

## **The Daughters in A House for Mr. Biswas: As Vulnerable As the Protagonist**

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**Abstract:** *The general approach to A House for Mr. Biswas is to examine it as the story of Mr. Biswas who is 'trapped' by marrying into a family that is ever ready to destroy his individuality and render him merely to the state of labourers like his fellow brothers-in-law. He is always treated as someone intensely suffering from such postcolonial issues like 'homelessness', 'alienation', 'identity crisis' etc. Nonetheless, while redressing his sufferings, a very little thought is given to the daughters of Hanuman House. They are barely thought of as having any crucial issue to be dealt with whereas if examined closely they would also be discovered belonging almost to the same group as Mr. Biswas. Much like Mr. Biswas, the daughters also are an oppressed group, which much to our surprise, they themselves are scarcely aware of. However, the present essay endeavours to highlight the nature and treatment subjected to the daughters, and to show that in no way are they less oppressed than Mr. Biswas and that they also deserve a great deal of attention too.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural Hegemony, Double-consciousness, Double- oppression, Other,*

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### **I. Introduction**

The central focus of A House for Mr. Biswas has always been the protagonist, Mr Biswas alone. The focus generally is on such issues as 'rootlessness', 'quest for identity', 'a quest for freedom' 'a man of exile' and so many more. Whatever be the issue, it is always centred upon Mr. Biswas; his suffering and struggle against Tulsidam attains all appraisals. The preoccupation with the anguish and vulnerability of Mr. Biswas is so engrossing that one fails to discover that A House for Mr. Biswas is a 'crowded novel' (Ganjewar, 76) populated with some other characters who unfortunately lack a same kind of attention too. If one closely examines the presentation and treatment meted out to the daughters, they will certainly be discovered as a wretched and vulnerable group like Mr. Biswas. The only difference is that unlike Mr. Biswas, they themselves are unaware of their abject humiliating condition since they have internalized the oppressive Tulsi code so well that nothing seems unnatural to their sensitivity.

### **II. Discussion**

The general assumption is that Mr. Biswas rebels against Tulsidam and Tulsi code, which "crushes the individuality who comes into contact with the Tulsi clan or who comes under its influence." (Ganjewar, 81) Nevertheless, upon a re-reading of the text from this perspective, it comes out that not just Mr. Biswas, the 'outsider', but the daughters or rather the insiders of Hanuman House are also not allowed to have a distinctive individuality of their own. Like their husbands, they too, belong to the group of labourers along with the children. "The daughters and their children", Naipaul himself clarifies "swept and washed and cooked and served in the store.... In return they were given food, shelter and a little money." (98) "The daughters", in the words of D.N. Ganjewar, "had no real position in the Tulsi family. They were to live there as second class citizens whereas Mrs. Tulsi, Mr. Seth and the 'two gods', Mr. Shekhar and Owad, Mrs. Tulsi's sons were to live very comfortably with privilege and luxury." (99) In reality, the daughters are treated with sheer indifference and callousness. This attitude is quite evident when Seth introduces Shama to Mr. Biswas: "She is a good child. A little bit of reading and writing even.'.... 'Just a little bit. So much. Nothing to worry about. In two or three years she might even forget.'" (91)

To be able to read and write does not seem to be worth any praise to him. The emphasis on the word 'even' instantly strikes the reader. He is rather quite sure that whatever Shama has learnt will last but a few days. Like a Tulsi daughter, Shama also accepts this with quiet resignation. Although, at a later stage of the novel she proudly informs Mr. Biswas: 'I would like you to know that I used to come first in arithmetic.' (357) What she would never like him to know that only she did not get the chance to continue her schooling like her two brothers. Not only Shama, the other daughters also never aspire for anything; scarcely cherish any ambition. Naipaul tells us:

“[F]or Shama and her sisters and women like them, ambition, if the word could be used, was a series of negatives: not to be childless, not to be an undutiful daughter, sisters, wife, mother, widow.” (165)

Contrary to this, what they expect from life:

.... “To be taken through every stage, to fulfill every function, to have her share of the established emotions: joy at a birth or marriage, distress during illness and hardship, grief at a death. Life, to be full, had to be this established pattern of sensation.” (165)

