

IDENTITY AND CONFLICT IN SHAMA-BISWAS RELATIONSHIPS: A POST-COLONIAL READING OF V.S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS*

DR. NAMITA PANDA

Abstract: The aim and objective of this paper is to study the relationships of a couple Mr. Biswas and his wife, Shama from the postcolonial perspectives. Both of them have a different way of thinking but coincidentally become husband and wife by a love note Mr. Biswas writes for Shama while working as a sign painter in the Tulsi store. Shama's mother, Mrs. Tulsi was looking for a boy for Shama and when she comes to know that Mr. Biswas belongs to a Brahmin caste, she immediately gets ready for her daughter's marriage with him and asks Mr. Biswas also whether he likes the girl or not. When he replies positively, their marriage takes place and a house is given to Mr. Biswas in Hanuman House. But Mr. Biswas doesn't like the ways of the Tulsis and immediately denies to work as a labourer like other sons-in-law on the Tulsi estate. He always finds fault in the ways the Tulsis live. His wife, even after marriage, favours her family members than Mr. Biswas and Mr. Biswas keeps quarrelling with her and the other members of the Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas wants to assert his identity by owning his own house to avoid all internal conflicts between him and the members of the Tulsi family. Through this paper, I have explored Mr. Biswas' struggle for his identity in a postcolonial world amongst all conflicts.

Keywords: Conflict, Identity, Home, Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas, Shama, Tulsis.

Introduction: Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is known as V.S. Naipaul who is a very renowned and acclaimed novelist, short-story writer and travelogue writer. He has been the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001. He was in the Port of Spain, in the island of Trinidad in 1932. There is a candid depiction of Caribbean society in his works. His novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* was published in 1961. He has written, to some extent, the incidences of his life that's why there seems an autobiographical touch in his works as is observed, "Both Mr. Biswas and Naipaul are in search of a home by which they will be able to find their identities." (Recep 117) Naipaul was close to this novel when he says, "Of all my books, this is the one that is closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child." (Naipaul 2003, 128). Naipaul is a man who has no proper roots and he says about himself in an interview, "When I speak about being an exile or a refugee, I am not just using a metaphor, I am speaking literally" (Evans, 1972: 62). Mohit K. Ray also observes that Naipaul could not consider himself the citizen of a particular country. He writes about V.S. Naipaul that he is "an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England, and a nomadic intellectual in a postcolonial world" (Ray 208).

A House for Mr. Biswas is a beautiful novel about the search for home and identity of its central

protagonist Mr. Mohun Biswas. The novel is written in two parts. First part starts with the Prologue and has six chapters namely 'Pastoral', 'Before The Tulsis', 'The Tulsis', 'The Chase', 'Green Vale', and 'A Departure' while the second part consists of seven chapters namely 'Amazing Scenes', 'The New Regime', 'The Shorthills Adventure', 'Among The Readers and Learners', 'The Void', 'The Revolution', 'The House' followed by the Epilogue. The novel traces the quest for Mr. Biswas' existence as a man with his own identity. He is a self-esteeming man and he does not want to be dependent on others and tries to live his life independently.

When the novel opens it describes how Mr. Biswas is born as an unlucky fellow. His father and mother keep quarreling and due to this quarrel, she gives birth to him in her parents' home. When he is born, he is born with six fingers and in a wrong way, "What sort of boy? Six-fingered and born in the wrong way?" (11). His birth in this way is considered inauspicious in Bipti's parental home and that's why all types of rituals are performed so that evil spirit may not enter their house, "Bissoonsaye brings back leaves of cactus and cut them in strips and hung them at every entrance of the house but the midwife warns her, "Whatever you do, this boy will eat up his own mother and father." (12) But the midwife says that this boy will eat the parents whatever she do. When the

pundit is called he also does not speak well about him, he says that “The boy will be a lecher and a spendthrift. Possibly as liar as well. (12) He advises that trees and water are not good for this boy so he must be kept away from them, “The only thing I can advise is to keep him away from the trees and water. Particularly water.” (13) Ultimately, it is because of him, his father Raghu drowns in the pond thinking that Mr. Biswas will be in water when Mr. Biswas hides himself after losing Hari’s cow. After his father’s death he tries his hands to be a pundit and starts working at a rum shop but fails everywhere. He becomes a sign-painter and his journey of life takes a new turn in this way.

