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V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*: A Painful Quest for Identity

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* has justly been recognized as one of the best novels in contemporary English fiction. It was written by Naipaul was at the age of twenty-nine. It deals presents the problems and plights of the people's identities. It is conceived and executed in the great tradition of the humanist novel, and has subtle and comprehensive analysis of the colonial experience as anything in imaginative literature. It is the character of Mohun Biswas against his background that imparts the striking success to the novel. Discloses the multifaceted and perceptive story of Mr. Biswas of the community he belongs to. It has the direct compoment on the important as well as the modern aspects and problematic issues that associates to identity crisis in human beings. William Walsh says, "the "Crisis" originates from the excruciating historical experience of slavery of various kinds. The novel explores the consciousness of the people who constitute a destitute culture and "carry about them the mark, in their attitudes and sensibilities and convictions, of the slave, the unnecessary man" (*A Manifold Voice: Studies in Common wealth Literature*, 70-71).

Keywords- Plights, Executed, Excruciating, Destitute, Identity, Individuality, Anxiety

This novel depicts Mr. Biswas's development as an individual and his quest for identity. His life is full of different kinds of struggle. It has various aspects that creates a very significant issue related to the struggle and notions of human life. The probabilities and strangeness are completely against in the life of Mr. Biswas from the beginning to the end. There is a series of disasters, misfortunes, and mishappening which are big and small but make his life miserable and full of tortures. His feverish body shape from childhood to the present adds to his absurdity and ridiculousness and to the poor image that he has. He has "the smallest of chests, the thinnest of limbs, a soft rising belly" (p-22). The novel traces the story of Mr. Biswas's life from the time

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of his birth to the time of his death. The forty-six years of his life are for him a time of constant anxiety, recurrent set-backs, repeated failures, many rebuffs at the hands of human beings, of society, and of fate. Mr. Biswas's acquiring a house of his own marks the culmination of his struggles in life. He receives his education at the local Canadian Mission School at a village called Pagotes where he has settled down with his mother Bipti while his two brothers have been sent to live with a distant relative in a town, and his sister Dehuti begins to work as a maid-servant in the household of Bipti's rich sister, Tara and Tara's husband Ajodha. Mr. Biswas spends six years at school whereafter he is put under religious training with a pundit Jairam. But he has to do a lot for his becoming a pundit himself. For some time thereafter he works as an assistant to Ajodha's brother, Bhandat, at Ajodha's rum-shop. But here Biswas is a big eyesore for Bhandat, the person who runs the rumshop. Then he moves on to become a sign writer but work is very irregular in coming to him. While working at Hanuman House in his capacity as a sign-painter, he feels attracted by a girl called Shama who is the daughter of Mrs. Tulsi, a widow who owns Hanuman House and a vast property besides. Mr. Biswas is trapped into a marriage with Shama. He is expected to live in Hanuman House as a dependent and to work in the Tulsi Store at the Tulsi estate like the other sons-in-law of Mrs. Tulsi. Mr. Biswas is a young man with a good deal of self-respect, and he does not wish to forfeit his independence. There is a rebellious streak in his nature and he is not willing to submit to the dictatorship of Mrs. Tulsi and her brother-in-law Seth with whose active assistance she rules Hanuman House and the inmates including her many daughters and their husbands. He describes the Tulsis as "blood-suckers". The author writes:

They (Seth and Mrs. Tulsi) had married Shama to him simply because he was of the proper caste, just and as they had married the daughter called Chinta to an illiterate coconut-seller. Mr. Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsi. (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 101)

The glory of Tulsidom is its capacity to induce conformity among its members. Pitted against this, Mr. Biswas revels in non-conformist acts and words. His resistance to being totally absorbed by the Tulsis and his desire to maintain some difference between them and himself takes a variety of forms. Mr. Biswas never give-up his independence because his motto in life is: "Paddle your own canoe." He mockingly refers to Mrs. Tusli as the old queen and the old cow, old hen etc. he refers to Seth as the Big-Boss The two principal traits of Mr. Biswas's character which strike us are firstly his independent-mindedness and secondly his capacity for making sarcastic remarks. His independent- mindedness leads him to various acids of defiance and rebellion, while his capacity for sarcasm makes him indulge in all sorts of disparaging and amusing comments on the Tulsi family. He sees that most other people around him seem to exist just to fulfill a function rather than to be a person. His reduction of the roles offered to him-the dutiful son-in-law, the resident sign-painter, the obedient shopkeeper-means that his Endeavour

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is always to be on his own. It is not surprising therefore that in his assertion of independence he decides to write. Biswas's self-image suffers a lot as a result of his being taken into the grinding machine that is Tulsidom. His crisis of identity is extremely acute and real. He says to Shama: "I don't laborer, overseer- I don't look like anything at all, shopkeeper, doctor, labourer, overseer- I don't like anyof them" (p-159).