Therefore, life is only an ‘established pattern of sensation’ much like a rulebook laid down by an authoritarian ruler; no one can dare to deviate from the pattern while the boys or rather the ‘two gods’, Shekhar and Owad have the license to act on their own accord. Being stern Hindus at home, they simultaneously can accept Christianity; can get married into the Christian community; can leave their own house by taking shelter into the in-laws. Nothing deters them from whatever they wish to do. Whereas it comes to the daughters, they were just coldly ‘disposed of’; (99) the orthodox aspect of caste of the groom, not any other prospect becomes the single most important criterion; it scarcely matters whether he is a crab-catcher or a coconut-seller so long if he is a Hindu Brahmin.

However, in spite of themselves, the daughters are not utterly devoid of any ambition: a spark of ambition still keeps flickering in their mind. Although they do not have the privilege to set some commendable goal to reach, they try to satisfy themselves by setting some trifling sort of target to achieve. It is out of such desire that Chinta wants to finish reading the Ramayana. Naipaul points out:

“Chinta ... continually sets herself new ambitions and at the moment wanted to be the first woman in the family to read the epic from beginning to end.” (307)

The daughters, despite being well aware of their predicament never complain anything. Forgetting all about themselves, they are preoccupied with the better prospect of the brothers. Therefore, on learning about a disappointment of the elder brother Shekhar over his desire of pursuing study in Cambridge, which he could not fulfill because of the alleged intervention of Seth, Shama, “clearly felt that an injustice had been done.”(369) The injustice that they are always exposed to scarcely matters to her. Such kind of sacrifice even startles Mr. Biswas also who –

.....“knew the Tulsis too well to be surprised that the sisters, who never questioned their own neglected education, cat-in-bag marriage and precarious position, should yet feel concerned that Shekhar, whose marriage was happy and whose business was flourishing, had not had all that he might.” (369)

Such a selfless concern compels our wonder. Here at this point, Shama and her sisters apparently seem to be unreal, devoid of any normal human feeling. They are, as it seems, like pre-programmed robots, impassioned and unemotional. However, keeping in mind the atmosphere the daughters were brought up, one would hardly need any explanation about their becoming such self-denial individuals. Since childhood they were deliberately taught to carry out the tasks assigned to them; they learnt only to be caring for the well-being of the Tulsi Empire. As a result, they are always intent on performing their duty with utmost sincerity. Thus, like the husbands, the daughters as well are inhumanly rendered merely as workers with nothing to claim as their own, not even the house they were born. The relationship between Mrs. Tulsi and the sons-in-law including Mr. Biswas is generally looked upon as one of master-workers. Prof. Gordon Rohlehr also comments:

“Hanuman House reveals itself not as a coherent reconstruction of the clan, but as a slave society, erected by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who need workers to help rebuild their tottering empire. They therefore exploit the homelessness and poverty of their fellow Hindus and reconstruct a mockery of the clan.” (Rohlehr, 87)

The social and financial status of the daughters naturally places them side by side with their husbands since both are homeless and oppressed. From this particular point of view, the daughters could well be regarded as doubly- oppressed. Still, the account of their predicament is scarcely taken into any consideration.

Although Mr. Biswas is in violent opposition to the Tulsis, surprisingly enough, he himself fails to do away the repulsive practice of self-denial from his own family. The hopes and expectations that he heaves on Anand, unconsciously become part of the lives of Savi, Myna and Kamla as well. Like their mother, Shama, they also learn to deem the success and failure of Anand as if their own. So, when after returning from his Exhibition Examination Anand declares gloomily that he has failed in the spelling paper, “[T]he gloom spread to Savi and Myna and Kamla.”(503) Much before this, when it was decided that if well provided Anand may win a scholarship and Mr. Biswas arranged a luxuriant expense for him, the only reaction that Savi could blurt out: “I am too glad ... that God didn’t give me a brain.”(378) The girls neither now nor in future, bear any grudge against the biased treatment of the parents. They are in reality used to show their pleasure “in possession and anticipation rather than fulfillment.” (223) In fact, everything perpetually becomes “a series of anticipation” (224) for the girls.

At Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas “was treated with indifference rather than hostility”(195). However, with much wonder we find the daughters being treated with the same kind of indifference though they do not put up any rebel against anybody. They themselves seem to be quite aware of this; but more than the helplessness, they are conscious of their own economic dependence, which brutally circumscribes the awareness. This becomes quite clear when Shama charges Mr. Biswas on his complaint against the quality of food served in the Tulsi household: ‘I always say...that you must complain only when you start providing your own food.’(135) Therefore, as it comes out, had Shama and her sisters had the economic independence they might not have been so easily dominated. But however dominated they are, a sharp instinct of self-respect is reflected sporadically if not regularly. It is out of such a sense of self-respect that Shama sternly try to teach Savi how to tie her shoelaces. On her failure to accomplish the task, Shama cries out: “[S]he must learn to tie her laces. Otherwise I will keep her at home and beat her until she can tie them.’(205) In fact, by trying to teach Savi, Shama only wants make her independent of all kinds of obligation that they are always subjected.

Shama’s harsh treatment to Savi reveals another important aspect of the affect of domination over the daughters of Hanuman House: the way she treats Savi at Hanuman House is utterly different from that one at the Chase. “At The Chase Shama had seldom beat Savi, and then it had been only a matter of a few slaps”(206) whereas at Hanuman House she turns completely into a ‘thorough Tulsi’ (99). Even Naipaul observes with astonishment: “what a difference there was... in the voice she used at Hanuman House!”(232) Such a complete makeover of Shama identifies her as a victim of ‘double-consciousness’ since she is acutely aware of her dual position - at the Chase and Hanuman House. Being well aware of both the conditions, she usurps the persona she needs. At the Chase she is the master of her own self while at Hanuman House she no more than a refugee with so many others like her. Therefore, in order to have a substantial foothold in the house she must subscribe to the demands of the house. Her sudden transformation into a Tulsi has been described by Naipaul as an act of ‘duplicity’ (232) which she has to recourse to. It is out of such duplicity that she is uses “standard talk at Hanuman House. At The Chase Shama had never spoken like that.”(205) Even, the act of flogging the children is also stimulated from the flogging that the daughters themselves received in their childhood from Mrs. Tulsi. They have internalized the Tulsi codes so intensely that giving corporal punishment seems normal to them. Therefore,

“...at Hanuman House the sisters still talked with pride of the floggings they had received from Mrs. Tulsi...And there was even some rivalry among the sisters as to who had been flogged worst of all.” (206)

The daughters hardly ever understand that what they have received from the mother is either a kind of coldness or stern punishment compared to the love and warmth bestowed on the ‘two gods.’

The corporal punishment that they received at the young age renders them almost benumbed to the humiliation that one undergoes while getting it; they have become so much used to it that they accept it as an emblem of honour. So when Chinta receives a terrible physical assault by her husband Govind, the “beatings gave Chinta a matriarchal dignity and, curiously, gained her a respect she never had before.” (488) Earlier on an occasion we get almost a same kind of response from Sushila, the widowed daughter who-

“...talked with pride of the beatings she had received from her shortlived husband. She regarded them as a necessary part of her training and often attributed the decay of Hindu society in Trinidad to the rise of the timorous, weak, non-beating class of husband.” (153)

Here one cannot miss the shrewd workings of ‘cultural hegemony’ at work. It is through such a deliberate act of hegemony that the Tulsi daughters justify the inhuman act of whipping forgetting all about self-respect and

honour. Shama's destroying the doll's house of Savi also is a result of the hegemony that teaches her and the rest to have a uniform attitude at Hanuman House; not to cherish any individual longing that could affect the well maintained atmosphere of the house. Mrs. Tulsi and Seth have so successfully ingrained this into the mind of the daughters that no one can act otherwise. Therefore, when Mr. Biswas, by presenting the doll's house to Savi tried to defy the Tulsi code of uniformity, everyone goes against him and Shama. Later on, Shama reports to Mr. Biswas:

“You don't know what I had to put up with. Talking night and day. Puss-puss here. Puss-puss there. Chinta dropping remarks all the time. Everybody beating their children the moment they start talking to Savi. Nobody wanting to talk to me. Everybody behaving as though I kill their father.’ She stopped, and cried. ‘So I had to satisfy them. I break up the dolly-house and everybody was satisfied.’ (235)

Eventually Shama, a helpless, poor mother is impelled to break up a present of her daughter only to satisfy the urge of the fellow Tulsi daughters who have unknowingly stood against any sort of individualism including their own.

