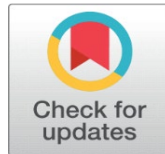


THE PRISON OF PROPERTY: THE HOUSE AS A METAPHOR FOR ENTRAPMENT IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

Abhisek Banerjee ¹

¹ Assistant Professor in English Raniganj Girls' College Dist- Paschim Burdwan, West Bengal, India



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ABSTRACT

Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* offers a multifaceted critique of the colonial experience, examining its impact on individuals and societies. The novel's central metaphor, the house, is a potent symbol of both personal aspiration and societal constraint. While Mr. Biswas's relentless pursuit of property ownership reflects his desire for autonomy and self-determination, the house ultimately becomes a prison, confining him to a life of limited possibilities. This paper explores how the house metaphor functions as a critique of colonial society's oppressive structures. It examines the ways in which Mr. Biswas's social class, race, and colonial status limit his agency and shape his experiences. The house, far from being merely a physical space, is a symbolic representation of these broader social and historical forces. By examining the complex interplay between individual agency and societal constraints, this analysis offers a deeper understanding of the novel's themes and meanings.

Keywords: House Metaphor, Colonial Experience, Entrapment, Independence, Societal Constraints, Self-Determination



1. INTRODUCTION

The Prison of Property: The House as a Metaphor for Entrapment in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* presents a nuanced exploration of the colonial experience and its lasting impact on individuals. While the novel is often interpreted as a simple tale of a man's quest for ownership, a closer examination reveals a more complex narrative. The metaphor of the house, while central to the plot, is not merely a symbol of personal identity but also a reflection of the broader social and political structures that constrain Mr. Biswas's life. The novel challenges the notion of the house as a sanctuary, suggesting that it can also be a prison. Mr. Biswas's relentless pursuit of property ownership becomes a metaphor for his desire to escape the limitations imposed by his social class, race, and colonial status. However, his ultimate acquisition of a house does not lead to the fulfilment and freedom he seeks. Instead, it highlights the illusory nature of such aspirations within a colonial society. While the novel affirms values like independence and individuality, a critical reading might question the extent to which these values can be realized within a colonial context. Mr. Biswas's struggle is not merely a personal one but a reflection of the systemic injustices and inequalities that shape his life. The novel invites us to consider the limitations of individual agency in the face of larger historical forces.

The novel begins with a stark portrayal of Mohan Biswas's birth, imbued with omens of misfortune and a sense of predestination. His physical anomalies and the midwife's dire prophecy serve as harbingers of the challenges he will face

throughout his life. However, it is crucial to consider these elements within the broader context of the novel. The inauspicious circumstances of Mohan's birth can be interpreted as a reflection of the limitations imposed on him by his social class, race, and colonial status. His physical anomalies are not merely individual quirks but rather symbolic representations of the marginalization and exclusion he experiences. The midwife's prophecy, while seemingly supernatural, can be seen as a metaphoric foreshadowing of the difficulties he will encounter in securing his place in the world. Furthermore, the incident of his father's drowning highlights the precariousness of life in a colonial society. The father's tragic demise, driven by a misplaced belief in his son's fate, underscores the devastating consequences of superstition and the fragility of human existence.

Naipaul's presents a complex and multifaceted portrait of Mohan Biswas's early life. While it suggests a series of unfortunate events, it is important to consider the underlying social and economic factors that contribute to his struggles. Mohan's limited education, obtained from Mr. Lal, reflects the educational disparities prevalent in colonial nations. His subsequent employment at Mr. Jayaram's house, where he commits a "heinous offense," highlights the precarious nature of his existence and the challenges he faces in maintaining a stable livelihood. The mention of Ajodha's rum shop and Bhandat's thievery underscores the pervasive corruption and exploitation that characterize colonial society. Mohan's marginalization within this environment further reinforces his vulnerability and the difficulties he encounters in asserting his agency. It is crucial to note that while his youth suggests a series of unfortunate events, Mohan's experiences are not merely a matter of bad luck. Rather, they are symptomatic of the systemic inequalities and injustices that shape his life.