One day he was painting a sign in the Tulsi Store and he gives a love letter to a girl named Shama, “*I love you and I want to talk to you.*” (85) Shama was Mrs. Tulsi’s daughter who lived in Hanuman house. This love-letter comes in the hands of Mrs. Tulsi and she immediately calls for Mr. Biswas through Seth. When Mr. Biswas goes there Seth and Mrs. Tulsi interrogate him and come to know that he belongs to a Brahmin family. They find him a perfect match for their daughter. They face no problem in this marriage as only the caste was the main issue for them. After that they also ask Mr. Biswas about his views for Shama:

‘You don’t like the child?’

‘Yes, I like the child.’

‘That is the main thing. We don’t want to force you to do anything. Are we forcing you?’

‘You are not forcing me.’ (91)

In this way, Mr. Biswas also agrees for marriage and he thinks that the Tulsi family is a rich and affluent family and he can get a good dowry. He keeps bragging about this family to Aleck, ‘Good family, you know. Money, acres and acres of land. No more sign painting for me...Rich people you know. Big house!’ (Naipaul 93). But as he has expected he gets no dowry and the marriage is also done in the registrar office to save expenses. He even does not get money for the sign painting he has done in the Tulsi Store. In fact Mrs. Tulsi wanted to use Mr. Biswas as a husband for her daughter and a labourer for her estate as Dr. Amar Nath Prasad also contends, “In the house men were needed for two reasons—husbands for Tulsi’s daughters as well as laborers for Tulsi’s estate” (Prasad 05). He is given a room in the Hanuman house to live with Shama and he is expected to work for the estate but he does not like to do under them like other sons-in-law who work as labourers in the

estate. Cudjoe rightly observes when he writes, “Mr. Biswas entered the world of Tulsis unaware that his romantic ego would be crushed by a hierarchical order that did not allow for the expression of the individuality.” (Cudjoe 54) Not only this, Mr. Biswas does not tell to anybody in his home about this marriage. He just tells her mother that he is going for a job and will return soon:

And telling Bipti one morning that he would be away for a short time on a job. He took some of his clothes and moved to Hanuman House...As a guarantee of that return he left most of his clothes and all of his books in the hut; it was partly, too, to guarantee this return that he lied to Bipti (97).

Mr. Biswas could not be on the good terms neither with Shama nor with other members of her family. He tries to convince the other brothers-in-law of the house but finds that they were all loyal to the Tulsi family. He finds faults with the members of the family. He calls Mrs. Tulsi, ‘the old hen’ and Shama’s brothers “little monkeys” and the Hanuman house “a zoo”. He is badly beaten by one of the brothers-in-law when he spits on Owad, Shama’s brother. He is also banished from the Hanuman House by Seth when Seth comes to know that Mr. Biswas has done such a disgusting deed.

After that they start living separately and Mr. Biswas starts a shop and Shama tries to help him. He finds that Shama is a clever wife and that why it is mentioned in the prologue also ‘I know the pack of you Tulsis are financial geniuses.’ (Prologue 1). When they open a shop Shama insists to invite her family members to bless their shop. Mr. Biswas says, “All right, send for the old queen, and the big boss and Hari and the gods and the everybody else and get the shop bless. (154) It was love marriage that was turned into an arranged marriage but no love ever exists between Shama and Mr. Biswas. She always keeps quarrelling with him, “You may have lost all shame. But everyone hasn’t. Just remember that.” (184) Mr. Biswas also keeps criticizing Shama and her family that’s why she leaves him and goes to Hanuman House and Mr. Biswas also knew this tradition of Hanuman House:

He knew that the Tulsi daughters who lived with their husbands often went back after a quarrel to Hanuman House, where they complained and got sympathy and, if they didn’t stay too long, respect. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘Pack up and go. I suppose they are

going to give you some medal at the monkey house. (184)

Mr. Biswas has three daughters Myna, Kamla and Savi and one son, Anand from Shama. Whenever Shama goes to her mother's house, Savi also goes with her and Mrs. Tulsi gave her non-vegetarian food which Savi never liked. Savi complaints to his father about Mrs. Tulsi's non-vegetarian food:

'Granny is making me eat fish. I hate it.'

'Well, you just don't eat it. Throw it away. Don't let them feed you any of their bad food.'

'But I can't refuse. Granny takes out all the bones and feeds me herself.' (193)

When Mr. Biswas comes back home, he tells the things to Shama in a resented voice. 'Look, I want you to get your mother to stop trying to feed my daughter all sort of bad food, you hear.' (193) But Shama does not understand his feelings rather Shama favours her mother and says that meat especially brain is good for the children's brain. He tells her,

'It took to me that your family just eat too much damn fish brains, you hear. And I want them to stop calling the girl the little paddler. And I don't want anybody to give names to my child.'

