

## Defying Tradition: Mr. Biswas' Struggle Against Conventional Ideals in V.S. Naipaul's 'A House for Mr. Biswas'

Dr. T. Raja Sekhar, Reader and Head  
Department of English, Hindi Mahavidyalaya  
Nallakunta, Hyderabad.

### Abstract

V. S. Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr Biswas*, depicts the colonial context in Trinidad during World War II. Extensive analysis has been conducted on the colonial structure. The protagonist, Mr. Biswas, is portrayed as opposing conventional and conservative Hindu ideals, traditions, and ideology. He experiences a state of full isolation amidst many others, assuming the role of a solitary combatant against a formidable conservative structure permeated with antiquated fallacies, traditions, and ceremonial practices. The intrinsic influence wielded by these limited concepts within the Hindu community has played a pivotal role in igniting a sense of defiance inside Mr Biswas, who courageously opposes the prevailing forces of rigid beliefs and repetitive behaviours. This phenomenon occurs due to his desire to emancipate himself from the oppressive power dynamics inherent in the conventional societal framework's rigid and restrictive customs and rituals. The present article focuses on these concepts and the changes that occur within oneself due to the rigid framework of societal conditions.

**Keywords:** colonial context, Hindu ideals, power structure, oppression, conventional modes, societal framework etc.

### Introduction

*A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) is a renowned and significant novel authored by V.S. Naipaul, which has garnered global attention and is widely recognized as a remarkable achievement in Naipaul's illustrious creative trajectory. Additionally, it signified a significant stage in his body of fictional works. Upon careful examination of Naipaul's photograph, it becomes evident that his countenance embodies the multifaceted nature of his identity as a renowned writer. His visage conveys sensitivity and scepticism, indicating his profound preoccupation with the human condition. Simultaneously, it reveals his critical disposition towards widely embraced remedies and solutions that offer hopeful prospects. Naipaul's

primary fiction era commenced with the publication of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, a work that solidified his position as one of the esteemed novelists of the twentieth century. The novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* signifies a significant shift in the trajectory of the author's creative journey. Within this work, Naipaul demonstrates his distinct characteristics as a writer, including a preoccupation with themes of failure, exile, alienation, the search for identity, and his subsequent critical assessments of marginalized and susceptible civilizations. The amalgamation of memory, autobiography, and imagination has given rise to a profound epic tale that effectively illuminates the intricate and enigmatic aspects of the diverse cultural and ethnic coexistence in Trinidad.

Scholars have extensively explored V.S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, delving into various aspects such as character analysis, narrative structure, themes, and the motivations behind Naipaul's creation of this work. Chinnam (2014) conducted a critical examination of the novel's characters, particularly focusing on the protagonist, Mr. Biswas. This analysis unveiled Biswas's journey of self-expression and social integration. Thieme (1996), a notable scholar closely associated with Naipaul, discussed the significance of the house as a central literary device in the novel and Mr. Biswas's relentless pursuit of becoming a householder. Thieme's insights were informed by his personal experience of visiting colonial residences during his research on Naipaul, offering a unique perspective on the novel's origins (Thieme, 1996).

Dooliy (2006), during an academic exploration, examined the novel from an Indian standpoint, providing a fresh perspective on the motif of the house as a place of residence. His research also delved into the multiple residences of Naipaul, with particular attention to the two homes crucial to Naipaul during his formative years. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the comical predicament Mr. Biswas finds himself in due to his unfamiliarity with the world known to others has been scrutinized by critics (Kumar, 2002).

The novel further explores the challenges faced by settlers, emphasizing the concept of creolization as a means to understand Mr. Biswas's characterization. Creolization denotes the process by which settlers gain dominance over the indigenous population of a region. Khan

(1998) highlights Naipaul's significant emphasis on language hybridity and cultural amalgamation as integral components of identity formation in Trinidad. According to Tas (2009), Mr. Biswas embodies genuine resilience and maintains a sense of human dignity despite his inherent insignificance (p.117). Levy (1995), in his analysis, examines Naipaul's use of language and identifies simplicity as a defining feature of his storytelling style. Critics like Khan and Tas appreciate the use of plain language and the avoidance of excessive literary devices in the narrative.

While critical evaluations of *A House for Mr. Biswas* have explored challenges related to establishing a stable residence and the subsequent lack of stability experienced by the main characters, they have often overlooked the themes of identity, fragmentation, and their profound effects on the lives of the central characters. Therefore, this study aims to address this research gap by examining the underlying factors and consequences associated with Mr. Biswas's loss of identity, fragmentation, alienation, and exile within the novel.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* is often regarded as V.S. Naipaul's most significant artistic accomplishment, lauded for its portrayal of the human condition inside a marginalized and culturally disconnected setting. The majority of critics have provided commentary about it. The primary factor contributing to its popularity is its compassionate and empathetic exploration of significant topics, including poverty, alienation, the quest for self-discovery, and interpersonal connections. According to Francis Wyndham, the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* offers a nuanced and comprehensive examination of the colonial context, comparable to the most insightful works of imaginative writing (Wyndham 223).