Further, Naipaul explores a complex and nuanced exploration of Mohan Biswas's relationship with the Tulsi clan. While it suggests that this relationship is central to his struggle for selfhood, it is important to consider the broader social and cultural factors that shape his experiences. The Tulsi clan, with its matriarchal structure and emphasis on traditional values, represents a microcosm of the colonial society in which Biswas is embedded. The Hanuman House, while providing subsistence and shelter, also imposes a strict code of conduct that demands conformity and obedience. Bruce King's observation that the Hanuman House symbolizes "traditionalism, rigidity, cultural inflexibility, ritual duty, hierarchy and communal life" accurately captures the oppressive nature of this environment. Mohan's response to the Tulsi clan is multifaceted. On the one hand, he adopts a grotesque mask and plays the role of a comic rebel, challenging the authority of the clan members and asserting his individuality. His use of nicknames, such as "old hen" and "old cow," is a form of resistance and a way of subverting the power dynamics within the household.

However, it is important to note that Mohan's rebellion is ultimately limited. His ability to maintain his selfhood is compromised by his dependence on the Tulsi clan for economic security and social acceptance. The grotesque mask he adopts becomes a way of coping with the constraints imposed on him, rather than a means of achieving true liberation. Ultimately, Mohan's relationship with the Tulsi clan highlights the tension between individual desires and societal expectations. While he strives to assert his autonomy, he is ultimately constrained by the broader social and historical forces that shape his life.

The novel further continues to explore Mohan Biswas's complex relationship with society and his ongoing struggle for selfhood. His departure from the Hanuman House and subsequent return to Shama highlight the conflicting pressures he faces. Mohan's decision to wear pants made from a flour sack is a provocative act of defiance. It challenges societal norms and expectations, allowing him to express his individuality in a humorous and unconventional way. However, this act of rebellion also reveals his underlying vulnerability and his need for recognition. It also highlights the challenges Mohan faces in his attempts to establish himself as an independent individual. His failure as a village shop manager and his financial difficulties underscores the limitations imposed on him by his social class and economic circumstances. The phrase "Insure and burn," used by Seth to rescue Mohan from his debts, is a cynical commentary on the corrupt and exploitative nature of the society he inhabits. Mohan's attempts to escape through reading and writing are ultimately futile. While he finds solace in Samuel Miles and writes unfinished escape stories, these pursuits are ultimately limited by the constraints of his social and historical context. The negative escapes he embraces, such as his stay at Green Vale, offer temporary relief but do not provide a lasting solution to his problems. Mohan Biswas's later struggles reveal the enduring challenges he faces in asserting his identity and achieving autonomy. While he resists societal pressures and seeks to escape his limitations, he is ultimately constrained by the broader historical and social forces that shape his life.

The plot culminates in Mohan Biswas's breakdown at Green Vale. His inability to adjust to life in the Tulsi barracks and his failed attempt to build a house highlight the ongoing challenges he faces in asserting his independence and

achieving a sense of belonging. Mohan's struggle to build a house, despite his limited resources, is a symbolic representation of his desire for a stable and secure home. However, the unfinished state of the house and his subsequent move into it reveal the illusory nature of his aspirations. The feeling of loneliness and vague fears that afflict him underscore the psychological toll of his isolation and the uncertainty of his future. Mohan's breakdown can be interpreted as a manifestation of the broader social and historical forces that constrain his life. His mental health issues are not merely personal but rather a reflection of the systemic injustices and inequalities that shape his experiences. The burning of the house, while tragic, can also be seen as a symbolic release from the burdens of the past and the limitations of his aspirations. These incidents suggest that Mohan experiences a sense of relief despite the loss of his house. This paradoxical response can be interpreted as a recognition of the limitations of his individual agency and a realization that his happiness is not solely dependent on material possessions or personal achievements.

