

V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS*:

A SATIRE ON HINDUISM

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Abstract

Present paper is an attempt to explore how V.S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr Biswas* is a satire on Hindu customs, traditions, rituals and rites. Naipaul's novels are about his peregrination of orthodoxies prevalent in Hinduism. Through the paper the researcher tries to highlight that some Hindu Brahmins of high society claim themselves of supreme caste but their actions are inferior even to those people who are considered from the lowest stratum of society. They claim with proud to be Brahmins and follow the Hindu rituals blindly but they have no any quest for religion, salvation, sacrifice or goodness. They follow the Hindu rituals impassively because their ancestors did so. But they defy and infringe all rules and customs of the Hindu religion whenever the rituals come on their way. Hindus are famous for vegetarianism and their love for Hindu religious books. But in this novel they discard all rules to grind their own axes and follow the western culture blindly. These Hindus don't refrain even from eating meat whereas even the egg is not touched in Hindu families. Such kind of themes have been projected and studied extensively in this paper.

Key-Words: Hinduism, Traditions, Rituals, Post-Colony, Satire, Humanity.

V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a story of Indian Hindu migrants whose grand-parents have been migrated in Trinidad and Tobago as indentured labourers on the sugarcane estates and started living there permanently. Two families have been described particularly in the novel in the main plot. One is Mohun Biswas's family and other one is Tulsi family in Arwacas. Hindu rituals, rites and customs have been criticized in the novel at many places. Mr. Biswas tragic Hindu life starts when he was a mere child. According to

Cudjoe, “Given the Hindu sensibility that informs the text, Mr. Biswas’s tragic dimension can be perceived as poetic necessity. (Cudjoe 74) When Mr. Biswas’ father drowns in the pond and subsequently dies in an effort to find his son in the pond, then this family loses the respect which is reserved to Hindu Brahmins. They eat food in Sadhu’s house as per Hindu rituals. Biswas’ family belonged to a Hindu Brahmin family and as per Hindu customs the garlic and even onion is not used in their food as it is considered a *tamasik bhojan*; then how this family eats the meat served to them and there is not mentioning of any resistance or reluctance of non-vegetarianism by any of the member of family. They eat non-vegetarian food there. It is only Mr. Biswas who feels nauseated and vomits all the food:

Because no cooking could be done at their house, they ate at Sadhu’s. The food was unsalted as soon as he began to chew, Mr. Biswas felt he was eating raw flesh and the nauseous saliva filled his mouth again. He hurried outside to empty his mouth and clean it, but the taste remained. (Naipaul 33-34)

According to Hindu rules, dead body is always cremated but in the novel the body of a Brahmin father, Raghu’s body is buried which is against the Hindu rituals, “Cremation was forbidden and Raghu was to be buried” (Naipaul 29). The way, Raghu’s mourning is done in the house, is a satire on Hindu religion. Whenever the husband of a Hindu lady dies, she has to break the bangles of her hands and starts wailing and crying; but in the novel nothing like this happens. Bipti, Raghu’s wife, neither wails nor mourns but she hurries to inform her sister, Tara about his death. When Tara approaches in this grief-stricken home, it does not seem that she has come on the occasion of death as she comes in very nice clothes wearing bangles up to the elbows and she is loaded with jewelry. From all this, it seems she has not come in the mourning but in a marriage ceremony in the home she came:

Tara came and at once took control. Her arms were encased from wrist to elbow with silver bangles...she had brought her own pundit, whom she continually harangued; she instructed Pratap how to behave during the ceremonies; and she had even brought a photographer. (Naipaul 29)

Not only this, she emerges as a dominant woman in this home. She applies her own rules to other members of family. She orders Dehuti to see that Mr. Biswas was properly dressed. She brings a Chinese, Negro and European blood photographer also to keep the moments unforgettable. There is an arrangement done to capture the images as is usually seen in the Hindu marriages only and not at the time of death:

Bipti was bathed. Her hair, still wet, were [was] neatly parted and the parting filled with red henna. Then the henna was scooped out and the parting filled with charcoal dust. She was now a widow forever.
(Naipaul 29)

The way the photos are captured it seems there is nobody who is sad at the death of Raghu all just go for new and different poses as if they were models or film stars:

‘Wait!’ Tara cried running out from the hut with a fresh garland of marigolds. She hung it around Raghu’s neck and said to the photographer in English, ‘All right. Draw your photo now.’ (Naipaul 31)

