V. S. Naipaul’s A House for Mr. Biswas

Sangita T. Ghodake
PDEA’s B. G. College, Sangvi, Pune-27
The Caribbean

• A chain of islands in the Caribbean Sea
• European White Settlers
• Ex-indentured labourers- migrated from all over the world to work on the sugar plantations and tobacco crops
• Multi-racial as well as multi-cultural islands
• Multilingual (Creoles), multi-ethnic nations – Independent in 1960s.
Naipaul as the Caribbean

• Naipaul describes the history of the Caribbean aboriginal population in his *An Area of Darkness*:

• "The Caribbean has been described as Europe's other sea, the Mediterranean of the New World.... And if one considers this sea, which the tourist enlives in his fantastic uniform, as a wasteful consumer of men through more than three centuries - the aboriginal population of some millions wiped out; the insatiable plantations: 300,000 slaves taken to Surinam, which today has a Black population of 90,000; the interminable wars; 40,000 British soldiers dead between 1794 and 1796 alone, and another 40,000 discharged as unfit. It would seem that simply to have survived in the West Indies is to have triumphed." (Naipaul 1964:32)
About the Author (1932-...)

- The third generation immigrant Aryan Brahmin family that had emigrated from India to The West Indies
- High school studies from the West Indies and Higher studies in England on scholarship in 1950
- Settled down in England and got married to an English lady
- Career as a writer in 1954: novels, short stories, as well as travelogues
- An expatriate in London and is an uprooted Trinidadian
A Recipient of Awards

• The John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize winning work *The Mystic Masseur* (1957)
• *Miguel Street* (1959)- Somerset Maugham Award
• *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963) won him the Hawthornden Prize
• *The Mimic Men* (1963) - W. H. Smith Award
• Booker Prize Winning novel *In a Free State* (1971)
• In 1993 he won the first David Cohen British Literature Award that was a lifetime achievement award ever declared for a living British writer.
• His winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001 marks the epitome of his career.
Naipaul’s Trilogy on India

• *An Area of Darkness* (1964)

• *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (1972)

• *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977)
About the Novel

• Prologue + Two Parts + Epilogue (590 pages)
• Flashback: Mohun, the protagonist dies as a journalist at fourt-six on Sikkim street, Port of Spain.
• Pastoral: His birth trauma, his father’s death, family’s separation, his shifting to Pagotes.
Novel: Story of Naipaul’s Father

• "Most commentaries on *A House for Mr. Biswas* including Naipaul's own, acknowledge that the novel is a fictional version of the life of the author's father, Seepersad Naipaul.... In addition to this, it is also well documented that much of the novel is closely based upon events and circumstances of Naipaul's childhood." (Musafa 1995:63)
Main Portrayals

- Mohun Biswas: lifelong odyssey from birth to death.
- Raghu: Father, superstitious, dies in drowning
- Bipti: His mother, widow, marginalized Indian woman, tragic sufferer
- Shama: a daughter of a landlady, wife, low self esteem
- Pandit Jairam: teaches rites and rituals of Brahmins to Mohun
- Mrs. Tulsi- Mother-in-law and a landlady, leads joint family
- Anand: Son, clever, self-centred and careless about his duties towards his parents
- Savi: daughter, intelligent, responsible, shoulders responsibility of her parents
- Myna and Kamala: Younger daughters, school going girls
Setting/Locale/ Milieu

- Trinidad
- A Village near Trinidad
- Pagotes: Tara-his maternal aunt’s place
- Green Vale: A place near Hanuman House
- Shorthills: A village near port of Spain
- United Kingdom
Depiction of Culture

• Three Prominent Races

• Black Race: Young labourer Edger, Mrs. Tulsi’s maid- Miss Blackie, a black boy who tops exhibition exam.

• Coloureds: Naipaul’s family and Indian immigrants
Alienation and Expatriation

• The Caribbean's feelings as expatriates is aptly described by Mohit Ray in his essay:

• "Colonials believe that they have an identity only in relation to the metropolitan country, and thus they think of themselves as marginal and insignificant. The sickness that Naipaul seeks to diagnose in these colonial societies derives from colonialism and imperialism: slavery, the plantation system, the immigration of indentured workers, and treatment of the Caribbean and West Indies only as a resource to be exploited have created an unstable and shaky amalgam of peoples uncertain of their roots and doubtful of their identity. Their center of existence seems to be 'nowhere and everywhere' and hence they move on the periphery only uncertain of the means and ways to develop their societies." (Ray (ed.) 2002:26)
References


THANK YOU