According to Landeg White, the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* comprehensively explores the interconnectedness between the artistic and personal aspects of Naipaul's life (White 42). According to Helen Hayward, the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* is considered to be exceptional due to its exploration and portrayal of the gradual and nuanced development of a literary sensibility confronted by the world's unforgiving and materialistic nature (Hayward 69). The author asserts that of all his literary works, this book holds the greatest significance to him. According to Naipaul, the most intimate work is derived from the author's childhood

experiences and emotions. The novel achieves the status of a significant and complex literary work as Naipaul skillfully combines various elements of his comic-satiric approach with a heightened sense of purpose, a broader exploration of different themes, and an increased emotional empathy towards individuals striving for equilibrium, all while endeavouring to humanize the context surrounding Mr. Biswas. (22)

The novel *A House for Mr Biswas* provides a depiction of the colonial context in Trinidad during the era of World War II. Extensive analysis has been conducted on the colonial structure. The protagonist, Mr. Biswas, opposes traditional and customary conservative Hindu ideals, customs, and philosophy. The individual in question experiences a profound sense of isolation within a larger social group and assumes the role of a solitary combatant against a formidable conservative establishment characterized by antiquated beliefs, practices, and ceremonial traditions. The intrinsic potency of these limited concepts within the Hindu community has played a pivotal role in instigating a sense of defiance in Mr Biswas, who courageously opposes the prevailing forces of rigid beliefs and repetitive behaviours. This phenomenon occurs due to his desire to emancipate himself from the oppressive power dynamics inherent in the rigid customs and rituals of the Brahmin socio-cultural system. He endeavours to forge his distinct identity within a rapidly evolving, ethnically diverse community.

Mr. Biswas can be characterized as a person of average abilities, lacking exceptional qualities that would classify him as a hero in the conventional term. In the novel, the depiction of a hero typically embodies an exemplary individual who possesses a comprehensive range of intellectual and emotional attributes. This includes strength, bravery, virtue, kindness, courage, high intelligence, and adeptness in interpersonal interactions, among other notable qualities. A hero typically overcomes several challenging conditions in life, leading us to occasionally experience a degree of envy for them due to their remarkable feats towards the conclusion of the narrative.

In the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the central character, Mr. Biswas, does not conform to the traditional archetype of a hero. Instead, he can be characterized as an anti-hero due to his distinct qualities, such as his unwavering self-respect and refusal to succumb to the

oppressive influence of Tulsidom. Within this context, Mrs. Tulsi and Seth wield significant power over the members of the Tulsi family, exploiting them with their desires and caprices. Undoubtedly, Mr Biswas endeavours to assert his distinctiveness; nonetheless, it is evident that his actions as the story's central character often exhibit trivial, illogical, ludicrous, and wholly inappropriate qualities. Like Oedipus, Mr. Biswas is destined to commit patricide; yet, in contrast to Oedipus, he accomplishes this prophetic act in an absurd manner. The individual's father tragically perished while attempting to save a calf that had fallen into a pool.

Additionally, before his birth, there were indications of unfavourable circumstances, as it was foretold that they would develop tendencies towards deceit, promiscuity, and excessive spending. Undoubtedly, he does not manifest characteristics indicative of an individual of immoral disposition. However, he fails to achieve notable prominence or prestige in any domain.

Naipaul adeptly depicts the inherent dangers of immigration, exploring the profound themes of a lack of rootedness, deprivation, and seclusion. Mohun Biswas stands out as a notable figure within the context of a compelled departure from one's origins and customs. He is a prime example of the timeless endeavour for personal identity in a disordered and unanchored community. Mr. Biswas symbolizes the struggle for personal identity and liberation in the face of repressive influences within the formidable Tulsi household, embodying the individual's existence within a state of displacement.

In the novel's opening chapters, Naipaul portrays the transition of Bipti, the protagonist's mother, from her rural residence to the town of 'Pagotes'. Through his vivid descriptions, Naipaul effectively conveys the lonely and impoverished conditions that Mr. Biswas will encounter upon his arrival.