Mr. Biswas is sent to Pundit Jairam to learn punditries. Pundit Jairam is also such a Hindu Brahmin who says which is against Hindu customs. He is a well-known pundit who eats no meat but condemns vegetarianism. He authenticates his points by giving references from a great Hindu epic the Ramayana by Valmiki. He says that Lord Rama does not go for hunting just for a sport but to get animals’ flesh to serve as food, “He ate no meat but spoke against vegetarianism: when Lord Rama went hunting, did they think it was just for sport?” (Naipaul 49). Under the guidance of Pundit Jairam Mr. Biswas gets sweets and fruits to eat when they go for any ceremony. Mr. Biswas once eats seven bananas and becomes habitually constipated and the natural call comes at unexpected intervals. At one night during such a moment, he relieves himself on his handkerchief and throws it on the oleander tree of which flowers Pundit Jairam used for worshipping:

He carefully unbolted the Demerara window, which hung on hinges at the top, and, keeping the window open with his left hand, flung the handkerchief as far as he could with his right. (Naipaul 55)

Pundit Jairam condemns Mr. Biswas and says that he can never become a pundit. Without any further delay, he drives him out of his house. After that Mr. Biswas starts working in Bhandat's rum shop but he has to return with disappointment from there also. He plans to start his own work that may give him liberty and shelter, "I am going to get a job of my own. And I am going to get my own house too. I am finished with this" (Naipaul 66). Mr. Biswas now starts own business of sign painting.

According to Hindu rituals, the marriage is generally arranged by the parents or the elders in the home. The elders are decision-makers in the home and this rule is also not followed by a few characters in the novel. Mr. Biswas' sister, Dehuti has been taken by Tara in her house as a servant after Raghu's death. She elopes with a servant named Ramchand to marry with him who used to work at Tara's house as a servant. Mr. Biswas also finds his life-partner himself and even does not tell about his marriage even to his mother. He silently likes the girl, "She was of medium height, slender but firm, with fine features, and though he disliked her voice, he was enchanted by her smile" (Naipaul 83). When Shama does not respond properly he takes it for her consent. He hands over a love-note to Shama, "*I love you and I want to talk to you*" (Naipaul 85). Shama, even before the marriage works in the Tulsi store as a sales-girl but after the marriage when Mr. Biswas is in acute need of money, she does not help him and always takes side of her parental family and spends most of her time in Tulsi residence. According to Hindu rituals, a girl has to go to her husband's home after marriage but here this Hindu rule is also broken when Tulsi family offers free residence to Mr. Biswas and Shama. Mr. Biswas starts living in his in-laws house as a ghar-jamai where he finds other son-in-laws also living in the house and working on the Tulsi estate. He is also in this illusion that Tulsi family will offer him a good dowry but he gets nothing in the name of dowry. Even the marriage is conducted in the court to avert the expenses of the marriage. This is how the story of fall of Mr. Biswas' starts from the time he puts his step in this family as a sign painter. Cudjoe also says this, "Mr. Biswas's arrival of the Hanuman House is a slow deterioration that occurs as a result of the forces of capitalism and modernity. (Cudjoe 71)

Mr. Biswas lives a disharmonious life in the Tulsi family as he has neither got any dowry, separate residence or a job that may give him a status that he has expected from this family. Mrs. Tulsi is a clever lady who finds Mr. Biswas a suitable person for her daughter. He is not financially independent and he is found at fault by giving a love-note to Shama. Due to his mistake he has to accept this marriage proposal, perhaps she already knew it. That's why she talks to him always in a good manner. But this sweet voice makes him more irritated and he passes humiliating comments to the members of Tulsi family. Mr. Biswas call Hanuman House a zoo where monkeys and animals live. It is not a place for human beings:

And what about the two gods? It ever strikes you that they look like two monkeys? So, you have one concrete monkey-god outside the house and two living ones inside. They could call this place the monkey house and finish. Eh, monkey, bull, cow, hen. This place is like a blasted zoo, man.' (Naipaul 123)

His wife Shama always quarrels with him on this matter and she calls Mr. Biswas a puppy as he too lives in Hanuman House; so he also cannot be a human being, "And what about you? The barking puppy dog?" (Naipaul 123) In such an environment Mr. Biswas thinks himself trapped and all ambitions of Mr. Biswas are shattered, "Ambition and chaos in colonial Trinidad don't go together." (Arlart 50)

Mr. Biswas passes sarcastic remarks to all the members of Tulsi family and tries to find fault always with every person especially Mr. Tulsi, her sons and Seth. Tulsi family is a Hindu family and believes in worshipping like all Hindus. One day during such an occasion Mrs. Tulsi's son, Owad brings the holy plate with burning camphor to Mr. Biswas but he refuses to touch the camphor plate saying that he does not believe in idol-worshipping. In this way he hurts the feelings of Tulsi members under the sway of Arya Samaj.

