



2. Effects of Western culture on immigrants as portrayed in A House for Mr. Biswas

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Abstract

The chief purpose behind writing this paper is to put forth the fact that anyone who once leaves his native country and settles in a foreign country, embraces the culture and ideas of that country in all respects. The character of Owad in V.S. Naipaul's novel A House for Mr. Biswas, belongs to a family of Indians whose ancestors migrated to Trinidad long ago. When he goes to England for medical studies, Owad adopts the British way of speaking English and consequently starts showing aversion to any accent of English that does not conform to the British standards. Owad dislikes the way the Indians speak their mother-tongue Hindi. He opines that the original Indians are a disgrace to the Indians settled in Trinidad and are not worthy to be friends. This is nothing but an example of slave mentality, a mentality that widens the gap between the native and non-native Indians. According to Owad, the Indians are not as intelligent as the Indians of Trinidad and were given degrees not on the basis of hard work or merit but simply out of charity. It is quite surprising that Owad calls the Indians arrogant, which is against the general perception. Owad feels no shame in saying that the Indians are perfidious in monetary matters and that they walked brazenly with English nurses on the streets of London and indulged in scandals. The food which the Indians prepare is horrible and in order to display their modernity, the Indians eat meat and consume alcohol. Thus, it can be seen in V.S. Naipaul's celebrated work A House for Mr. Biswas that one tends to forget his very roots after getting deeply influenced by the Western culture.

KEYWORDS- Foreign country, Trinidad, Slave-mentality, Perfidious



Introduction

Sir Vidiyadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (1932-2018) was a Nobel Award winning writer of fiction. Naipaul is known for vividly portraying issues such as identity crisis, alienation and struggle in his novels. His works are to an extent, a reflection of his own life which can be seen in novels like *A House for Mr. Biswas* [5] and *Miguel Street* [4]. The famous French essayist Marcel Proust is of the view that a book contains those elements which are not manifested by an author in his real life. Naipaul on the other hand, is of the view that novels should in some way or the other, display what we face in our actual life. Naipaul's life was a series of journeys between the old and new world. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the protagonist Mr. Biswas fights to have a house of his own which according to him is a symbol of success and self-esteem. The novel titled *Miguel Street*, presents a picture of slum life in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Here, Naipaul has presented the view that those people who do not relinquish an imaginary life ultimately become big losers. Naipaul won the Booker Prize in 1971 for the novel *In a Free State* and also the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001[6]. Apart from being a successful writer, Naipaul did express views which were quite controversial.

A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) is a famous novel penned by V.S. Naipaul that won him international fame. The story of the novel chiefly revolves around the character of Mohun Biswas who is a Hindu-Trinidadian and has to face a lot of problems in search of a descent house [1]. Mr. Biswas is born with an extra finger and hence, is called inauspicious by a Pundit. Because of his sixth-finger, the Pundit prophesizes that the newborn child will be a lecher and will consume his mother and father. It is also advised by the Pundit that the boy should be kept away from trees and water. One day, a young Mr. Biswas takes a calf for grazing near a stream. Since the child has not seen water in its natural form, he becomes curious and lets the calf run. Fearing punishment for this act, he hides in his own house. The family members of Mr. Biswas become frightened and start looking for him desperately. His father infers that Mr. Biswas has drowned in the stream and in attempt to save him, jumps into the water but himself drowns. This mishappening partially fulfills the prophesy made by the Pundit.

Following the death of his father, the disintegration of Mr. Biswas' family takes place. While his sister is sent to live with some rich relatives, Mr. Biswas, his two brothers and mother start



living with other relatives. But because of the violent behavior of his alcoholic brother Bhandat, Mohun Biswas decides to lead an independent life. He happens to meet a childhood friend of his who helps Mr. Biswas get into the job of sign-writing. One day, Mr. Biswas meets the daughter of one of his clients and falls in love with her. Soon their marriage takes place and Mr. Biswas becomes a member of the Tulsi household. But here also, Mr. Biswas faces trouble since he has to live on the conditions laid down by the family members of his wife [7]. Being unable to live with the Tulsi family, Mr. Biswas along with his wife Shama, sets out on a journey to get a house that Mr. Biswas can call his own [9]. Although he fails several times in building a house that he can assertively call his, Mr. Biswas does not lose confidence and finally succeeds in building a house that could guarantee him a high place in the society and make him get over the pain caused by rootlessness. Mr. Biswas successfully fathers four children, works day and night as a journalist for *The Sentinel* and leaves no stone unturned in making his family happy. The character of Mohun Biswas is based on V.S. Naipaul's father Seepersad Naipaul and the Tulsi family refers to the Capildeo family, an Indo-Trinidadian and Tobagonian family to which V.S. Naipaul himself belonged.