Port of Spain helps Biswas to bring about a re-centring of the displaced impulse and the restructuring of his self in the context of the racial and urban pressures of Trinidadian society as a whole. He finds a job which gives him both dignity and pleasure and helps him to further humanize the context of his whole being. The ultimate expression of such attempt is of course the search for a habitation where one can be one's ownself. Biswas's semi-independent occupation of the house in *Port of Spain* begins the long process of recovery for his damaged self which culminates in his coming to have a house of his own on Sikkim street. As a boy Biswas had moved from one house of strangers to another; and since his marriage he had always felt that he had lived nowhere but in the houses of the Tulsis- at Hanuman House in Arwacas, in the decaying wooden house at short hills, in the clumsy concrete house in *Port of Spain*. But his investing in the children's happiness is a sign of his having travelled a longway from the relentlessness and lack of focus of the Tulsi dominated days. He is happy in Sikkim:

Soon it seemed to the children that they had never lived anywhere but in the tall square house in Sikkim street. From now on their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent. (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 581)

Biswas's relationship with his wife too undergoes a positive transformation in his own house:

He didn't now care to do anything against his wife's wishes. He had grown to accept her judgment and to respect her optimism. He trusted her. Since they had moved to the house Shama had learned a new loyalty to him and to their children; away from her mother and sisters, she was able to express this without shame, and to Mr. Biswas this was a triumph almost as big as the acquiring of his own house. (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 58)

These lines are from the prologue of the novel and in Naipaul's hands "The prologue" is a really helpful gloss on the whole novel. Further he says:

The wonder of being is his own house, the audacity of it; to walk into his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished..... to hear no noises except that of the family, to wander freely from room to room (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 09)

At Hanuman House he is regarded as a buffoon and a trouble maker. There is no doubt that in some ways he is a buffoon. He is an absurd man, one early proof of his absurdity being the manner in which he unwittingly brings about the death of his father. But, though he is an absurd man, though he is an Everyman, and though he may even be called an anti-hero, he is not absolutely devoid of heroism. He loves his family very much but does not like to live with Tulsi's

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family:

How terrible it would have been at this time, to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 381)

Even for Mr. Biswas's children the house was to provide an ordered world, which was never granted to their father:

Soon it seemed to the children that they had never lived anywhere but in the tall square house in Sikkim Street. From now on their lives will be ordered, their memories coherent. The mind, while it is sound, is merciful. events will be telescoped and forgotten. (p-382)

The vision of the house sustains Mr. Biswas through all these years of dismal decadence.

William Walsh says:

The members of the community in *A House for Mr. Biswas*..... carry about them in their attitude and posture, in their management of life and feeling the indelible mark of the slave, who is supremely the unnecessary man. All are impelled by the desire to demonstrate, to themselves even more than to others, their human necessity. In the earlier novels they did this by bruising themselves absurdly and ineffectively against an indifferent universe. Mr. Biswas constructs the proof of his necessity in both a comic and a most moving way. Saturated as he is with the ethos of the given place, maltreated by its peculiar deficiencies and cruelties, he is nonetheless realised with such complete conviction, so living a reality, that he becomes a model of man just as the history and situation which formed him are seen to be a metaphor of the process which constitutes any man. (*V.S. Naipaul*, 30-31)

Mr. Biswas begins to be haunted by the amazing scenes of the headline of a newspaper. he also begins to be haunted by strange fears about his future; and he is tormented by all kinds of questionings. Neither Savi's stay with him nor Anand's brings him much relief. He keeps muttering to himself that he has been trapped in a hole. Thus, his simmering resentment against the Tulsi family becomes an obsession with him and then leads to his nervous breakdown. The Tulsi family is doing no damage to him at all, but his grudge against the Tulsi family has not abated. Inwardly, even more than outwardly, he puts the whole responsibility for his failures and inadequacies on the Tulsi family. The Epilogue constrains a very moving account of Mr. Biswas's predicament and his death. His government job is gone, and he has to eat the humble pie by returning to the Trinidad Sentinel on a lower salary than, he was getting as a Community Welfare Officer.

He wants to sell his car, but Shama does not permit him to do so. The debt which Mr. Biswas owes to his uncle Ajodha weighs heavily on his mind. He no longer has any ambition in

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life. The thought of the debt frustrated his energy and his ambitions. W. Walsh opines:

His enthusiasm, unsupported by ambition, faded. His work became painstaking and laboured; the zest went out of his articles as it had gone out of himself. He grew dull and querulous and ugly. Living had always been a preparation, a waiting. And so the years had passed; and now there was nothing to wait for. (*V.S. Naipaul*, 31)

The heart-attacks which he gets constitute a very pathetic episode in his life. His dismissal by the Trinidad sentinel comes as a very painful blow to him and to us. Savi's return and her getting a well-paid job are the only ray of light in the life of Mr. Biswas now. Anand has proved a big disappointment to Mr. Biswas, and his letters contains no news to provide any hope to his father. Mr. Biswas's premature death completes the tragedy of his life. His only achievement in his life has been buying a house of his own, but even the house is mortgaged. The Trinidad Sentinel announces his death in the following words: "Journalist Dies Suddenly." The novel presents the vivid outlooks and fulness of sympathy that may related human beings. Deficiencies, deformities, pretensions, cruelties, of society and human life have been noted in the novel very clearly and vividly. It is one of the important aspects on the novel. Mr. Biswas is caught in are recorded as effects of our common humanity, not as the operations of an alien or inferior nature.

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