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The Reading List of Mr. Biswas in V.S Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*: A Post-Colonial Exploration into the Indo-Trinidadian Cultural Crises

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Abstract:

V.S Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is structured in an interesting format where the protagonist recollects memories starting from his birth to his death. Through these memories, we get a scope to visualize the cultural and geographical shift of the Indian indentured labourers settling in Trinidad. As readers attempt to make sense of the narrative, the protagonist is seen providing examples of a few texts at different crossroads of his life. The paper will explore the unsaid implications of these texts on the protagonist's narration of his life struggles. The paper will further attempt to discuss how Naipaul's choice of the mentioned texts through the narrative of the protagonist throws light upon the Indo-Trinidadian cultural crises. Lastly, the paper will explore the condition in which the appropriation of the colonizer's culture is performed along with the preservation of one's own culture.

Keyword: V.S Naipaul, Indo-Trinidadian, cultural crises, immigration, post-colonial

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The book *A House for Mr. Biswas* by V.S Naipaul creates an extraordinary juxtaposition of memory recollected and narrated in every detail by the protagonist starting from events before his birth to the suffering which ends in death. The protagonist, Mohun Biswas gives a spatial imaginary to the historical contexts, cultural and geographical setting of the Indian labour immigrants settled in Trinidad. The series of experiences that formulates the transformation of the character is what makes the narrative unique and relatable to the audience out there. The life of Mohun Biswas is based on Naipaul's father's life and in one of his newspaper articles, *Writing "A House for Mr. Biswas"*, Naipaul reveals:

Not formally educated, a nibbler of books rather than a reader, my father worshiped writing and writers. He made the vocation of the writer seem the noblest in the world; and I decided to be that noble thing.

During this journey of life, Mr. Biswas, a semi-literate person, refers to different books in his narrative. My paper will explore the implications of these texts that accompany the protagonist in different facets of his life. It will further elucidate how the choice of books that are mentioned also throw light on the Indo- Trinidadian cultural crises of these people. The appropriation of the culture of the colonizers was continued simultaneously along with the conservation of fragments of one's own culture.

The birth of Mr. Biswas was considered to bring in bad luck for his family as he was born at midnight with some abnormalities. The Pundit was immediately consulted about the post-birth rituals and most importantly the task of naming the boy. He refers to the "holy book" that he always carries with him and fills up Biswas' grandmother with all kinds of weird instructions. These instructions vary from the way the boy should be brought in front of the father on the twenty first day to the ways in which his physical deformities can be interpreted. It is also suggested that the boy must be kept away from water. Naipaul here lays out the superstitions that people tend to believe in to create a humorous tone and this "holy book" seems to be the first piece of text that hints at the predestined nature of his struggles. Naipaul depicts the Pundit as the promoter of these rituals. When Biswas' grandmother bothers the Pundit with too many questions, the Pundit:

raised his right hand, bunched the fingers and, with his head

on one side, said slowly, "One has to interpret what the book says." (Naipaul 6)

When Mr. Biswas was taken out of school, he realized that he had forgotten to return the book *Standard Elocutionist* by Alexander Melville Bell which he had borrowed from the school's library. This book was being used by

him for preparing a poem for the event of the school inspection. This book incidentally also lands up in the bookshelf of Biswas' house at Sikkim Street years later, this being the house that he finally owns. This book becomes a symbol of the Westernized education that the children were receiving in the schools in Trinidad during the British colonial rule. To impress the school inspector, the students had to follow the official English norms during the elocutions which were conducted. Talking about such manuals and using Bell's *Standard Elocutionist* as an example, Joy Damousi in his book, *Colonial Voices: A Cultural History of English in Australia, 1840-1940*, states:

These manuals found currency throughout the British Empire during the nineteenth century. It was largely through studies of rhetoric that elocution was promoted and discussed...This was an effective means through which to uphold and appreciate British traditions. The definition of Englishness in the South African setting was also replicated through the work of such manuals. (Damousi 78)

Naipaul's emphasis on the fact that this book never left the protagonist's side also signifies how Mr. Biswas held on to the meager amount of Western education that he had received. That could also be the reason why his thought processes turned out to be different from the other orthodox Hindu Pundits who were living in poverty stricken Hindu communities in Trinidad back then. The skepticism that he acquired towards the way a lot of Pundits would interpret the verses of Hinduism according to their convenience is also in a way an application of this education. The principle he develops on the basis of this Western education, just like Bell's book, does not leave his side till his death.