The younger god [Owad] frowned even more. 'Is not because my father dead that people who eating my mother food should feel that they could call she [her] a hen. I want Biswas to apologize to Ma.'(Naipaul 113)

When Mr. Biswas favours girl children's education, then Seth refutes him. He says if they will send their girls to school, then they will elope like Mr. Biswas' sister Dehuti, and they will choose their husbands. Mr. Biswas faces the same problem which his father Seerprasad faced. But Mr. Biswas followed his father:

The father's obstinacy and iconoclasm informs Biswas's rejection of the Tulsis and his satire of Tulsi practices such as parentally arranged marriage and the tradition of educating family children. (Weiss 61-62)

Mr. Biswas rejects this family and the rotten customs of this family. He replies to Seth that her sister lives at a better place and in a clear house than Seth. Seth and other people feel helpless to see him talking like that. Seth says, "The Black Age has come at last, sister. We have taken in a serpent. It is my fault. You must blame me." (Naipaul 127)

There are other instances in the novel which make it a satire on Hinduism. In Hindu homes generally a cow is reared and worshipped as it is called *Gau Mata*, but news is sprung in the Trinidad Sentinel that Tulsi family, despite of being the Hindu family, reared pigs instead of cows. Pigs are considered dirty animals in the Hindu religion. Pigs are reared by the Chuhras or sweepers, which are considered by Hindus the most inferior classes of the society due to their policy of caste-discrimination.

Mrs. Tulsi sends both of her sons to convent schools for education. Younger son, Owad goes abroad to become a doctor. In Hindu religion going abroad is not considered good for a Hindu. Later Mr. Biswas' son, Anand also goes to England on a scholarship. After sending Owad on a foreign land, Mrs. Tulsi is in search of a bride in for him. She feels that only an educated, beautiful and rich Indian girl will do for this purpose. She here discards the caste of the girl as she is a hypocrite lady who grinds her own axe in the guise of Hinduism:

For a short time afterwards a search was made for an educated, beautiful and rich girl from a caste family who had been converted to Christianity and had lapsed. Finally, it was agreed that any educated, beautiful and rich Indian girl would do, provided she had no Muslim taint. The oil families, whatever their original condition, were too grand. (Naipaul 240)

Consequently, a rich Christian girl belonging to Presbyterian family comes as a bride in the family. Another big blow on the Tulsi family is given by Owad when he goes to his wife's home as a *ghar-jamai* which Mrs. Tulsi has never imagined. When Shekhar comes on 26th December on Boxing Day with his wife, his wife's behavior is not like a traditional Hindu woman. She neither observed Purdah nor wears full clothes. She wears short frocks and calls herself Dorothy. Shama's sisters alleged that she is a lady of unlimited sexual appetite and her daughters already have the appearance of whores at this age also. From the epilogue it is known that Owad too marriages with the Dorothy's cousin with whom he met in the company of Dorothy for the first time.

Mr. Biswas who seems to be a petty-minded and cantankerous man refers to Shekhar's crucifix and says that the family is on the way to become Roman Catholic. In Tulsi family, W.C. Tuttle is a strict Hindu holding orthodox views. One day, some of the children of Tulsi household kill a sheep and eat its roasted meat. He expresses his indignation on this heinous act. He stops eating that day onwards from the Tulsi kitchen store and orders his wife to cook separately. His mouth bursts into sores the day sheep has eaten. Only he has strict Brahmnical views in this family though his western leanings for music cannot be ignored:

Mr. Biswas denies all the external practices and internal values of Hinduism (that is, feudalism) and opts for, and subsequently comes to represent, the central moral and spiritual principal of Christianity (that is capitalism): that is impossible to be socially mobile and to reject the static, hierarchical position ordained by Hindu tradition. (Cudjoe 71)

Mrs. Tulsi exploits their son-in-laws and rule over them like masters. Mrs. Tulsi and Seth both are the commanding figures in the novel. These all people live in a culture where other people are from different roots and they don't hesitate to take any step for their life. They want only their own benefit. There is a Negro woman who works as a servant in the family. There are labourers from different backgrounds on the Tulsi estate. This is not in this novel; *Miguel Street* also has the people from different backgrounds and cultures:

Miguel Street metaphorically stands for Trinidad—the multi-racial and the multi-cultural society composed of the Negroes, Chinese,

English and Spanish, all of whom are expatriates. Their beliefs, habits and attitudes characterize the impact of colonialism on them (Mehta 280).

To conclude, almost all the characters live in present and are under the sway of modernism; though outwardly they pretend to be traditional Hindus. The Creole Culture eats all Hindu rituals and customs. Tulsi family copies this alien culture. That's why this family is disintegrated ultimately because the children learnt no manners. They just copied what they saw in this alien culture. They lost all values for their families—they eat meat for taste, drink liquor to be modern, young ones find their life-partners themselves and sometimes even elope to get their love, they live in their in-laws houses to please their wife and in-laws, they lose all ethics, disregard their elders, quarrel in home—all this things are enough for disintegration and deterioration of a family. That is what happened to Tulsi family also ultimately. It was all this because the children learnt a lot from this modern world and education system; but lost their Hindu values which keep them stick to their family, teach them to respect their elders and to love the younger ones.

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