'And what about the names you give?'

'I just want them to stop it, that's all.' (193)

There was no any kind of instructions in the Hanuman house where children were considered just as assets, 'Now he saw that in this communal organization children were regarded as assets, a source of future wealth and influence. His fears that Savi would be badly treated were absurd, as was his surprise that Mrs Tulsi should go to such trouble to get Savi to overcome her dislike her dislike of fish. (195) Mrs Tulsi was a traditional lady and she could better understand the words of her son, Owad how she had married off her daughters. She also knows about this reality. Mrs Tulsi says:

You know what owad always tells me. He always blames me for the way I married off my daughters. And I suppose he is right. But then Owad is going to college, reading and learning all the time. And I am very old-fashioned.' She spoke with pride in Owad and pride in her old-fashionness. (211)

The relationships between Mr. Biswas and Shama were not good but the wheel of cart of their life kept rolling slowly. In Chapter 5 "Green Vale" Mr. Biswas goes to live in Green Vale, "Green vale was damp and shadowed and close. The trees darkened the road and their rotting leaves choke the grass gutters. The trees

surrounded the barracks." (214) Mr. Biswas has to resort the Tulsis many times and he starts working as a driver for them, "Mr. Biswas, as a driver, was given an end room. The back window had been nailed shut by the previous tenant and plastered over the newspaper." (215) Mr. Biswas has a very schedule there and he works from early in the morning till afternoon and his daughter, Savi also lived with him and she remained hungry but she never touched the food offered by their neighbours:

They spent a miserable week. Mr. Biswas left the barracks early in the mornings and returned in the middle of the afternoon. All that time Savi was alone. An old woman, who was spending time with her son, his wife and five children in a barrack room, took pity on Savi and gave her food at midday. This food Savi never ate; hunger could not overcome her distrust of food cooked by strangers. (231)

Shama tells Mr. Biswas that when he came to Hanuman House he doesn't have the proper clothes to wear. He has no stability of his work and he does not have any place to live in. everybody in hanuman house also knew it and When Mr. Biswas goes to Hanuman House Chinta says to him, ' Brother-in-law, I want you to know that until you came to this house, there were no crab-catchers here.' (242) Mr. Biswas does not think that in the company of Tulsis, his children will be safe or learn something good. He never likes the steps taken by Shama. He never liked that Shama go to the Tulsis and his children may get the dirty food there. Mr. Biswas finds his son, Anand also complaining, 'And when I come home Ma beats me,' Anand said. He wasn't complaining. He was angry. 'Ma beat me. She beat me.' Repeated, the words lost their anger and became pleas for sympathy. (245)

Mr. Biswas goes to Aunt Tara and tells them that this time his job is steady and he is planning to build his own small house. Tara tells him that Hanuman House is a big house and he may be facing some difficulty in living there. She says:

"I don't know how you managed to live at hanuman house...How many people live in that place?"

'About two hundred,' Mr Biswas said and they all laughed. "Now this house is going to be a proper house -" (257)

Mr. Biswas does not like the ways Shama behaves. She behaves like her other sisters behave. She is unable to cut off her family. She blindly follows the traditions and rituals of the house. Mr. Biswas always

wanted that Shama does not have her relationships with the Tulsis. He hates the ways she behaves during her pregnancy:

Of Shama he was not afraid, only envious, for her unthinking assurance. Then almost immediately, he began to hate her. Her pregnancy was grotesque; he hated the way she sat down; when she ate he listened for the noises she made; he hated the way she fussed and chucked over the children; he hated it when she puffed and fanned and sweated in her pregnant way; he was nauseated by the frills and embroidery and other ornamentation on her clothes. (285)

Mr. Biswas is a man without his identity and nobody in the Hanuman House cares for him. He is not much certain about himself. He thinks that he is just a man who has not much positive role in this world. That's why he says to Anand that he is nobody:

'Who's your father?'

'You.'

'Wrong. I am not your father. God is your father.'

'Oh, and what about you?'

