

M.A. in English (CCAЕ), Vidyasagar University

Course 305: Unit 3

V. S. Naipaul – *A House For Mr. Biswas*

Summary

V.S. Naipaul's *A House For Mr. Biswas* can be roughly called a novel of two halves. In the first half, the reader is introduced to Mohun Biswas' family. Bipti and Raghu Biswas are second generation descendants of indentured labourers of Indian origin residing in Trinidad. The couple produce four children Pratap, Prasad, Dehuti and the youngest Mohun Biswas. Mohun Biswas is born on a dark night at his maternal grandparents' home with six fingers. The Pandit declares that Mohun is an inauspicious child who will cause his father's death and warns that the child should be kept away from water. Mohun is not sent to school and is instead asked to take care of his neighbour's calf. When Mohun, for the first time in his life, comes across a lake he is distracted with the sight of water. The calf meanders away. Scared of reporting the loss of the calf, Mohun silently comes home and hides under the bed. The family is worried and searches for Mohun. As the villagers inform Raghu that Mohun was spotted near the lake, Raghu repeatedly dives into the lake and is drowned.

With Raghu's death the family disintegrates. Pratap and Prasad are sent to stay with relatives from their paternal side, while Bipti, Dehuti, and Mohun reside with Tara. Tara is Bipti's sister. She is married to Ajodha and the couple are childless. The couple is rich and own many commercial enterprises. Mohun is sent to school, while Dehuti is assigned domestic chores. Unable to stay with the Ajodhas Dehuti elopes with Ramachand, a 'low caste' domestic help. Mohun is pulled out of school and is sent to apprentice with Jayaram, a Hindu priest. Mohun is unsuccessful and comes back to stay with the Ajodha family. At the Ajodhas' home Mohun cultivates a love for books. He reads extensively. Mohun is sent to stay with Bhandat, the younger brother of Ajodha and assist him in the liquor business. Bhandat, a 'lecherous', 'womanizing', 'spendthrift' who is constantly cheating Ajodhas and the customers, distrusts Mohun. Bhandat manhandles Mohun and forces him to leave the shop.

Mohun decides to look out for himself. He seeks out his school friend Alec, and begins to paint signboards. An assignment takes him to the Tulsis' shop. He sees Shama at the shop and instinctively writes her a love letter. The letter lands him in trouble as the Tulsis interpret it as a proposal for marriage. The wedding is quickly arranged and performed at the Tulsis' residence—the Hanuman House. Mohun and Shama are asked to stay in one of the many rooms in the building. Mrs Tulsi and her brother in law, Seth, want Mohun to work in their shops. Mohun is not prepared for a married life and finds the environment in the Hanuman house stifling. He yearns for independence and constantly finds means to express himself. Very early into his marriage he realizes that the Tulsi household does not provide any reasonable means to live an independent and contented life. The marriage produces four children. Mohun heartily dislikes the gargantuan Tulsi household which he finds regressive. He rebels at every opportunity, tries to ascertain his independence on every occasion and wants to break away from the Tulsis. He detests every member in the household. He names Mrs. Tulsi the 'old queen' and the 'old hen'. He calls Seth 'big boss' and the 'big bull'. He dislikes the highhandedness of his brothers-in-laws Owad and Shekhar whom he mockingly calls 'gods'. He is repelled at the sight of Hari, the son-in-law who serves as the spiritual leader of the household. Hari's obsession with his illnesses, his food practices, and religious books irritate Mohun. He distrusts Padma who is the wife of Seth. Mohun tries to seek the company of the rustic and illiterate Govind. Govind betrays Mohun's trust as he reports Mohun's complaints to Seth.

Residents at the Hanuman house brand Mohun a trouble maker. Mohun is often humiliated and is isolated. On one occasion Govind manhandles Mohun. For Mohun the Tulsis come to signify a decadent old order, which is crumbling and has no place in the contemporary world which is constantly making and remaking itself. He deems himself trapped by circumstances and wants to escape from the situation, reclaim his agency and live life on his terms. The Tulsis finally give away and allow Mohun to run a shop on one of their properties. For the first time in their marriage, Mohun and Shama live independent of the Tulsis. Mohun becomes a shopkeeper and his family resides in a house located behind the shop. Initially Mohun is successful at managing the shop. However, at Shama's insistence Mohun gets the shop 'blessed'. Mohun gets into trouble and is in a legal case. Mohun loses the shop and the family is forced to return to the Hanuman House.