And so Mr. Biswas came to leave only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years, he was to be a wanderer with no place to call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. With his mother's parents' death, his father died, his brothers on the estate at Felicity, Dehuti as a servant at Tar's house and himself rapidly growing away from Bipti, who was impenetrable, it seemed to him that he was quite alone. (40)

*A House for Mr Biswas* depicts the tragic journey of an individual who exhausts himself to adapt to a significant societal transformation and a shift in his perspective. By the age of forty, he deems his professional aspirations unattainable and instead places his hopes on the success of his offspring. Despite his limited accomplishments, Mr. Biswas's efforts were insufficient to overcome his residence's substandard quality and incomplete payment. However, he provides his children with an improved foundation to navigate a transforming society upon his demise. He is the initial casualty of the change. The individual commences their journey without resources and attains a modest accomplishment. At the book's outset, the protagonist is instructed to internalize the notion that "nothing will come of nothing," a concept that continues to impact his existence profoundly. His accomplishment lies in creating a modest dwelling from limited resources. There were two challenges that Mr Biswas had to surmount to surpass societal expectations. One of the primary objectives is to overcome the fatalistic and passive mindset inherited from his predecessors. Additionally, it is crucial to liberate oneself from the constraints of a very conventional and restrictive society, which is currently undergoing a state of decline. The concept of fate's hospitality or indifference is a notion that has been passed down to Biswas's family, with his maternal grandfather perceiving Mr. Biswas's birth as an embodiment of this concept.

Bipti's father, futile with asthma, propped himself up on his string bed and said, as he always did on unhappy occasions, 'Fate'. There is nothing we can do about it. (13).

The protagonist, Mr Biswas, expends a significant portion of his existence engaged in a persistent struggle against the prevailing influences emanating from the Tulsi household to assert his distinctiveness and autonomy. Suppose Mrs. Tulsi can be considered as the archetypal colonizer, assuming the role of the dominant figure. In that case, it becomes evident that the entire endeavour is intended to enforce subordination and colonization. Nevertheless, it is important to carefully approach Biswas's rebellious character and well-publicized defiance against the conformity-subsistence/master-slave dynamic, as there is a tendency to idealize

these aspects. The Tulsi family has painstakingly constructed and perpetuated this system. In his endeavour to establish a self-sufficient household alongside his spouse, Shama, we witness Biswas's arduous battle against the looming spectre of poverty and financial reliance on the Tulsis. The excessive control exerted by Mrs. Tulsi over those under her care is overwhelming for this son-in-law, who values his independence, sensitivity, and relatively higher level of education. He harbours private aspirations of heroism and adventure, which have been cultivated by his engagement with the works of English literature.

Although it is a work of fantasy, it allows him to liberate himself from Tulsi's control. The organization of the Tulsi house was simple; Mrs. Tulsi had only one servant, a negro woman called Blackie by Seth and Mrs. Tulsi... Miss Blackie's duties were vague. The daughters and their children swept and washed and cooked and served in the store. The husbands, under Seth's supervisor worked on the Tulsi land, looked after the Tulsi animals, and served in the store. In return, they were given food, shelter and a little money---Mr. Biswas had no money or position; he was expected to become a Tulsi. At once, he rebelled. (97)

The Tulsi household operated under a barter system characterized by exchanging goods and services for sustenance and resilience. Despite Tulsi's assistance, his repeated endeavours to establish his path consistently result in unsuccessful outcomes. Pursuing literary endeavours, including reading and writing, is not essential to his quest for independence. Instead, he finds fulfilment as a merchant at 'the Chase' and a supervisor at 'the Greenvale' sugar farm. His sensitivity is repulsed by the practice of bookkeeping and the impoverished conditions in which the labourers reside.

Despite Mr Biswas' resistance to the suppression of individuality and freedom, influenced by the Tulsis' pessimistic perspective on personal liberty, his revolt does not conform to conventional expectations. His anger manifests through many forms of behavior and words, ranging from abusive actions to expressions of frustration. For instance, these actions include tossing food out of the window onto Owad's head, referring to Mrs. Tulsi as the 'old woman fox', and kicking the pregnant Shama. He initiates his rebellion at a comprehensive level and aims to advance it to the purposive level by seeking the assistance of Govind, whom he perceives as a

fellow individual experiencing hardship. However, he returns to the former level of rebellion upon realizing that Govind willingly serves as a subordinate, manipulated by Seth to persuade him to abandon sign painting and instead assume the role of a driver. Hence, the concept of rebellion in Mr Biswas is characterized by his condition as a cultural, psychological, and social orphan.