In the novel, Owad is the son of Mrs. Tulsi and the brother-in-law of Mr. Biswas [10]. He is called "the younger god" by Mr. Biswas. Once Mr. Biswas had a fight with a man named Govind who happened to be a distant relative of his over a trivial issue. When they literally came to blows, Owad started shouting "Kill him, uncle Govind" [5]. This shows how violent Owad could become at times. Owad is a person who is quite impulsive and does not think much before he speaks. He also has a habit of praising himself which becomes evident when he says he has defeated many highly educated men in public debate. Owad also boasts of having known many distinguished personalities like Bertrand Russell, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan and Joad. Owad also loved to sing old songs from Indian films and can be seen singing in one of the chapters of the book. It is interesting to note here that by this act of his, Owad wants to give the message that he has not been completely taken over by the British culture. Owad also loves to flatter everyone. He is of the view that progressiveness and open-mindedness should not be looked down upon and that conservative thinking and orthodox ideas must be removed completely. Owad feels nothing wrong in tying the knot with a British girl, something that was considered taboo in those days. He openly criticizes anything that does not meet his



expectations and boasts whatever great deeds he does in his daily life. Owad disliked the Indians who after coming to England became non-vegetarian, forgetting that they were strict vegetarian. Owad is a character who reflects what a 21st century Indian would feel after inculcating Western values. Hence, through the character of Owad, Naipaul wants to give the message that it is natural for anyone to disown his native ideas after having tasted the wine of Western culture [2]. One must not dissociate himself with his culture wherever he may go or settle because we are nothing without our culture and the goodness of our culture cannot be spread if we show utter disregard for it.

Owad's aversion for Indians

Owad is kind of person who considers material progress more important than anything else and speaks as the mouthpiece of Western education system. Owad goes to England for medical studies and during his college days, he becomes a Communist and at the same time develops a particular dislike for the Indians who come to England for various purposes. He feels no regret in saying that the original Indians are a disgrace to the Indians settled in Trinidad, that they are arrogant and uncouth. One of the most controversial comments made by him is that Indians are unintelligent and timid and get academic degrees that are worthless. Here, it becomes apparent that Owad is fiercely condemning the Indian education system for its loopholes and banality. He despises the way Indians cook food and boasts that only he could prepare true Indian food in England. Owad's anger on the drawbacks of the Indian culture is a product of his unwavering faith in the Western ideals that are based on materialism and external attraction. Owad makes fun of the Indians for pronouncing their mother-tongue Hindi in a crooked manner. He then goes on to say that Indians roam around with English nurses on the streets of England and are constantly involved in scandals. These statements show how much hatred does Owad have for his own countrymen. One should not openly boycott his compatriots just because of external vices. People like Owad tend to forget that we should support our motherland irrespective of the vices that tarnish her image. It is all because of the lack of moral values that people start hating their own roots once they obtain degrees from foreign educational institutions. Owad feels no shame in making fun of the way his countrymen speak English which is an example of arrogance and that is totally uncalled for. The first and foremost virtue that an educated person should possess is that he should be thankful to his motherland and should have



unshakable faith in his culture. He cannot achieve respect by disrespecting his own people and trying to show himself superior to them. Through the character of Owad, we can easily differentiate between Indian culture and the Western culture. It is very easy to disown anything that does not fulfill the standards set by him but that should not overshadow his character. If you are insulting your own culture, it means you are betraying yourself and tarnishing your personality. Owad does not seem to understand the fact that the act of denigrating one's own culture is tantamount to cutting the very branch on which he is sitting.

The only aim which people like Owad have in mind prior to going abroad for higher studies is to become financially successful in life. For them, material progress is above character building and values and life according to them revolves around merrymaking and glamour. Owad opines that the rituals practiced by the Indians are debased which portrays him as an extremely anti-conservative character. One of the reasons behind Owad's dislike for Indian rituals and culture is that he is a staunch Communist because Indian culture is based on theism and the very the idea of Communism is based on atheism. The family members of the Tulsi family are greatly influenced by the mannerisms of Owad. This is an example of a colonized mindset which sees nothing beyond the supremacy of English ideals. Owad feels pride in saying that he got a seat in the parliament and that he had defeated many a great-personalities in public debate. Owad is a great admirer of Russia and his love for the country can be seen in the following lines spoken by him in the novel:

“There is work for everyone and everyone must work. It is distinctly written in the Soviet constitution-Basdai , pass me that little book there-that he who does not work shall not eat” [5]. Owad also tells how advanced are the Russians in the field of agriculture when he says the following lines:

“No backache and bending down. In Russia, you know they plant rice?”

They shook their heads

“Shoot it from an aeroplane. Not shooting bullets. Shooting rice”

“From an aeroplane?” the rice-planting widow said.

“From an aeroplane. You could plant your field in a few seconds” [5].