This is where the second half of the novel begins—a documentary of Mohun's struggle to assert himself. Mohun does not live with the Tulsis for long. He rebels and is

employed as a driver and an overseer on the family's plantation estate. Mohun's family is forced to live alongside ten other families in the barracks. Mohun resents the housing arrangement and the nature of his job. He is inept as an overseer. He tries to build his own house on the plantation. However, due to financial constraints he is forced to compromise on the quality of the raw materials and ends up procuring a weak house. The frail house is destroyed during a storm and Mohun is devastated. Mohun is forced to return to the Tulsi household again. He is emotionally estranged from them, moves to live with his sister in Port of Spain, and begins to seek employment in the city. Luckily, soon enough he lands up a job as a journalist with the Sentinel. As a journalist Mohun is sensational and is not very efficient at his job. Mohun relocates his family to Port of Spain. He begins to enjoy his independence and the new job. He aspires to become a writer. He buys a typewriter and types a few sentences. Mrs. Tulsis intervenes again and manipulates the situation. Mohun and Shama reside as tenants at the family house in Port of Spain. Mohun's new job wins him the friendship and respect of his brothers-in-law. Shekhar is married to Dorothy, a Presbyterian of Indian origin. Owad leaves for England to study medicine at Cambridge. Seth and Mrs. Tulsi begin to disagree on most things and the Tulsis seem to be on the verge of breaking up. Mrs. Tulsi and her children, along with their families, move away from Arwacas to set up a new house on a plantation at the Shorthills. Much to his irritation and discomfort Mohun is also forced to relocate to the new house. He achieves professional success and begins to build his own house on the estate. An accident leads to the house being burnt down. As the tenants at the Tulsi house in Port of Spain vacate, Mohun begins to reside in Port of Spain. As a Community Welfare Officer, Mohun begins to enjoy his job. He focuses on the education of Anand, buys a car, and seems to be finally at ease with life. However, as various members of the Tulsi also relocate to Port of Spain, Mohun finds the house inhospitable and finds the environment stifling. To add to the crowd Owad returns from England. Though trained as a doctor, his Marxist views notwithstanding, Owad is as regressive and prejudiced as any other member of the Tulsi household. Owad is overbearing and fights with Anand. His arguments with Mohun lead to a massive argument between Mohun and Mrs. Tulsi. As the Community welfare department is disbanded, Mohun goes back to being a journalist with the Sentinel. He is now a seasoned journalist. His daughter Shama and son Anand win scholarships and find their way to England. Mohun is clearly middle aged and searches for a house of his own with more vigour. He finally finds a house, arranges a loan with the Ajodhas and buys it. The house is not as perfect as it looked and its faults render it dysfunctional. He realizes that the

previous owner has cheated him. Mohun suffers a series of heart attacks and is diagnosed with serious heart ailment. Mohun is in debt and is disappointed that his son and he do not share a warm relationship. However, he finds solace in the fact that Savi has proved to be an intelligent and a warm daughter. Mohun is gradually retired out of Sentinel, and the newspaper hires Savi instead. Mohun steadily reconciles to life and towards the end of his life he begins to live a contented life. Mohun, towards the end, succumbs to a heart attack.

The idea of the “house”

Mohun’s efforts towards the owning a house is a metaphor of his quest at finding his space in the modern world. Mohun seems to be a complex character whose family deems him to be a fickle minded, adventurous and misguided man. Mohun is alienated from his family members and seeks to find a place of his own. Naipaul has stated that the character of Mohun was inspired by his father’s life. Seepersad Naipaul found himself choked amidst the Capildeo family. Like Mohun, Seepersad was quite alienated with his surroundings and craved for a better life. He constantly sought 9 opportunities to improve himself and advance his goals. Naipaul remembers his relatives making fun of his father’s efforts. Despite several humiliations and insults, Seepersad focussed on making and remaking himself. His efforts paid off as Seepersad made his living as a journalist, became an author, owned a house and educated his sons in England. In a relatively short lifespan of five decades Seepersad, who was born to emaciated, almost illiterate and indentured labour couple accomplished many of the objectives that he set out for himself. Mohun’s quest at owning a house emerges as a very significant marker. Even as the Tulsis laugh at his attempts to own a house and live an independent life, Mohun carries on with his quest. He tries to build or buy a house on several occasions. Every time fate intervenes and his efforts are nullified. The quest seems to be a doomed affair, notwithstanding the small awards that come his way. Even as he seeks to own a house of his own, Mohun buys a bicycle and graduates to driving a motorcar. He is employed in office spaces which are meant for learned men where he can wear suits to work. His children win scholarships to study abroad. He finally buys and moves into a two storied house, which he realises is full of defects. Yet, very unlike him, Mohun is reconciled to its defects. Mohun yearns for space, dignity and recognition; hence he seeks a house of his own. Space, dignity and individual recognition are a testimony of a person’s agency in modern society. Mohun is the only truly modern individual in the novel. He has comprehended that the old colonial order is being replaced by a new chaotic milieu and is aware that the new

world brings in opportunities. Ironically, many members of the Tulsi household who initially mock Mohun, gradually copy him and strive for better jobs and education for their children.

