

A House for Mr. Biswas and Kuberer Bishoy Ashoy: Similarities between V.S. Naipaul and Shyamol Gangopaddhay

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul's 'A House for Mr Biswas' and Shyamol Gangopaddhay's 'Kuberer Bishoy Ashoy' –both novels are written in different background but they have tremendous similarities in characters' portrayal, plot and philosophy. In this paper these common features and similarities between two novels are shown. Both Mr. Biswas and Kuber want an individual house for themselves to find their own identity. For both of them an 'individual house' is turned into their dream, goal, target and life.

Key words: House, Individuality, Prejudice, Identity, Alienation.

A House for Mr Biswas is a 1961 novel by V. S. Naipaul. It is the story of Mr. Mohun Biswas, an Indo-Trinidadian who continually strives for success and mostly fails, who marries into the Tulsi family only to find himself dominated by it, and who finally sets the goal of owning his own house. Drawing some elements from the life of Naipaul's father, the work is primarily a sharply-drawn look at life that uses postcolonial perspectives to view a vanished colonial world.

In 1998, the Modern Library ranked *A House for Mr Biswas* at 72 on its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century. Time magazine included the novel in its "TIME 100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005."

Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* is a tragicomic novel set in Trinidad in 1950s. It deals with an East Indian's struggle for a place to strike his deracinated root afresh. It also attacks the Indian society's segregated, traditional way of life which contents to live in its shell and preserve its own special religious identity.

Mohun Biswas (Mr. Biswas) was born in rural Trinidad to parents of Indian origin. His birth is considered inauspicious as he was born with an extra finger. A pundit prophesies that the newly born Mr. Biswas "will be a lecher and a spendthrift; possibly a liar as well", and that he will "eat up his mother and father." The pundit further advises that the boy be kept "away from trees and water. Particularly water". A few years later, Mohun leads a neighbour's calf, which he is tending, to a stream. The boy, who has never seen water "in its natural form", becomes distracted watching the fish and allows the calf to wander off. Mohun hides in fear of punishment. His father, believing his son to be in the water, drowns in an attempt to save him, thus in part fulfilling the pundit's prophecy. This leads to the dissolution of Mr. Biswas's family. His sister is sent to live with a wealthy aunt and uncle, Tara and Ajodha, while Mr. Biswas, his mother, and two older brothers go to live with other relatives.

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Mr. Biswas now becoming a young man decides to set out to make his own fortune. He encounters a friend from his days of attending school who helps him get into the business of sign-writing. While on the job, Mr Biswas attempts to romance a client's daughter and his advances are misinterpreted as a wedding proposal. He is drawn into a marriage which he does not have the nerve to stop and becomes a member of the Tulsi household.

Naipaul based *A House for Mr. Biswas* on his own experiences in Trinidad. Mr. Biswas is the prototype for Naipaul's father, Seepersad and Anand, Mr Biswas's son for Naipaul. In his book, *Letters between Father and Son: Family Letters* (1999), Naipaul says that the relationship between him and his father is similar to that of Anand and his father Mr. Biswas. Reading the novel in light of Naipaul's biography, one can clearly recognize similarities between the real and fictional fathers and sons. For example, Both Naipaul's father and Mr. Biswas were born in a village. Both of them change many houses until they have one of their own. Living with wealthy relatives, working as sign painters, getting married with the daughters of conservative, wealthy Hindu families; holding a series of jobs are some of the other similarities.

With the Tulsis, Mr. Biswas becomes very unhappy with his wife Shama and her overbearing family. He is usually at odds with the Tulsis and his struggle for economic independence from the oppressive household drives the plot. The Tulsi family (and the big decaying house they live in) represents the traditional communal world; the way life is lived, not only among the Hindu immigrants of Trinidad but throughout Africa and Asia as well. Mr. Biswas is offered a place in it, a subordinate place to be sure, but a place that's guaranteed and from which advancement is possible. But Mr. Biswas rejects that. He is, without realizing it or thinking it through but through deep and indelible instinct, a modern man. He wants to BE, to exist as something in his own right, to build something he can call his own. That is something the Tulsis cannot deal with, and that is why their world—though that traditional world, like the old Tulsi house which is its synecdoche, is collapsing—conspires to drag him down. Nevertheless, despite his poor education, Mr. Biswas becomes a journalist, has four children with Shama, and attempts to build a house that he can call his own. He becomes obsessed with the idea of owning his own house and it becomes a symbol of his independence and value.

Naipaul, mentioning *A House for Mr. Biswas* says that it was “very much my father's book. It was written out of his journalism and stories, out of his knowledge he had got from the way of looking Mac Gowen had trained him in. It was written out of his writing” (FC 1984:XIII). The novel takes its subject matter from the excluded peoples who have been alienated from societies to which they apparently belong, and who are in search of an uniqueness.

Naipaul portrays the West Indians lives, the reality of offspring of indentured servants by presenting his familial experiences as a miniature sample of the larger truths about the general colonial predicament in Trinidad. In his book *Reading and Writing*, he says that he began to see what his material might be: “the city street from whose mixed life they had held aloof, and the country life before that, with the ways and manners of a remembered India” (Naipaul in Schmitt, 1998: 132).