Owad, despite being a haughty person, did not compromise with his profession. His keenness towards the well-being of patients and anger at the careless attitude of doctors can be seen in the following line spoken by him:

“These doctors stopped learning twenty years ago”.

“They don’t even bother to keep up with the journals” [5].

What readers can easily come to know from Owad’s character is the deep impact of colonialism. Since India was a colonized country and had undergone massive cultural changes, the Indian masses became overwhelmed with the education system of Britishers. As a result of this, many Indians started migrating to England for higher studies and eventually, settled there. Colonialism is the practice of getting full and even partial political control over weaker countries and also exploiting it economically. Naipaul has talked about colonialism in his work entitled “Guerillas” which is loosely based on the life of Michael de Freitas, a West Indian Black Muslim. We do come across a few examples of colonialism in *A House for Mr. Biswas* such as in the expression *Hanuman house stood like an alien fortress*, here, Hanuman house is the symbol of British imperial system. Mrs. Tulsi who is the mother-in-law of Mr. Biswas is called “*the old queen*” which is an allusion to Queen Victoria of England. The metaphor of the house is the basic structure that Mr. Biswas is unable to have in his own lifetime. He keeps changing houses in the novel, which shows his search for connection, his search for a way to not be alone-even though his loneliness never leaves him. Mr. Biswas’ intense, lifelong desire for a house of his own is more than a desire for a place where he can live [3]. It is a metaphor for the big wish a lot of people have for self-determination in a modern society that forces people to think as if their own lives are largely out of their control. A house in the novel is also a metaphor of one’s indomitable spirit to get something which he can call his own with full pride. One cannot claim his right over something that he has not earned through hard work or diligence, because nothing great has ever been done by merely sitting cross-legged. Mr. Biswas proves that the word impossible itself says I am possible.

Class status is one of the most important themes in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. For Mohun Biwas, a spacious house is a symbol of status and for Owad, marrying a British wife is a symbol of great prestige. V.S. Naipaul knew well how important is class status in the 20th century. As the



Britishers were a class-conscious people, hence wherever they went and ruled, they gave a lot of importance to class status. As a result of this, the colonized people too started pursuing the path of the White people by finding various ways to improve their social status. Owad speaks English in British accent and looks down upon anybody who is unable to speak in that accent. Mr. Biswas feels immense pleasure after buying a car which is another crucial symbol of status in the novel. Owad boasts of knowing famous people such as Radhakrishnan, Bertrand Russell and Joad which clearly indicates that Owad leaves no stone unturned in showing that he belongs to a class of highly educated people. Mr. Biswas has a desire to possess a house of his own which reflects independence from an imposed identity. The Tulsi House, where his parents-in-law live, symbolizes the identity of Tulsi family and Mr. Biswas, being the son-in-law, wants to live independently with his wife Shama which is quite natural for any married man but at the same time, can't be possible if he lives in the house of his in-laws. Independence is something very pious and is close to everybody's heart. The great freedom fighter Lokmanya Tilak gave the famous slogan: **"Freedom is my birthright. I must have it"**. This shows the pricelessness of independence. Mr. Biswas' constant struggle to have a house of his own shows his undying love for independence and self-respect. Owad thinks that by following traditional Hindu ideals he is putting at stake his freedom and hence, seeks independence from old Indian values by embracing British culture.

The readers come across a sense of belongingness in the novel when the pet dog of Anand (Mr. Biswas's son) is dead. In the character of Owad, the sense of belongingness becomes visible when he wholeheartedly takes care of Mrs. Tulsi when she falls ill. Mohun Biswas' parents are deeply attached to him and always tell him not to go near trees or river fearing a disaster. Mr. Biswas cares for a bright future of his children and therefore, works hard to get them admitted to a reputed school and later on, sends Anand to England for pursuing higher studies. Belongingness is something that arises out of deep love and attachment for anybody. The era in which the novel is written is marked by emotional attachment and people used to value human relations a lot during this time unlike the present century where everybody is busy fulfilling material desires and has no time to take care of human relations. Since Sir V.S. Naipaul's parents themselves immigrated to Trinidad and Tobago as labourers, he very well knew the pain of struggling in a foreign land as a worker. The protagonist of the novel Mohun



Biswas hails from a family of Indian immigrants. He feels the pain of placelessness and fights for his right in Trinidad. The family of Mohun Biswas also faces troubles related to accommodation. This is the exact portrayal of the Indian immigrants who moved to Caribbean islands as labourers and who were forced to suffer the ills of displacement apart from dispossession, alienation, dislocation. The character of Mohun Biswas also bears the pain of alienation and keeps changing houses in search of peace and pleasure but unfortunately, is unable to find it anywhere. The more Mr. Biswas tries to run away from the fear of displacement, the more he is consumed by problems such as alienation and loneliness.

