

Class Conflicts and Cultural Assimilation In V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*: An Analysis

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a semi-autobiographical novel, and this work brought him great recognition. The protagonist, Mr. Mohun Biswas, being a marginalized person, fights against his adverse circumstances and situations on the alien land of Trinidad, and V.S. Naipaul effectively portrays the difficulties of his life in elaborate detail. The author showcases Mr Biswas's victory over his endless problems. Finally, Mr. Biswas wins the right to build his own house, which becomes a symbol of his identity as a middleman in this colonial world. The present paper examines the thought processes of Mr. Mohun Biswas, whether it is a struggle for self-identity or a class conflict. V.S. Naipaul brings to light not only the protagonist's struggle for dignity and selfhood but also the cultural conflicts he faces in the colonial world, where the other characters are also striving to maintain Indian traditions. Cultural hybridity is another theme explored in this work.

Keywords: Class conflict, Struggle for identity, Quest for home

Introduction: The novel is set partly in Trinidad and partly in the capital city, Port of Spain, which is one of the islands that collectively make up the West Indies. Later, it became an independent country. Along with English, French, and Spanish, there are native Africans who are the descendants of the Negro slaves, and there are Indians who are the descendants of those who went from this country to Trinidad to work as labourers in the sugarcane fields. Naipaul's grandfather was one of those who had gone from India to Trinidad as a laborer. Naipaul's father elevated the status of his family by becoming a writer. Afterwards, Naipaul followed the legacy of his father and achieved recognition as a novelist and journalist. Being a Trinidadian, Naipaul immigrated to England to study at Oxford University and settled there permanently. Naipaul is noted for his dark novels of alienation and his vigilant narrative of life and travels (Barnouw, 2003; Dooley, 2006; Ray, 2005). Although Naipaul had lineage, he was born and brought up in the multicultural society of Trinidad, where he felt as if he were an alien in the midst of other aliens (Chakroberty, 2005). The chunks of autobiographical experiences are reflected in the novels of V.S. Naipaul. He sensed being an Indian in the West Indies, and a West Indian in England (Ray, 2005). *A House for Mr. Biswas* is about a Trinidadian Hindu who is aware for his self-respect, even though he belongs to the laborer class. The novel is mainly concerned with Naipaul's journey in quest of the personal community beyond the alienating effects of colonialism (Garebian, 1984; Kumar, 2002).

A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) is no doubt Naipaul's magnum opus, which describes the story of a mediocre man, a rebellion that originates from man's strong desire for self-respect and dignity. The novel not only brings out the middleman's search for identity and dignity, but it is also a strong exposure of the socio-cultural dynamic of colonial Trinidad. V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* presents a combination of class conflict and cultural assimilation with a problem of maintaining a post-colonial identity. Mr Biswas's misfortune starts from the time of his birth when the midwife predicts that this child is an omen for the family and will eat up his father. About this work, Naipaul himself comments that *A House for Mr. Biswas* is one of the closest to him: "It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child." The major theme of this novel is a sensitive man's rebellion against tyranny and his desperate struggle to achieve independence. Mr Biswas ate up his father because the father drowned one day in the village pond while trying to trace his son, who was missing but hiding under a bed at home. The whole family becomes split after his father's death. After his father's death, his misfortunes knew no bounds. Both of his elder brothers leave the place to work on a distant sugar farm. Mr Biswas moved from one place to another, first to Pagotes and took refuge in his uncle's house, Ajodha, along with his mother, and later to Pandit Jairam.

For the next thirty-five years, he was to be a wanderer with no place he would call his own, with no family except that which he had to attempt

to create out of the engulfing world of Tulsis. (Mr. Biswas 40)