Critics generally agree that Naipaul's finest work is *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The novel is both a minutely circumstantial account of an individual's life and an allegory of the East Indian's situation in Trinidad, or of the colonial predicament more generally. Mr. Biswas, the main character, is Naipaul's Third World “Everyman,” in search of his role in the world—more

specifically, a home he can call his own. This sense of "rootlessness" is a recurrent theme in Naipaul's work and stems from his unique background. Shyamol Gangopaddhay cannot be compared with Naipaul in terms of reputation in international arena of literature, international recognition and fame but if his *Kuberer bishoy ashoy* (1963) is read in parallel with Naipaul's *A house for Mr. Biswas* (1961) any reader will be surprised to find the similarities.

Hero of the *Kuberer Bishoy Ashoy* Kuber was also born in a night of cyclone which was thought as unlucky as Mr. Biswas. Naipaul seems to be in a psychological limbo, having been alienated from the culture of his people. Alienation and exile are the concepts which the writers of postcolonial literature mainly discuss and treat in their works.

This sense of not belonging to a significant country or culture results either in its rejection by the writer through criticism and satire, or by his physical or psychological withdrawals in the form of various kinds of alienation, as it has been the case with Naipaul at the very beginning of his adolescence and later in his matured life. Nevertheless, before the novel in question, it is of great importance to deliberate the concept of alienation.

V.S. Naipaul said in an article in *The New York Review of Books*, "Of all my books *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the one closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child. It also contains, I believe, some of my funniest writing. I began as a comic writer and still consider myself one. In middle age now, I have no higher literary ambition than to write a piece of comedy that might complement or match this early book. The book took three years to write. It felt like a career; and there was a short period, toward the end of the writing, when I do believe I knew all or much of the book by heart. The labour ended; the book began to recede. And I found that I was unwilling to reenter the world I had created, unwilling to expose myself again to the emotions that lay below the comedy. I became nervous of the book. I haven't read it since I passed the proofs in May 1961."

Mr. Biswas wanted to build his own house where he can live with full liberty and also with his own identity against outside collective force. His house will be called 'Mr. Biswas' house'.

A House for Mr Biswas, metaphorically, is a miniature world which symbolizes the colonial world. Mr. Biswas's personal battle with the stronghold of the Tulsi household (the symbol of the colonial world) is a quest for existential freedom and the struggle for personality. "Mr. Biswas is the unaccommodated man representing the outcast's symbolic quest for a place in the hostile universe" (1998: 126).

On the other side in Shyamol Gangopaddhay's novel *Kuberer Bishoy Ashoy* poor Kuber also dreams for a big house for him and his family among his all obstacles. He dreams for a house, a garden and pond in front of the house and fishes in the pond. Both Mr. Biswas and Kuber search for individual identity by dreaming for individual house for them. But both Naipaul and Shyamol draw the same ending in their novels. Both Mr. Biswas and Kuber die at the end of novels.

Naipaul brings out Biswas from the perspective of a big family like Tulsis and in the same way Shyamol brings out Kuber from Debendra Lal Sadhu Kha's family and makes an 'individual Kuber'. The feeling of deracination and displacement and lack of a national community in Trinidad are the fundamental themes in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, as they were for Naipaul personally. Both Mr. Biswas and Naipaul are in search of a home by which they will be able to find their identities.

Similarities are found in both novels in case of Hindu religious prejudice. Both novels' characters have accepted Hindu religious rituals and practices. In terms of plot structure both novels have some similarities. Stories are not described chronologically, it is described chapter wise keeping the hero in front of readers.

Even in language style some similarities are found. In the chapter 'Pastoral' of *A House for Mr. Biswas* a description is found, "Abruptly, he decided that the calf was lost for good; that the calf was anyway able to look after itself and would somehow make its way back to its mother in Dhari's yard. In the meantime, the best thing for him to do would be to hide until the calf was found, or perhaps forgotten. It was getting late and he decided that the best place for him to hide would be at home." (Book 1, Chapter 1, pg. 25)

In *Kuberer Bishoy Ashoy* a fine description of Kuber's mentality is found where it is told that Kuber feels very sad when he hears about price of land at water rate. Oh! If I would be a matured person earlier and had enough money then I could also buy a big land which I see now in the two sides of railway. Then I could make a big house with pond, garden etc.

In Mr. Biswas' dream for a house signifies his frustration, loneliness, individual identity in a vague colonial society. Shyamol Gangopaddhay's Kuber is also frustrated like Mr. Biswas. He also dreams for individual identity. Identity crisis is driving him severely.

If both the novels are read in parallel it seems that Mr. Biswas and Kuber are twin brothers and both Naipaul and Shyamol wrote these two novels sitting together – same kind of characters, plots, writing style etc. Shyamol Gangopaddhay was born in Barishal, Bangladesh in 1933 and later he lived in West Bengal, India. That's why he made his novel's background in West Bengal. On the other side Naipaul was born in Caribbean island Trinidad and his novel's background in Trinidad. Both of them were born in different continents but their novels have many similarities surprisingly. Actually in describing humane conditions all the writers think alike. Struggle of Biswas and Kuber touches readers' heart in the same way.

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