Although the upbringing of the daughters has been done with absolute indifference, an inflated ego of the Tulsi was successfully injected into the deepest core of their being. Therefore, despite so much deprivation of life, they are pathetically found to be occupied with the overblown sense of pedigree viz. being a Tulsi. This exaggerated sense of Tulsi ego seems to be the one and only possession that they have inherited as legacy. Out of such an inflated feeling, Shama being-

“[U]nable to buy the best and, like all the Tulsi sisters, having only contempt for the second-rate in cloth and jewellery....bought nothing at all and made do with the gifts of cloth she received every Christmas from Mrs. Tulsi.”(365)

Some of the recent critics have tried to show that in the novel the women figures are the real source of power and authority; the matriarchal society wields the actual baton of power. Nevertheless, the plight of the Tulsi daughters raises a serious question mark on such over- simplified assumption: in reality, Tara and formidable Mrs. Tulsi are seen to be vested with actual power and authority. The physical appearance of Tara and Mrs. Tulsi comes closer though there still is a marked difference. “She (Mrs. Tulsi) was as laden as Tara with jewellery; she lacked Tara's sprightliness but was statelier.”(85) No one else of the Tulsi daughters do we find clad with such heavy ornaments. Miles away from authority the daughters always remain as the ‘Other.’ The sole concern of Mrs. Tulsi is always over the betterment of her two sons. Therefore, “[W]ith her two sons settled, she appeared to have lost interest in the family.”(383) She hardly ever seems to be worried about the well-being of her daughters and sons-in-law. But, however an ‘exceptional’ (153) figure Mrs. Tulsi turns out to be, eventually she herself falls in line with the daughters: as she exploits her daughters along with the sons-in law, she herself is exploited by her sons- Shekhar and Owad. Being well established, they unscrupulously leave Tulsi House forgetting all about the contribution and pain of the mother and sisters. When Shekhar leaves the house to stay in his in-laws no one, not even Mrs. Tulsi blames him; on the contrary, “[T]he sisters felt that Shekhar .... was under the influence of his wife, and the fault was wholly hers.” (385)

In the same way, Mr. Biswas also is betrayed by his son Ananad. Much like his mother-in-law, Mr. Biswas, ignoring the prospects of his daughters substantially expends on Anand who eventually turns the back on him when he needs it the most. On the other hand, in spite of being neglected, Savi unlike her mother conquers all obstacles and comes out as a winner. The victory of Savi could well be ascribed to the legacy that she has inherited from her mother, Shama. Amongst all the Tulsi daughters Shama is discovered to have had a contact outside with a pen friend from Northumberland which greatly surprises Mr. Biswas who always,

“yearned after the outside world... read novels that took him there; he never suspected that Shama, of all persons, had been in contact with this world.” (215)

Moreover, on his outing along with the family and Miss. Logie Mr. Biswas was taken aback by the knowledge of Shama. Naipaul explains:

“She was throwing off opinions about the new constitution, federation, India, the future of Hinduism, the education of women. Mr. Biswas listened to the flow with surprise and acute anxiety. He had never imagined that Shama was so well-informed...” (533)

Therefore, it could be said that contrary to the belief of Seth, Shama did not forget the insignificant learning she received at school; rather the spark of the learning encouraged her to be well-informed all the time.

### **III. Conclusion**

The tragedy of the daughters is that they are never let to realize their degrading situation. Had they been aware of their condition, they could feel one with Mr. Biswas. The postcolonial issues like 'exile', 'rootlessness', 'a quest for identity' could well be ascribed to them. They could also embark on 'a quest for freedom' much like Mr. Biswas. However, Savi's return to home and taking responsibilities serves to signify as a victory on the part of all the oppressed daughters of Tulsi clan. It also signifies a poetic justice: out beating the popular notion that Ananad will shoulder the family responsibilities, Savi takes up the position of the son whereas Anand like Shekhar and Owad unashamedly evade their responsibilities. By conferring the status of the son on Savi, Mr. Naipaul seems to counter-balance the utter neglect and indifference that the daughters have always suffered.

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