

# A House for Mr Biswas as a Comprehensive Analysis of Colonial Situation in the Trinidad

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**Abstract**—V.S. Nailal wrote "A House for Mr. Biswas" at the age of twenty-nine. The novel is called as 'magnificent' by Nadine Gordimer (The New York times). It addresses the colonial situation in Trinidad. Colonialism does not only involve the conquest of lands but also the labor power of its people. The novel highlights how the Tulsi family exploits the laborers who are their relatives. Colonization is always based on exploitation, and this paper will emphasize the oppression of the colonizers (the Tulsi family) and the protagonist's (Mr. Biswas) courage to oppose this system.

**Index Terms**—Colonialism, Exploitation, Trinidad, Resistance and Oppression.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The novel is set in the early 20th century in Trinidad. It provides an overview of the various cultures that constitute the island, ranging from Africans to Indians to Europeans. The novel depicts the colonial situation in Trinidad as a complex and multifaceted force that shapes society into two distinct groups: the colonizers (the Tulsi family) and the laborers (the colonized). The term 'colonialism' is derived from the latin term 'Colonia,' which means 'colony.' This indicates that colonizers first established their colonies and demonstrated their aftermaths. It always occurs for the purpose of acquiring wealth and natural resources.

The story revolves around the protagonist, Biswas, who is born into a family marginalized by the colonial forces. He is born with a sixth finger, which is considered a sign of a bad omen. This detail may hint at the atmosphere that is intoxicated by the colonizers, represented by the Tulsi family in the novel. The Tulsi family constitutes the ruling class, adhering strictly to traditional marriage customs, and no one is able to resist their authority. They marry off their daughters but do not allow them to accompany their husbands. They keep their sons-in-law in their houses

as slaves. The following passage from the text gives a good description;

"The daughters and their children swept, washed, cooked, and served in the store. The husbands, under Seth's supervision, worked on the Tulsi land and looked after Tulsi's animals. In return, they were provided with food, shelter, and a small amount of money." (A House for Mr Biswas 87-88)

Same is the case with our protagonist who gets married with one of the daughters of Tulsi family, Shama. He too gets the treatment of a slave. Being son-in-law he has no honour and respect and has to work for Tulsi family like a slave. In return to his work, he gets food, insults and shelter.

The following passage gives the description of Biswas' treatment as a colonized than son-in-law; Mr. Biswas is busy with work, and Seth arrives as a colonizer. "He wore muddy boots and a stained khaki topee; in the pocket of his sweat-soaked khaki shirt, he carried a black notebook and an ivory cigarette holder. He approached Mr Biswas and said in a tone of gruff authority, 'The lady wants to see you before you go.'" (A House for Mr Biswas 78). This passage provides a clear indication of the treatment of the colonizer towards the colonized. They regarded them as objects and manipulated them as they pleased.

The novel also reflects the economic exploitation of the native population by colonial powers. The native population is compelled to work and is provided only with the minimal amount necessary for survival. This is done solely for the benefit of the colonizers, ensuring that the natives remain able to work for them. For instance, Mr. Biswas works for the Tulsi family without receiving any wages; he is merely given food and shelter, along with a dose of insults. Ragu works in a sugar plantation, earning a meager wage.

Language is the means of communication, but the colonizers corrupt this as well. When two cultures intermingle, the language of the dominant class

prevails. The natives attempt to learn their language in hopes of elevating their status. The same is true for Mr. Biswas; he struggles to learn English at school. As he resides with his in-laws, Hanuman House is authoritative and oppressive, representing the colonizers, while Mr. Biswas is a victim of their oppression as a colonized individual.

So, Mr. Biswas becomes a symbol for all colonized individuals who face challenges in colonial situations. There is a continuous metaphor of 'house' throughout the novel that Biswas longs for. This represents the aspiration of all colonized people; they all desire their own private space where they can experience a moment of peace. According to Barry Argyle, "A house of his own becomes as much Mr. Biswas' (colonized people's) quest as it was for Odysseus when he returned from the Trojan war, or Satan's when cast out from heaven." (113).

Whenever colonization starts anywhere, the resistance against it begins at the same time. Naipaul's novel is magnificent as it portrays this concept. The following passage provides a good description of resistance:

"Late one afternoon, Shama came up with the food for Mr. Biswas and said, 'Uncle (Seth) wants to see you.' 'Uncle wants to see me? Man, go back and tell Uncle that if he wants to see me, he must come up here. [...], I am not at his beck and call, like everybody else in this house.'" (A House for Mr Biswas 97).

Mr. Biswas, being colonized, still begins to resist according to his strength. His resistance does not stop here; he challenges Mr Seth's authority when Mr Seth approaches him while he is busy with his work. Seth orders Biswas that before he leaves, the old lady wants to see him. Mr. Biswas' response is a condemned one: "He came down the ladder and washed his brushes, doing his soundless whistling while Seth stood over him." (A House for Mr Biswas 78). As a colonized individual, he should fear Seth's orders, but as a rebellious spirit, he whistles.

Braithwaite claims, "In 'A House for Mr. Biswas', we have at least one novel where the central character is clearly defined and is genuinely trying to get in rather than get out." (97). Furthermore, he differentiates himself from the Tulsi family by speaking Creole English, performing Hindu puja, and wearing crucifixes simultaneously. Through his continuous efforts, he ultimately succeeds in acquiring his own house. This represents hope for

all individuals who are trapped in colonial situations and face challenges without resistance.

They too should resist according to their strength. Towards the end of the novel, Biswas planted a laburnum tree in the courtyard, which grew rapidly and provided him shelter from the rays of the afternoon sun. In the same way, colonized people can create their own shelter from the harsh treatment of colonizers when they resist according to their strength.

## II. CONCLUSION

"A House for Mr Biswas" is a magnificent novel by V.S. Naipaul that portrays two sides of the colonial situation in Trinidad: how the colonized people suffer and feel suffocated in the colonial atmosphere. It is a toxic atmosphere where, despite their own labor, they receive only a little food and shelter. At the same time, Naipaul leaves a message for all colonized people to resist according to their strength. When they resist, there is hope for them in the form of the laburnum tree which will protect them from harsh rays of the Sun (colonisers).

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