Naipaul's continues to explore Mohan Biswas's complex relationship with society and his ongoing struggle for selfhood. His departure from the Hanuman House and subsequent relocation to Port of Spain highlight his desire for independence and his resistance to the constraints imposed on him by the Tulsi clan. However, it also reveals the limitations of Mohan's agency. Despite his efforts to escape the oppressive environment of the Hanuman House, he finds himself once again dependent on his sister and her husband. This highlights the systemic inequalities and social structures that shape his life and limit his options. The shift in Mohan's attitude towards the Tulsi clan is a significant development. His growing detachment from the family reflects his increasing awareness of their dysfunctional dynamics and the limitations of their traditional values. The disintegration of the Tulsi clan, with Govind and Seth becoming detached from Tulsidom, parallels Mohan's own journey towards self-hood. It suggests a complex interplay between Mohan's personal growth and the decline of the Tulsi clan. While he can achieve a degree of independence, his progress is intertwined with the broader social and historical changes that are taking place.

The novel infers with a complex exploration of Mohan Biswas's later years. His move to Port of Spain and his subsequent employment as a journalist and community welfare officer represent significant steps towards his independence and self-realization. However, this phase in Mohan Biswas's life also highlights the ongoing challenges he faces. His failed attempt to build a house at Short Hills and his temporary residence at the Tulsi estate underscore the limitations imposed on him by his social and economic circumstances. The positive transformation in Mohan's relationship with Shama is a significant development. While it suggests that he is now more submissive to her wishes, it is important to consider the broader context of their relationship. The changes in their dynamic may be attributed to a variety of factors, including the evolution of their individual identities and the shifting power dynamics within their marriage. Ultimately, Mohan Biswas's life is a complex and multifaceted narrative. While he achieves a degree of independence and personal growth, he is also constrained by the broader social and historical forces that shape his existence. His story serves as a powerful critique of the colonial experience and the enduring legacies of inequality and injustice.

Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* concludes with a poignant exploration of Mohan Biswas's relationship with his newly acquired house. While it is described that the house is poorly constructed and bought with borrowed money, it is important to consider its symbolic significance. The repetition of the word "own" underscores the importance of the house in Mohan's life. It represents a tangible manifestation of his aspirations for independence and security. However, the house's imperfections and the fact that it is purchased on debt highlight the limitations of his agency and the challenges he faces in achieving his goals. Mohan's untimely death prevents him from fully enjoying the fruits of his labour. However, it suggests that his legacy lives on through his daughter Savi and the vegetation associated with her. This suggests that his efforts to create a better life for himself and his family have not been in vain. Ultimately, the house, while imperfect, represents a tangible symbol of Mohan's struggle for selfhood. It is a testament to his resilience and his determination to overcome the obstacles he faces. Even in death, his legacy endures, serving as a reminder of the importance of individual agency and the enduring human spirit.

The novel presents a complex and nuanced portrayal of the protagonist's character. While Mohan Biswas's acquisition of a house is often interpreted as a heroic act, it is important to consider the broader context of his life and the challenges he faces. While Biswas exhibits moments of courage and determination, he is also flawed and vulnerable. His cowardice and contemptible actions at times undermine his heroic image. However, the novel's triumph lies in Naipaul's ability to present a character who is both flawed and admirable. His "littleness" and "inner dignity" make him relatable and compelling. Biswas's struggle to maintain his identity in a rootless society is a central theme of the novel. His wavering between "identity and non-entity" reflects the challenges faced by many individuals in a rapidly changing and often impersonal world. Ultimately, Mohan Biswas's story is not simply a tale of heroism or failure. It is a nuanced

exploration of the human condition and the complexities of individual agency in the face of broader social and historical forces. While his life may seem ordinary and unremarkable, his struggles and triumphs resonate with readers on a universal level.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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