'I'm just somebody. Nobody at all. I'm just a man you know.' (291)

Mr. Biswas was living much wounded life. Ramchand was Mr. Biswas' brother-in-law with whom Mr. Biswas' sister, Dehuti eloped and later married. He does not like the lifestyle of Mr. Biswas and that's why he invites them at the Port of Spain. He tells him in the chapter 'A Departure',

I will see. Look why you don't leave the country, man, and come to Port of Spain? A man like you shouldn't remain in this backward place. No wonder this thing happen to you. Come up and spend some time with us. Dehuti always talking about you, you know. (314)

As is inevitable, Mrs. Tulsi was a very dominant woman and at her time. She was the all-in-all of the house but with the passage of time her she does not exercise her powers. In the part 2 chapters 2 entitled "The New Regime" Mrs. Tulsi's influence started fading: Nothing had outwardly changed but Mrs. Tulsi no longer directed and her influence was beginning to be felt more and more as only that of a cantankerous invalid. With her two sons settled, she appeared to have lost interest in her family. She spent most of her time in the Rose Room, acquiring illness, grieving for Owad. (383)

Seth is another powerful person after Mrs. Tulsi and he always thinks that it is due to him and Mrs. Tulsi Mr. Biswas has brought up his children. He tells the thing to Mr. Biswas' children, 'Your father is a damn

funny sort of man. Behaving as though he own the place. Let me tell you that when you children born your father couldn't feed you. Ask him. and see the gratitude get? Everybody defying me these days.. Or you dint know? (408) he tries to insult their father by telling them that he was out of work and penniless when he was married with Shama, 'You know what your father was doing when I pick him up and marry him to your mother? You know? He tell you? He wasn't even catching crab. He was just catching flies' (408). He further tells that Mr. Biswas now-a-days wears white suit and tie but he himself wears the dirt clothes as always. 'Today, look! White suit collar and tie. And me. Still in the same dirty clothes you see me with since you born. Gratitude, eh? But I will tell you children if I leave them today, all of them--- your father, mother and all--- all of them start catching crabs tomorrow, I guarantee you.' (408-09)

Mr. Biswas could not be happy until he lived with the Tulsis. One day Chinta tells that someone has stolen her eighty dollars from her room. Mr. Biswas says, "The old Roman cat and kitten... like mother like daughter. But look, eh, I don't want my children meddling in that sort of tomfoolery." (446) there was a different kind of environment in the Hanuman house and the people have also the mentality which was never liked by Mr. Biswas. They have sometimes very conservative attitude. One day Vidiadhar's father, Govind was beating his wife, Chinta and she was feeling proud by her beatings. "Her beatings gave Chinta a matrimonial dignity and curiosity, gained her a respect she had never had before. They had the subsidiary effects of quarreling her children, killing her song, and raising her to cultural rivalry. (488)

Mr. Biswas's life could not become a satisfactory married life and they both quarrel like cats and dogs wherever they get any opportunity. Mr. Biswas never stops finding fault with her family and he says, 'So that is your philosophy, eh? I will tell you what your philosophy is. Catch him. Marry him. Throw him in a coal barrel. That is the philosophy of your family. Catch him and throw him in a coal barrel. (546)

Conclusion: It was the end of the novel that a considerable change can be noticed in their relationships. Shama is not like he Shama she used to be earlier and she starts co-operating her husband. In the Sikkim Street they own their house and live peacefully after making their own house till the death of Mr. Biswas: Soon it seemed to the children that they had never lived anywhere but in the tall square

house in Sikkim Street. From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent. The mind, while it is sound, is merciful. And rapidly the memories of Hanuman House, The Chase, The Green Vale, Shorthills, The Tulsi House in Port of Spain would become jumbled, blurred; events will be telescope, many forgotten. (614)Champa Rao Mohan also articulates that the novel tells the stories through a series of homes which reveal Mr. Biswas' identity, "In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the story is portrayed through a series of homes which symbolize Mr. Biswas' personal identity. Mr. Biswas was trapped in the clutches of Tulsidom. He has dream of his own

house. The house of his dream is highly symbolic." (Mohan 05) BijenderSingh also articulates about the ending of the novel and a favorable turn in the Shama-Biswas relationships: Thus, they live not a happy married life due to strong streaks of morbidity in their nature that deepens when they married in an immature age. When Tulsi family is broken up and Mr. Biswas purchases his own house; Shama's attitude towards him undergoes a drastic change. Mr. Biswas acknowledges this change and starts speaking highly of her. They no longer hurt each other's feelings and live a contended life forgetting all puniness of life. (Singh n. pag.)

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Dr.Namita Panda /KIIT University/namitapanda53@yahoo.com/A.L 20/V.S.S Nagar/Vaniviha/Bhubaneswar /Orissa