With the help of his aunt, Mr Biswas was admitted to the Canadian Mission School, where he came into contact with Alec, a Christian boy. It is through this association that Mr. Biswas discovers his talent for lettering. His lettering proves to be so nice that the teacher calls him a sign-painter. Later, he pursued this art as his profession. Along with Alec, he begins doing sign painting at Hanuman House, from which he enters a new chapter of his life. Mrs. Tulsi, a matriarch, is the owner of this house, and Shama, her daughter, works at the shop where Mr. Biswas is doing the sign painting. He is taken by the family and compelled to marry Shama, with whom he has been flirting. His flirt with Shama converted into a forced marriage. He has no proper job and no permanent source of income. He comes from a peasant family and marries into a wealthy business family due to the superior Brahmin caste to which he belongs, as does that family. After marriage, Mohun Biswas has to live with his in-laws' family, where the head of the family is Mrs Tulsi. The family lives in Hanuman House, situated in Arwacas. The family owns not only this house but also other houses situated at various places. Mrs Tulsi owns an agricultural land at Green Vale, Short Hills, and a house at Port of Spain. The novel mainly belongs to the class conflict. Mr Biswas' struggles are unending and countless against those powers who suppress his individuality. After marrying Shama, he noticed that he was only a labourer and had no respect as the son-in-law of the Hanuman house. With the help of Seth, Mrs Tulsi's brother-in-law, he tried his hand at a grocery shop at The Chase and maintained a house at the back of this shop, which later became a great failure. He was the son of a peasant; even he has great self-respect. With the suggestion of Mr Seth, he occupied a job of overseer at Greenvale, where he was also given a piece of land by Mrs Tulsi to build a house. He builds a low-cost house there. Eventually, the roof of the house was damaged in the storm, and he became extremely sick there and went into depression because of the adverse circumstances. He is taken care of by the whole family at Hanuman House. After his recovery, he leaves Hanuman House without any further planning and takes a bus and reaches the Ports of Spain. His departure from Hanuman House shows his unwillingness to stay there. His quest for self-dignity takes him to The Sentinel, a reputed newspaper, where he works as a story writer. Now he starts living with his family in a house owned by Mrs. Tulsi at the Ports of Spain. No doubt, he faces various problems in his life, but he never gives up. One after another, he shifts his jobs and houses, but he wants something own, his own house, his workplace, and doesn't want to live on the pity of Mrs Tulsi. The search for a house becomes the symbol of self-respect and dignity for Mr Biswas and Mrs Tulsi as a matriarch seems as a hurdle before Mr Biswas' attempt. Naipaul shows the clash of class and capitalism with the portrayal of a middleman who is conscious of his self-respect, even in the period of colonialism. The intersection of class conflict and cultural assimilation in the novel brings out the graver confusions of colonial powers. Mr Biswas's struggle is not just economic, but it is his journey to face class conflicts in Trinidad's Indian community of despondent labourers and workers. The Tulsi family is a great example of such class disparity, where Mr. Biswas belongs to the lower working class. The intersection of class conflict and cultural assimilation in the novel brings out the graver confusions of colonial powers. Mr Biswas's struggle before Mrs. Tulsi is not of have-nots; It is a cultural conflict, and his wish to live in his own house is considered a challenge to the old patriarchal system, and love for the Western-based nuclear family system wins. No doubt, Mr Biswas is successful in getting a house, whether it is structurally flawed, and even though he feels cheated after getting this house, Shama did not complain. She only said, "It looks as though we will have to do a few repairs before we move" (573). But V.S. Naipaul shows the struggle of a middleman in Trinidad colonial times is unfinished and endless. The novel's cultural landscape is marked by hybridity—a blend of Indian traditions and Western colonial influences. The Tulsis' Hindu rituals, the Hindi language, and the practice of arranged marriage are juxtaposed with British colonial schooling, cricket matches, and Christian influences. Mr Biswas himself embodies this hybridity: while he resents the oppressive traditionalism of the Tulsi household, he also yearns for the Western ideal of individual selfhood represented by homeownership.

Conclusion: Through *A House for Mr Biswas*, Naipaul represents a nuanced narrative of class struggle and cultural hybridity, showing how the colonial condition generates both material and existential conflicts. Mr Biswas's pursuit of a house becomes a powerful metaphor for the postcolonial quest for selfhood in a world of overlapping cultures and social hierarchies. In the end, the novel's portrayal of Mr Biswas's triumphs and failures encapsulates the ambivalent legacy of colonial modernity—its promise of freedom always shadowed by the persistent structures of domination. If Mr Biswas 'life is compared to any other character of the novel, then it will be proved that it is only he who is aware of establishing his own identity. Mrs Tulsi is enjoying the identity of her dead husband and never makes any attempt to maintain his identity. The house is a symbol of stability and security for Mr. Biswas, and finally he wins to build a house. No Doubt, the house has so many flaws, and it does not match Hanuman House, but it brings relief and self-dignity to Mr. Biswas, which he always longs for in Hanuman House. It is also the symbol of cultural hybridity based on Indian aspirations and Western modifications. Mr Biswas is fully satisfied with the house as his identity reflects with it; he says,

“The sun went through the home and laid dazzling strips on the exposed staircase...” (A House for Mr. Biswas 572). Eventually, the house brings happiness and satisfaction to him.

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