Biswas' dissatisfaction with the Hindu Pundits and his appreciation of the Aryan missionaries is transparent in the section where he seems extremely inspired by the speeches of Pankaj Rai and where he receives a copy of the man's book:

After he had spoken Pankaj Rai distributed copies of his book, *Reform the Only Way*, and Mr. Biswas asked for his to be autographed. Pankaj Rai did more. He wrote Mr. Biswas's name as well, describing him as a "dear friend". Below this inscription Mr. Biswas wrote: "Presented to Mohun Biswas by his dear friend Pankaj Rai, BA LLB." (Naipaul 53)

Biswas's newfound beliefs lies in clash with those of his in laws and his inclination towards turning into an Aryan convert upsets them. Biswas provokes the religious sentiments of the household by trying to obtain the opinion of Hari, another son-in-law in the Tulsi household, regarding the Aryans but Hari turns a blind eye towards his provocations. The last straw was Biswas leaving pieces of these pamphlets in various corners of the house which makes the Seth angry and

leads to another set of arguments. Biswas tries to convince the people by emphasizing on the notion of Hinduism that the family tries to promote while they send their sons to Roman Catholic schools for their education. The reference to Pankaj Rai and the book *Reform the Only Way* becomes a symbol of the clash between the old orthodox culture and the emergence of the new beliefs and Mr. Biswas' resistance towards being trapped in such an orthodox family.

In another part of the narrative, before being married to Shama and still struggling with his efforts to find a proper work and earn enough, Biswas is seen reading novels of Hall Caine and Marie Corelli. Both of these writers were British Victorian novelists. They give him a visual of a land, vastly different from the one he was born and brought up in. Authors like Samuel Smiles gave him heroes he could relate to:

Samuel Smiles was as romantic and satisfying as any novelist, and Mr. Biswas saw himself in many Samuel Smiles heroes: he was young, he was poor, and he fancied he was struggling. But there always came a point when resemblance ceased. The heroes had rigid ambitions and lived in countries where ambitions could be pursued and had a meaning. (Naipaul 36)

The presence of these texts in the narrative creates a contrast with the reality that the life of Mr. Biswas depicts. By making his protagonist read books like these, Naipaul automatically emphasizes on the plight of a common man who has to survive a quite different struggle rather than the extraordinary flamboyant happy endings of these fictional characters. Biswas makes it clear for the readers that he is completely an ordinary man with ordinary aspirations. The books which are read by Mr. Biswas also confirms the time period which is being talked about by placing a simple reference to the chronology of literary authors.

In an environment where the protagonist struts and frets for something which will provide him with a sense of belonging, these texts in the long run of the narrative if viewed from a separate standpoint can be used to define this man and the problems of migration that he represents. In the instance of this homeless character that has lost all connections with the origin of his roots, the answers are to be found in these literary, religious, or revolutionary works that he comes across. The "holy book" that assisted his arrival into the world brings in an assurance of the existence of the culture that has migrated to this foreign land along with these people. The elocution manuals as well as the Victorian novels provide the tinge of the "English" culture that was creating an impact on the mass. On the other hand, the book carrying the tenets of the Aryan missionary hints towards the desire to appreciate the resistance towards the stringent and orthodox nature of the "old", paving a way for the "new". These turn out to be pieces that could give him momentary escapes or provide

a base for his doubts in his religion or culture and at the same time expose him to other cultures. The culture that is developed after the clash of the multiplicity of cultures that form the Indo- Trinidadian identity is seen to be warped into the emergence of a new form of belief systems.

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