



SELF-EXPLORATION IN A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

SUMA GILBERT

Research Scholar, University of Mysore, Mysuru, Karnataka



SUMA GILBERT

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Abstract

The expatriate writers tend to confine themselves to the issues of migration, cultural confrontation and the search for one's self in a world of distorted identities. Existentialism and the features inextricably interlinked with the philosophy such as freedom and the emergence of the self-constitute the underlying motif of the fiction of V.S. Naipaul. Existentialists like Albert Camus, Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre believe that we have to start from freedom if we are to understand man. This is the ultimate realisation that dawns upon the protagonists of V.S. Naipaul's works as they embark upon the onerous task of self – assertion. The vision of life as portrayed in his novels carries the semblance of the existential philosophy. His protagonists are existentialists, struggling to exorcise memories, and their lives are torn asunder by volition and destiny. In his inimitable style, Naipaul depicts characters, reacting to the hostile, alien environment and asserting themselves as individuals. The deterioration of values and cultural decay are acute in his fiction, and his protagonists brave the odds with grit and fortitude.

Keywords: Existentialism, Postcolonialism, identity crisis, self-reliance, stability.

V. S. Naipaul's magnum opus, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) brings into focus an ordinary man's relentless efforts to establish himself in the transient, colonial society of Trinidad during the first half of the twentieth century. The protagonist, Mr. Mohun Biswas is born into a family of labourers of Indian origin, and what distinguishes him from the people around are his talent for sign painting and the very honour of belonging to an upper caste. Through the authentic rendering of the people in his works the novelist seems to be pointing his finger of scorn at the divergent social classes. The novel stands unrivalled with its meticulous descriptions, presentation of the grotesque reality and truthfulness in laying bare the hypocrisy and superficiality of the religious community. Mohun Biswas though a cultural oddity and an itinerant dreamer is endowed with intellectual prowess which makes him transcend his limitations and rise above

the sundry and mundane. He does not allow the heft of dreams to play havoc with his life but let's its steer the future. His pragmatism enables him to conceptualize the abstract and discard the loathsome.

The novel which is panoramic is indeed an epic in the unravelling of its theme which operates at the different levels of human sensibility; unfolding the ordeals of the hero who encounters the adversity that life throws at him. Biswas' untiring efforts to build a house point to man's intense craving for setting up an abode. His efforts thus become synonymous with an individual's yearning for self-reliance and the formation of an identity of one's own. Biswas is an individual, caught in the transitional phase between the two words. The most interesting facet of his personality unravels itself with the exploration of his potential which leads to self-assertion.

The protagonist of the novel has his share of eccentricities and foibles but retains his dignity. His deformity renders him an oddity. Though initially overcome with the urge to prove his mettle he is solely dependent on the Tulsi family and the security that accompanies it. Marriage into the Tulsi family bestows upon him dignity and a special status in society that he always craved for, but, in return, the family demands the strict adherence to dogmatic Hinduism. Biswas' tremendous respect for his ideology makes him throw off the shackles of orthodoxy and liberate himself. The profundity of his ideals and dreams segregates him in a family which demands the humble submission of his egotism. The protagonist never loses himself or relinquishes his identity despite the deadening effect that the Tulsi family causes.

The predicament of the hero is juxtaposed against the postcolonial society around. It is valid to consider *A House for Mr. Biswas* an allegorical presentation of the postcolonial society of Trinidad which renders it ambiguous. The novel ends on a note of hope and despair; the protagonist's victory remains dubious as we learn that at the moment of death, he leaves his family on the verge of a grave financial crisis though his dream of having a permanent home materialises. The flowery trees, surrounding the house of Biswas are expectant of tomorrow which unfolds innumerable possibilities, and the focus shifts to the young and intelligent Savi who holds a lucrative job.

The novel portrays Mohun Biswas as a man of indomitable spirit who never allows destiny to harness his dreams. His unflagging enthusiasm propels him to move on even when adversity stares him in the face. Alarmed by the indifference of his wife who prefers the safety of the Tulsi home to the enervating climatic condition of the estates, Biswas, the lone warrior braves the odds. Two themes are interwoven into the texture of the novel; the central character's desperate struggle to establish his identity despite the Tulsis' efforts to ostracize him and the decline of the Hindu culture under the impact of westernisation.

The house built by Mr. Biswas symbolises permanence and stability and the culmination of

human endeavours. The erection of the house heralds the onset of the most glorious phase in the personal life of the protagonist. Hanuman House which offers asylum to Biswas ultimately turns out to be detrimental to the development of his individuality. The antagonism of a few members of the family and reluctance to be servile to Mrs. Tulsi prompt the hero to separate himself from the environment which stifles. As the novel progresses the attention of the readers is drawn to the breakdown in the value system which culminates in the disintegration of the Tulsi family. Through the very portrayal of such incidents the novelist emphasises that changes are inevitable, and they contribute to the growth and development of society.

After the untimely demise of his father, Biswas leads the life of a vagabond, running from pillar to post in search of permanence and stability. What distinguishes the protagonist from the other characters are his perseverance, heroic endurance and fortitude. The forbearance and resilience exhibited even when confronted with cosmic fury render Biswas a great tragic hero. However, he remains uncompromising; unperturbed by the changes and breaks away from orthodoxy with valour and nonchalance. At Green Vale the newly built house becomes a prey to nature's rage, and Biswas and his son, Anand are rescued by the same Tulsis', the protagonist was always hostile to. The Tulsi family with its pursuit of traditions and conventions serves as a foil to Biswas who is a radical; a person of astounding candour and self-will.

There are a few idiosyncrasies and foibles which diminish Biswas' heroic and intellectual stature. He is unforgiving; the news of the disintegration of the Tulsi family fills him with glee. Meanwhile he is oblivious of the fact that it was the same family that rendered him succour while he was on the verge of an imminent danger. Biswas has ascetic traits present in him. He is devoid of sentimentality. Detached from his mother, he treats his wife and children as individuals with self-respect and dignity.

Towards the end of the novel, the readers find Biswas, embracing death at the age of forty – six, having liberated himself from the fetters of dependency. Though a structural disaster and liability the house of Biswas stands as the testimony to the protagonist's volition and inexhaustible energy. *A House for Mr. Biswas* brings into focus, the predicament of the nowhere man, springing from the cultural dislocation, identity crisis and alienation which can be traced back to the existential philosophy. In *V.S. Naipaul (Critical Essays)* (2004), N. Sharada Iyer comments on the range of his themes, His recurring themes are the collision of cultures and the resultant ambiguities in human adjustment, the colonial situation that produces a special kind of human psychosis (17).

Transcendentalism marks most of the works of V. S. Naipaul. His characters are at constant strife with themselves and venture to transcend the identities thrust on them. The satirical presentation of characters with a cold aloofness characterizes his fiction. The apathy exercised by the novelist as he dives into the psyche of the protagonist has drawn flak. Most of his characters live in a bizarre world of entangled identities. He is preoccupied with the preposterous condition of the modern man, caught in the web of intricacies. The novels of Naipaul encompass philosophical aspects which may be termed as sombre and vague. Like the enigmatic and rootless protagonists of Albert Camus and Saul Bellow, Naipaul's characters are lost in an exorbitant struggle to assert themselves and establish their identities. The sundry experiences and absurdity and incoherence of the modern world constitute the recurring themes of his novels. Traces of Nihilism are preponderant in the works of V. S. Naipaul. The world as presented by him is an illusion, and his protagonists are stranded in foreign countries and confronted with alien cultures. Naipaul is a writer who encourages the readers continually to question, and he writes about the world with the freedom of a person with no home, no country and affiliations.

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