

A house for mr. biswas by v.s.naipaul

Life



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Cultural Diversity or existence of different cultures plays an important role in the development of an individual's identity. But when one culture assumes superiority over the other one, then it results in a clash between the two cultures. This conflict can make a person alienated and indifferent from the native society and his roots. Jonathan h. Turner defines cultural conflict " as a conflict caused by differences in cultural values and beliefs that place people at odds with one-another." (Sociology. p. 87)

V. S. Naipaul's novel " A House for Mr. Biswas" deals with the protagonist Mr Mohun Biswas's search for identity in the multi-cultural society of Trinidad and the disintegration of the Tulsi family under the impact of westernization. The story however, in its larger perspective, is not just about a single individual but the story of an entire community and its struggle to emerge as a distinctive socio-cultural group, to grow as a sub-culture in the large Caribbean landscape. The novel is regarded as one of the best illustration of cultural diversity, conflict, assimilation and negotiation. It shows the dilution of Hinduism in the expatriate Indian community as a result of its contact with the surrounding creole society which imitates the Western life style, follows Christianity and speaks English.

Cultural diversity is one of the most dominant themes of the novel. The Tulsi family and Honuman House represent Hindu culture. Gradually, coming under western influences, the orthodoxy of the Tulsi family begins to crumble. As a result of the process of assimilation and the impact of the west-oriented culture in Trinidad, certain aspects of Hindu culture take new forms that share aspects of both the cultures which ultimately lead to cultural hybridity. Mrs. Tulsi is very keen to preserve the Hindu culture.

The daily puja or worship, and the various rituals prescribed by the religion are regularly performed in the house. For Mohun Biswas, the Tulsis represent a hollow cultural identity; - neither fully Creole, nor Indian, neither fully Hindu nor Christian. Under the influence of materialistic western culture the sacred Hindu religious practices gradually reduces to business and bargains. The westernized creole culture of Trinidadian society slowly weakens the traditional Hindu beliefs and customs. With the passing of time, the society moves towards the west and away from India leading to dilution of Hinduism.

The Hindu rites and rituals are still practiced but the meaning has gone out of them. " For every puja Mrs. Tulsi tried a different pundit, since no pundit could please her as well as Hari. And, no pundit pleasing her, her faith yielded. She sent Sushila to burn candles in the Roman Catholic church; she put a crucifix in her room; and she had Pundit Tulsi's grave cleaned for All Saints' Day." (p. 551). On the other hand, Mohun Biswas was given the offer by the Tulsis to become a Tulsi son-in-law, for his sheer good blood " I can just look at you and see that you come from good blood." (p. 96). This sort of religious ambiguity and disintegration is the result of the impact of west-oriented culture of multiracial Trinidad on the Tulsi family.

A House for Mr. Biswas also symbolizes cultural diversity in form of character's indecisive way of life. Prakash, Brother-in-law of Mr. Biswas, referred to as W. C. Tuttle is one of such characters who is depicted as a follower of two cultural ethos- eastern and western. In his life, Hindu religious practices are common, " In one photograph W. C. Tuttle, naked except for dhoti, sacred thread and caste-marks, head shown except for the top-knot,

sat crosslegged, fingers bunched delicately on his upturned soles, and meditated with closed eyes." (p. 486).

This description is true observation of Indian Hindu-Brahmin sensibility and daily performed activities. The following picture just next in Tuttle's room portrays him as an advocator of western culture; his followed conducts justifies him as a complete image of an English gentleman, " W. C. Tuttle stood in jacket, trousers, collar, tie, hat, one well-shod foot on the running-board of a motorcar, laughing, his gold tooth brilliantly revealed." (p. 487).

W. C. Tuttle's changed self makes him the practitioner of double culture as it is in context of Naipaul. It does not merely describe the fusion of two different cultural-ethos, but also focuses on Author's dilemma to tangle himself between the two diverse traditions. Following the two culture, later author reveals the caricature which unveiled his own truth when he calls this the " blending of East and West" (p. 487).

Additionally, the Tulsi household initially followed a food habit that was primarily Indian: Rice, Roti, Lentils, curried beans, bread, biscuits and the gradual shift in food habits is noticed in occasional indulgence to oyster, salmon and tinned food. Home-made bread had been the menu for breakfast along with fried tomatoes and dried pancakes. Christmas was incomplete without Suniti's cake made with a fraudulent local Cherry brandy and Chinta's ice-cream. Mrs Tulsi's privileged sons had prunes and milk for brain exercises which Shama repeated with Anand in Port of Spain. The curious mixture of cultures in every aspect of the life of the Indian settlers is highlighted upon throughout the novel.

Furthermore, despite having an established estate business, Tulsi sends her sons to the Roman Catholic college in Port of Spain for their education but she leaves her daughters uneducated. Mr Biswas and Shama also decide that Anand would go to college as "it would be cruel and foolish to give the boy nothing more than an elementary school education." (p. 512) Indian orthodox system for selecting spouses was later changed into freedom of ideas when the eldest son of family, Shekhar picks a presbyterian girl for marriage. Later, Tulsi agrees her most loving daughter, Shama's marriage conducted in a registry office in place of grand ritual ceremony as generally happen in Indian context. This change also signifies the inclination of displaced people towards modern tradition of West.

Similarly, Language is also seen in the novel as an important cultural signifier, chosen by the immigrants to assert their unique identity. The vocabulary of Mr Biswas and other characters in A House for Mr Biswas reflects marked influence of Indian religion, mythology and culture. Sometimes it is also used to the advantage of a secret language. At the same time the use of English is seen for show-off of superiority and as the language that of the colonials as noted below, "Ghany could follow their conversation.

He disliked the way Indian women had of using Hindi as a secret language in public places. " (p. 41) "You will be hearing from my solicitor," Mr. Biswas said. "And those two rakshas you have with you. They too." He disappeared again. The labourers, unaware of their identification with Hindu mythological forces of evil, unloaded. (p. 408) There are many other instances in the novel which reflect the impact of western tradition on the Hindu abounding Tulsi

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family. The influence of western tradition, life style and growing aspiration for new change defines it clearly as they turn themselves into westerner by involving all type of works and professions which generally avoided by diasporic people long back.