

## **Women in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas***

**Shamim Akhtar**

**A** *House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) is generally considered a magnum opus of V.S. Naipaul. The novel is about Mohun Biswas, a third generation diasporic individual of Indian origin in Trinidad. The novel begins with the birth of Mohun Biswas under circumstances that are declared inauspicious by a Hindu priest. From that moment of supposed inauspicious birth, life for Mohun Biswas was an epic battle for making his identity of which 'owning a house' remained a symbol throughout his adult life. Naipaul has mirrored his father Seepersad Naipaul in the life of Mohun Biswas. Naipaul, mentioning *A House for Mr. Biswas* in one of his interviews, says that it was "very much my father's book".

The main female characters in the novel and their respective relationship with the protagonist are Bipti (mother), Tara (aunt), Mrs. Tulsi (mother-in-law) and Shama (wife). The women characters of the novel have played significant, if not central role in deciding the course of Mohun Biswas's life and his ultimate fate.

Mr. Biswas's mother Bipti is portrayed as an illiterate rustic woman who apart from her weak intellectual faculties also suffers from general insensitivity. Though it sounds crass, one cannot help but compare her to a cow which is domesticated for a certain purpose and besides fulfilling that purpose without any conscious effort, it just stands ruminating, oblivious to happenings around it.

I have considered Bipti among the main women characters of the novel for the sole reason of her being Mr. Biswas's mother. As for her role in his life, it was inaction and not any of her actions which decided the course of Mr. Biswas's early life.

On demise of her husband Bipti, instead of being struck with profound grief, was more involved in informing relatives and calling them over for funeral rites. Furthermore, her callous attitude towards her children comes to fore when two of Mr. Biswas's elder brothers in their early teens were dispatched by Bipti to sugarcane plantations for work. Dehuti, Mr. Biswas's sister was handed over to his aunt Tara for she was soon to be of

marriageable age and seemed burdensome to Bipti. Mr. Biswas, being a little boy at that time, stayed back with her.

This voluntary fragmentation of family to avoid hardship validates my earlier observation about Bipti's nature. Though faced with tribulations, Bipti could at least have tried to keep her family together instead of conveniently disposing of her children and putting them to mercy of others. Bipti is at her callous best when Mr. Biswas after having been beaten and driven out from Pandit Jairam's house, came back to her dejected and hoping for motherly consolation but she thrashed him instead. Of all the women characters in the novel, Bipti is the weakest. She lays the foundation for Mr. Biswas's future riddled with struggle and uncertainty.

Next major character is Mr. Biswas's aunt, Tara. Tara, to a certain extent can be blamed for being responsible for Mr. Biswas's chaotic future. At the same time her actions and intentions show an inclination towards charity. It was Tara who took Dehuti under her roof and also allowed Bipti to live in the back terrace of her house with young Mr. Biswas. My earlier accusation of Tara being partially responsible for Mr. Biswas's uncertain future is valid because, despite being financially capable of sending Mr. Biswas to a regular English school, she decided to send him to an eccentric person called Pandit Jairam to learn the Hindu scriptures and become a pundit. On Mr. Biswas's failure to adjust with Pundit Jairam, Tara sent him to her wily brother, Bhandutt's rum shop to work as a helper. The rum shop episode merely added to woes of Mr. Biswas's life.

As suggested earlier, Tara's husband was a well-to-do person. She was quite capable of sending Mr. Biswas to a regular English school to be educated. This would certainly have ensured an entirely different course of events in Mr. Biswas's life.

Mrs. Tulsi is evidently the strongest woman character in the novel. She is the head of the Tulsi clan. If Tulsi family is looked at from a patriarchal point of view, it turns to consist of just Mrs. Tulsi and her two sons since all her daughters are married off to their respective husbands. But, the ground reality of the Tulsi clan is entirely different and also very interesting. Hanuman House, the abode of the Tulsi family, besides having Mrs. Tulsi and her sons, shelters a number of Tulsi daughters—married, widowed, their respective husbands and numerous children.

What Mr. Biswas could understand about the Hanuman House is that it functions like a miniature slave society. Tulsi's daughters are married

to poor and homeless men like Mr. Biswas. These men invariably lose their identity under the umbrella identity of the Tulsis. At the helm of the affairs is Mrs. Tulsi, taking advantage of her poor sons-in-law's dependence on the Hanuman House for employment and shelter and thereby keeping the Tulsi household alive and running. She is the dictatorial head of the family. Mrs. Tulsi's indirect method for subjugation is immediately discerned by Mr. Biswas and it fires his rebellion.

On the other hand, Mrs. Tulsi's attitude towards Mr. Biswas in varying lights of fact that she is his mother-in-law and also the head of Hanuman House appears confusing. Mrs. Tulsi's dislike for Mr. Biswas is quite clear when she comes across his many deliberate eccentricities. At the same time she makes sure that Mr. Biswas is promptly rescued after his various failed adventures towards making it big in life. The discord between Mrs. Tulsi and Mr. Biswas is explained by Maureen Warner-Lewis as a natural difference of opinion between the 'Traditional' and the 'Creole' which are represented here by Mrs. Tulsi and Mr. Biswas respectively :

Tulsidom, which might be defined as 'encapsulating an idea of India-in-the-Caribbean' has to come to terms with change which is reflected in the behaviour and attitude of the younger generations who do not speak Hindi and aspire to go abroad. (Warner - Lewis 97)

Finally one can say that Mrs. Tulsi is instrumental in keeping Biswas afloat through most of his adult life. This very benevolence of Mrs. Tulsi carries the germ of perpetual dependence and anonymity in its underbelly which Mr. Biswas could sense and went all out for breaking free.

Finally, we now focus on Shama, Biswas's wife. Shama belongs to a species of women that has a remarkable ability to reconcile and adapt to the existing circumstances, however bad they might be. In my opinion, Mr. Biswas could not have had a better life partner considering his financial status and impulsive behaviour throughout his life.

Mr. Biswas was constantly driven by the noble idea of being independent and having an identity of his own. This obsession with freedom also kept him on the wrong side of financial equation and at times mental balance as well. It was Shama's compromising nature that

allowed Mr. Biswas to stay on a long lease despite being responsible for his family. Shama's role is commendable for having given her husband a free reign during his attempts for kick-starting an independent life. The hardships she bore in 'The Chase' episode are testimony to the above fact. Towards the end of the novel when Mr. Biswas was duped into purchasing an ill-designed house, Shama, instead of complaining remarks, "This is just right for me. Something small and nice". (Naipaul 613)

Therefore, it can be said that apart from ownership of a house, the best thing that happened in Mr. Biswas's life is his marriage with Shama who stood by him in his every misadventure. Women in *A House for Mr. Biswas* have played both explicit and implicit roles in deciding the course of the protagonist's life. Among all, Bipti, despite being the weakest of characters has played a deciding role in the novel. Tara and Shama representative of grossly ignorant facet of feminine psyche. Mrs. Tulsi is a strong as well as enigmatic character in view of her dual image of being benevolent and autocratic at the same time.

#### Works Cited

- Naipaul, V.S. *A House For Mr. Biswas*. Picador, 2003.
- Warner-Lewis, M. *Cultural Confrontation, Disintegration and Syncretism in A House of Mr. Biswas*. R. Hammer (Ed.), *Critical Perspective on V. S. Naipaul*, Washington DC: Three Continent Press. 1977.