Frequently, his rebellion exhibits a sense of anger and sorrow reminiscent of a kid whose innocence has been invaded and a childlike desire to establish that his anguish is consistently attributable to other parties. He believes that their oppression and exploitation renders them innocent. The individual's intricate postures, indulgence in reverie, asserting personal identity, and avoidance of accountability can be attributed to the cultural, social, and psychological displacement stemming from his status as a second-generation Hindu with limited abilities residing in economically disadvantaged colonial Trinidad. Biswas, being an orphan, exhibits a sense of insecurity that may necessitate the presence of familial or communal support. Throughout the work, there is a notable absence of any significant harmonic compromise between the protagonist and the Tulsis, hindering the integration of the protagonist into the Tulsi family. However, it is worth noting that the protagonist is provided with security and employment opportunities that are scarce elsewhere, particularly considering his limited talents and lack of motivation. Despite this, he continues to resist and targets the Tulsis, inciting a revolt. Maureen Warner Lewis (1977) astutely observes.

Despite the clash of cultures in Tulsidom, Mr Biswas struggled to assert his identity in this apparent monolith of conversions, prejudices and conservatism, then Mr Biswas barges. He openly disapproved of many of the Tulsi practices and policies. He even challenges their religious belief and associates with Hindus of another sect with whom the Tulsis disagree...The religious ambiguity and syncretism and, in some cases, even neglect of traditional religion is one of the earliest aspects of cultural confrontation with which Naipaul deals in the novel. (Lewis 97)

To comprehend Biswas's act of rebellion, it is imperative to grasp the social framework of Hanuman House, which becomes evident as a fragmented reconstruction of the clan and a



society characterized by servitude. This society was established by Mrs Tulsi and Seth, who needed labourers to restore their precarious dominion. Consequently, these individuals take advantage of the poverty and lack of shelter experienced by their fellow adherents of the Hindu faith, reconstructing a distorted version of a social group that operates solely due to their incomplete understanding of the psychological dynamics inherent in a system of servitude. Like the West Indies, Hanuman House comprises a substantial assemblage of impoverished families, deliberately together due to the economic necessity imposed by the privileged upper caste minority.

In this context, the presence of men is primarily valued for their roles as spouses to the Tulsi daughters and labourers on the Tulsi estate. To embrace the notion of the Hanuman House is to submit to one's state of servitude passively. He embodies the resistance of marginalized and vulnerable groups who have assimilated into the dominant culture. Despite the challenges faced, pursuing their cause remains meaningful. Initially, the protagonist endeavours to persuade the ordinary members of the Tulsi family to align themselves with his objectives, as he promptly recognizes that he cannot conform to the expectations of the Tulsi home without sacrificing his sense of self. He endeavours to persuade individuals such as Govind that his struggle is intrinsically linked to theirs, and his rebellion would undoubtedly instigate a revolution, liberating many from the subjugation imposed by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth. Due to this rationale, Mr Biswas persistently contends with the dominant power dynamics within the formidable Tulsi household but achieves only limited success as the narrative draws close.

In conclusion, *A House for Mr Biswas* is a work of fiction that primarily delves into the examination of divergent ideologies and social contradictions across various groups and communities, particularly the tensions arising from the interactions between the landed aristocracy and the working class. The profound fixation of Mr Biswas on establishing his own distinct identity gives rise to a remarkable clash with the traditional ideals of the Tulsi household.

### **Conclusion**

In this literary work, Naipaul endeavours to undertake a nuanced and all-encompassing examination of the colonial condition in Trinidad, employing his refined imagination and sensitivity. The remarkable prose epic ultimately achieves a tragic grandeur, notwithstanding the exceptional comedic intelligence that pervades it. The central character's profound affection for

humanity's inherent freedom and unique identity serves as a catalyst for his resistance against the stagnant and decaying traditions, legends, and practices of a deteriorated Brahmin cultural framework, symbolized by the Tulsis in the literary work. Despite his marital connection to the Tulsi family through Shama, he continues to be seen as an outsider and does not partake in the customary religious practices observed by the family. The protagonist consistently maintains his elevated position in many contexts and situations throughout the narrative by refusing to conform to the mechanical, stereotypical, and outdated Tulsi concepts and ideologies.

The protagonist, Mr. Biswas, finds himself in opposition to the traditional and conservative Hindu views and ideology. He finds himself in a state of full isolation amidst many people, assuming the role of a solitary combatant against a conservative system permeated with antiquated beliefs, traditions, and ceremonial practices. The intrinsic influence of these limited conceptions within the Hindu society has played a significant role in instigating Mr Biswas' inclination towards rebellion. He exhibits a solitary stance opposing prevailing dogmatic ideologies and mechanistic routines. This phenomenon occurs due to his desire to emancipate himself from the oppressive and restrictive notions and beliefs of the Brahmin socio-cultural framework, endeavouring to forge his own distinct identity within the societal context.

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