As India was a victim of slavery for centuries, the people of India had developed a caged mindset. An example of slave mentality can be found in the novel when the members of the Tulsi family, who are basically Indians, become fascinated with the ideas of Owad who is an avid supporter of the British way of living. The Britishers took Indians as slaves to the Caribbean islands and made them work under harsh conditions but at the same time, provided them food and shelter. As time passed, the Britishers introduced various means of transport and built schools and hospitals in the colonized countries. A major impact of these technical advancements was that the colonized people developed a taste for modernity and hence, despite becoming free from the clutches of colonialism, they fell prey to intellectual slavery and that is why, people like Owad show an obsession with the British culture as well as system of education. V.S. Naipaul has vividly portrayed the migration of Indians as indentured labourers toiling day and night in the Caribbean islands. These immigrants were not at all comfortable in an alien land because of its newness and strangeness. It is but natural for anybody to feel unsafe in a land that is not originally his or hers. Naipaul has quite carefully portrayed in the novel the dilapidated conditions of the slum people belonging to the lowest strata of Trinidadian society and various kinds of day-to-day troubles that they have to face while also struggling hard to earn bread. Since Naipaul's ancestors migrated to Trinidad as labourers, he very well knew the hardships and pain of workers who had to work under harsh conditions in order to survive. Mohun Biswas had to go through a lot of problems in the village where he lived during his childhood and therefore, the issue of indentured labourers has been carefully examined and effectively presented by Naipaul in the novel.



In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the readers can easily come across the feeling of escape in the character of Mr. Biswas as long as he lives with the Tulsi family [8]. It is so because there, he cannot express his thoughts freely and after all, he becomes a victim of a kind of emotional oppression in the house of his in-laws and therefore, in order to escape that oppression, he wants to have a house of his own. In the character of Owad, the readers can find escapism from the orthodox and traditional mindset of the Indian society. While criticizing the Indian culture for its backwardness, Owad is trying to escape from his own roots and showing a deep desire for intellectual novelty. As the ancestors of Naipaul themselves had to face a lot of oppression and torture, Naipaul knew the pain of the oppressed and how does one feel after having escaped from the clutches of exploitation of any kind. Oppression in any form is a major challenge to the overall development of mankind and therefore, must be eradicated.

Owad as a man of conceit

Owad always considers himself superior to anybody who does not conform to his standards. This is certainly not the characteristic of a man who is genuinely educated because the more you show-off, the less you impress others. It should be kept in mind that a tree which is heavily laden with fruits tends to lower its branches so that the needy may be able to pluck its fruits easily. If you are highly educated then you should present your knowledge in such a way that may benefit others. The Western education system may be better than its Indian counterpart in material aspects but spiritually, it can never be at par with the Indian education system. It is a well-known fact that the Indian civilization is the mother of all civilizations and that many scientific theories actually originated from India. If one is not able to speak English in British accent it does not undermine his or her stature. There have been many great men who never got the opportunity to go to foreign universities and never spoke in British accent but even then, made unforgettable contributions in various fields, be it engineering, medicine, education or commerce. One's talent cannot be judged only on the basis of his accent because nobody is born perfect. Owad's criticism of the Indians for not being able to speak English in the British accent is totally absurd. The Western system of education fails miserably when it comes to character building and imparting moral education.

In Owad's character, the vices of the foreign education system dominate the benefits that one can receive from it. It should not be forgotten that every system of education is just like a coin



that has two sides, but it wholly depends on the student which side he likes. The main objective of any student who aspires to go to some university outside his own country should be to grasp only the good qualities and discard the bad ones. One should and must not compromise with his or her character while studying outside his country. A student should broaden his mind while studying abroad instead of narrowing it. He must do away with all kinds of demerits that may hinder his path and should learn to be humble and empathetic.

Hence, the superiority complex caused by the Western education becomes clearly visible in the character of Owad.

Conclusion

In the end, it can be said that anybody who goes abroad is indeed affected by the Western culture in some way or the other. Owad is a character who has been brainwashed by the demerits of the British culture. He underrates the Indians not on the basis of merit but on the basis of external characteristics such as accent and their way of cooking food. People like Owad ultimately face defeat because they are victims of pride and those who are haughty and lack morality soon lose friends and well-wishers. A wise person never gets swayed by superficial qualities but instead, looks for something deeper and more meaningful. It should be kept in mind that mere bookish knowledge can never guarantee overall development of one's personality and hence, special care must be given to moral education and virtues. We should not part with our original ideas and values wherever we go since it is directly connected to our self-esteem. Getting educated abroad should in no way mar our personality. Owad feels no shame in saying that Indians are disgrace to the English society but at the same time forgets that however smart one can be, it is ultimately his motherland that gives him true love and shelter. Without showing respect to his own culture, one cannot expect respect for himself.

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