

Mr. Biswas' refusal to conform to the code of conduct at Hanuman House leads to his expulsion from there. He has now come to The Chase to take charge of the Tulsi food shop. He finds himself ill-equipped to function as a shopkeeper and to deal with his customers. Under Shama's pressure, Mr. Biswas has to agree to hold a house blessing ceremony to which he was otherwise opposed. The house blessing ceremony necessitates a large expenditure which Mr. Biswas could hardly afford. Mr. Biswas feels deeply dissatisfied with the accommodation which is given at The Chase. Mrs. Tulsi describes this accommodation as 'very little nice property', but Mr. Biswas makes sarcastic comment that a 'coal-barrel will equally serve his purpose'. There are instances where Mr. Biswas felt unhappy for he was not consulted to name his own born first child and he also resents his having been described as a 'labourer' in the birth certificate of his child. Yet, Mr. Biswas realises at the same time that Hanuman House is a sanctuary to which he feels like going quite frequently, which shows his ambivalent nature of love and hatred towards Hanuman House, where he describes the Tulsi family as 'blood suckers'. Hegel remarks that "through self-analysis and contemplation, the human moves from an immature sense of universality to a powerful sense of his own individuality which Mr. Biswas does".

Naipaul himself and his protagonist struggles for their individuality through a realisation from the immature structure of their community, yet, they cannot totally ignore them all. Further, at Greenvale, Mr. Biswas and his family are given a room in the 'barracks', he feels most uncomfortable in the 'barracks' like he had felt at Hanuman House. His discomfort arises from his incapacity to accept any kind of regimentation.

But, at Greenvale, he is at least relieved for the fact that he is away from his close physical proximity to the Tulsi clan. So, Mr. Biswas decides to build a house for his own but he does not have enough money for the purpose, yet, owing to his desire for freedom and for living in a neat house of his own, he embarks upon the project which leads only to a feeling of frustration because the house cannot be completed. As a consequence, he suffers a nervous breakdown and has to be carried to Hanuman House in order to be nursed back to health. After recovering from illness, Mr. Biswas feels that it would be impossible for him to stay on at Hanuman House as a dependent of Mr. Tulsi. He leaves Hanuman House and goes to Port of Spain in order to explore 'fishwoods and pastures new'. Here, Mr. Biswas' movement from one place to another is indicative of the nature that he fails to identify his own true identity and at the same time his unstable state of mind created by the conflict between his body, mind and soul. Also, because of his inability to stay suppressed under the subordination of any individual which is indeed his greatest quality that pulls him up to know his identity.

Later, he moves to Shorthills which does not last long, then to Port of Spain with his family and gets a couple of rooms in the same house where he had been previously accommodated by Mrs. Tulsi. Since, many other members of the Tulsi clan also now shift to this house in Port of Spain, Mr. Biswas has no peace of mind at all. Under the stress and strain of living in this overcrowded and noisy house, Mr. Biswas quarrels with both Mrs. Tulsi and Awad. Mrs. Tulsi asks him to quit her house, and Mr. Biswas declares that he regrets the day on which he had stepped into this house. In the previous part of this novel, we have seen Mr. Biswas building a house at Greenvale which was subsequently burnt down by the local labourers who had been hostile to the Tulsi family. No doubt his desire for independence and self-assertion comes to nothing; yet, he had never lost his sense of humour and his spirit when he mocks the Tulsi family for leaving Arwacas and came to settle at this far-off place. He says sarcastically to Mrs. Tulsi :

"A lot of bamboo. You could start a paper factory."

Seeing a mule on the estate, Mr. Biswas mockingly says 'horses'. Further, seeing his burnt house, Mr. Biswas says without losing his sense of humour,

"If anybody wants charcoal, plenty of it is available at my charred house. The ashes too can be collected and used as a kind of fertilizer."

Thus, even in this midst of his misfortune, he never loses his spirit.

Later, Mr. Biswas buys a new house of his own in Sikkim Street in Port of Spain borrowing four dollars from his uncle Ajodha. Even though the house is found subsequently to have many defects, but at last Mr. Biswas has become the honour of a house and has achieved the fulfilment of his long cherished ambition. Mr. Biswas is now fully developed person both as a developed journalist and a complete private individual. He has at last liberated himself from the chaos and the dilemma of his earlier unsettled life, thus, his quest for his identity is fulfilled.

Writing in 'Homecoming', Ngugi Wa Thiango observes that,

"the disorder he dreads is symbolized by the house of the Tulsis, when they tried to turn into an object, denying his private life and human individuality. Yet, Mr. Biswas chooses to fight back in his quest for his identity which is indeed the greatest quality he possesses."

Naipaul represents Hanuman House as a 'symbol of traditionalism, rigidity, culture infallibility, ritual duty hierarchy, and communal life', remarks Maurner Warner. For Mr. Biswas, the houses represent the symbol of hero's refusal to fall under the weight of his society, but at the end he found himself a 'half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth'.

Conclusion:-

Therefore, Mr. Biswas' search for security and quest for his identity is seen in concrete specific terms of definite social struggle. Naipaul distinctively paints the picture of a development from an apparent colonial rule to independence. Naipaul puts forward the quest for political identity too. It is right to say that our Mr. Biswas thus stands for the symbol of the oppressed that is liberated at last. Indeed, 'A House for Mr. Biswas' is one of the best novels in contemporary English fiction.

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