The breakdown of conventional social structures

A House for Mr. Biswas depicts the breakdown of societal structures among the Indian community in Trinidad. Since nineteenth century people of Indian origin who stayed on in the islands as indentured labourers strove hard to keep their identities intact. Though severely emaciated and poor, these labourers wanted to retain the caste hierarchies on the island. They practiced religious and caste rituals (and often created new rituals) to mark themselves as culturally distinct from the other communities. These religious and cultural practices provided the Indian community with a sense of identity. The Indian community often looked up to the family structure to uphold its sense of community. The family was expected to teach its children the cultural rituals which in turn made the children a part of the Indian community. ¹⁰ However, within a span of a century these bonds became weak. Notwithstanding the periodic visits to India and the regular visits of religious leaders from South Asia to the islands, the Hindu community in Trinidad faced a severe identity crisis. The crisis occurred due to several reasons including the rise of nationalism in the islands, the weakening of the colonial structure, the change in the political economy of the island and the migration of the young people to England. Naipaul points out that the indentured labourer could work on the plantation. The plantation offered work to a large section of the population. But in the twentieth century, as plantations gave way to the service industry, an individual had to be clever. The struggle against the colonial rule and the demands for self rule brought together the black and the Asian populations.

Character of Mohun Biswas

Mr. Biswas, emerges as a sympathetic figure in spite of his faults. This is partly because of the adverse circumstances of his life, which he does not accept and continually makes efforts to overcome. Mr. Biswas is always the “little man”; physically weak and small, he is dependent on others economically and socially; he is humiliated by them and cannot win any respect even in the family into which he marries. As a result, he hits back by making them the butt of his scathing humor, which lowers his stock even more. Ironically, the most respect Mr. Biswas receives is from the destitutes and villagers with whom he comes into contact as a result of his work as a journalist. He realizes, though, that there is a huge

discrepancy between the way they regard him and what he feels to be the depressing truth of his own precarious existence, and this self-awareness produces some of the most hilarious episodes in the novel.

Mr. Biswas's relationship with his wife Shama is for much of the novel one of contempt and mutual incomprehension. They are bound to each other not through love but necessity; there are periods when, following a quarrel, Shama returns to live at Hanuman House for months at a time. The result of these separations is that Mr. Biswas's children grow up distant from him, although he does eventually succeed in forming a bond with Anand, who refuses to leave his father alone at Green Vale.

Shama herself is long-suffering and has a sarcastic wit of her own, but she cannot comprehend her husband's desire for independence from the Tulsis. She is far more conventional and would have been content to live her life in the time-honored way of the Tuli women. The passage of time does bring some accommodation, however, and in his final years, Mr. Biswas comes to respect Shama's judgment and her optimism.

Analysis

Listed amongst the 100 best novels written in English language in the twentieth century, V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is one of the most significant novels to have been written by a Caribbean author. The novel describes the travails of the protagonist Mohun Biswas, who seeks to own a house in Trinidad. The novel is set in the first half of the twentieth century. Even as the novel depicts the desires and insecurities of Mohun, it rather humorously depicts the lives of the various members of the gregarious Tuli household. The novel provides a commentary on the relations between sexes in Indo-Trinidadian society, also throws light on the complexities of race and of impending exit of the colonial rule in the island. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, published in 1961, won V.S. Naipaul immediate international recognition. Naipaul based his novel on the life of his father Seepersad Naipaul. Seepersad Naipaul, a son of indentured Indians, was a self taught writer. At a very young age, Seepersad, an emaciated yet ambitious young man, was married into the influential Capildeo (Kapil Dev) family. The novel is set in the first half of the twentieth century and all the main characters in the book are Trinidadians of Indian origin. *A House for Mr. Biswas* portrays the dynamics of the Indo-Trinidadian community. It throws light on the superstitions, and the culture of the emaciated descendants of Indian origin on the island. The description of the lifestyles of the Ajodha and the Tuli family is a record of the in detail. The action in the

novel is situated in the first half of the twentieth century, a period which witnessed massive political changes across the world. It discusses the genealogy of coolie—the indentured labourer from various parts of South Asia, to Trinidad. It portrays the prejudices and the malice prevalent in the Indian community residing in Trinidad. It depicts the troubles that the community faces to keep its religious (Hindu) and caste identities intact. The novel demonstrates that the Indian community in Trinidad, despite its contestations, is cultivating ‘hybrid’, and ‘hyphenated’ identities.