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Themes of rebellion and independence in A House for Mr. Biswas

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Abstract

The protagonist of *A House for Mr Biswas*. is a mediocre but complex person. He is a king of anti-hero, despite his strong self-respect and his refusal to surrender his independence at any stage of his career. There is much that is absurd and ridiculous about him. He is a lowborn picaro who, because of his physical limitations, is forced to live by his wits. Indeed, none of Mr. Biswas's individual acts is significant by itself. He is an unimportant man who in many ways is even petty, but the complete story of his life turns out to be greater than the sum of his parts.

Keywords: Rebellion, independence, identity, archetypal, talent

Gordon Roehlehr looks upon Mr. Biswas as an archetypal Everyman struggling tenaciously for identity and independence in a poverty-stricken colonial set-up, and says: "It is worth asking what is the social and universal significance of the rebellion of a mediocre, ridiculous man" (38). Mr. Biswas is certainly this: an anti-hero moving through dimension after dimension of nearly epic absurdity. He is forever trying to arrange his world, and ending up more deeply immersed in the absurd situation.

Like Oedipus, Mr. Biswas is fated to kill his father, but he fulfils the prophecy in the most ridiculous ways. His father is drowned in the village pond in the course of his attempt to rescue him while he is hiding under a bed at home. Later on, Mr. Biswas is to be the Scarlet Pimpernel for a local newspaper stunt, and is to read Samuel Smile's tracts on the dignity of labor and the virtues of being a self-made man. It is the nearest he comes to achieving a heroic status.

When he is born, it is predicted that he would grow up into a liar, a lecher and a spendthrift. Poverty prevents him from becoming a spendthrift; and he proves to be a liar only in a very narrow and limited sense. However, he cannot get away from his sense of his own littleness. Riding like a Beckett character on his bicycle, moving many times with his cumbersome furniture, aware of the bitter irony of his position as an investigator of deserving destitute when he himself is a deserving destitute, he is the absurd man. But he is also the rebellious man because he is

persistent in his desire to understand life and to make sense of his social environment. Naipaul's novel depicts the rebellion of a weak, mediocre man, a rebellion which originates from the man's strong desire for independence. It is this desire for independence, and the rebellion to which it leads, that make him a hero despite his absurdity and mediocrity.

Mr. Biswas has no special talent; he is incapable of any commendable enterprise or initiative; he hardly shows any business or commercial competence; he is no judge of human character; even his literary ability is strictly limited because as a writer of short stories, he can hardly go beyond the opening sentence. But what makes him heroic is his integrity as a human being; he wins over respect by his self-respect. His unflinching sense of humor, his capacity for bitter sarcasm, and his biting wit add to his stature.

Mr. Biswas, however, does not begin as a rebel. In fact, the rebel's role slowly grows upon him and is never his dominant attribute. First of all, he is merely aware of his situation as an orphan living with a penniless mother in the back trace of his aunt Tara's house at Pagotes and repeatedly thrown off by society as such. Out of this awareness grows a romantic dissatisfaction with his limitations. He reads Samuel Smile's tracts on the dignity of labor and the virtues of being a self-made man:

Mr. Biswas saw himself in many Samuel Smile's heroes: he was young, he was poor, and he fancied he was struggling. But there always came a point where the resemblance ceased. The heroes had rigid ambitions and lived in countries where ambitions could be pursued and had a meaning. He had no ambition, and in this hot land, apart from opening a shop or buying a motor bus, what could he do? (23)

Nevertheless, he takes up sign-painting to earn a living and expects the world to yield to its sweetness and romance to him. He defers all his pleasure in life until that day.

Ironically, however, his status as a Brahmin and his gift for sign-painting lands him in trouble. For while he is painting signs on the Hanuman House store of the Tulsis

in Arwacas that he is detected as passing a love-note to the Tulsi daughter Shama and allows himself to be bullied into marriage by her widowed mother, Mrs. Tulsi, and her uncle, Seth.

As an Indian in the Trinidad of the 1930's, Mrs. Biswas feels insecure and needs the support of the family or the clan. At no time in the book is he, or any of the Tulsis, able to come to any meaningful compromise with the Creole world though he absorbs some of its spirit in his love for piong mamaguy, repartee and caricature. When he marries into the Tulsi family, he is offered protection, the sort of job which he could get scarcely get anywhere else, given his limited talents and lack of drive. Yet he rebels and makes the Tulsi the target of his revolt, says Gordon Rohlehr.

To understand Mr. Biswas's rebellion, one must understand the social structure of Hanuman House. On the surface the Tulsis have affected an admirable reconstruction of the clan in a strange and sometimes hostile environment. It has its leaders, its scheme of prescribed duties, its own law and order, its religious ritual, and it tries to provide the individual with the sort of job for which his talents equip him. This is, at least, how it appears on the surface, and in a sense, Mr. Biswas's rebellion is inexplicable when one considers his prospects in colonial Trinidad. Because he has no alternative to life in Hanuman House, the rebellion suffers from a lack of direction, and he has to return to the protective warmth of Tulsidom, time and time again.

But on closer examination, 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 rebuild their tottering empire. They therefore, exploit the homelessness and poverty of their fellow-Hindus, and reconstruct the mockery of the clan which functions only because they have grasped the psychology of a slave system. Like the West Indies, Hanuman House is constructed of a vast number of disparate families, gratuitously brought together by the economic need of a "high-caste" minority. Men are necessary here only as husbands for the Tulsi daughters and labourers on the Tulsi estates. To accept Hanuman House is to acquiesce in one's slavery.

There is something archetypal in the organization of Hanuman House. Mrs. Tulsi is a powerful Mother-Figure, and she rules through an understanding of the psychology of slavery. She is constantly demanding to be loved and worshipped, and is very good at staging strategic illnesses in order to inspire feelings of guilt in those who have failed in their worship. She has instituted

an elaborate system of rules which make devotion easy for the would-be believer. Mr. Biswas, inveterate enemy of the ritual, assents. His deep skepticism preserves him from the necessity of paying the emotional blackmail which Mrs. Tulsi constantly demands. A bad slave, he cannot be brought to feel grateful for his conditions or sorry for the troubles he causes. On the night of his final revolt, he shouts: "I curse the day I stepped into your house." "You curse the day," Mrs. Tulsi retaliates, "coming to us with no more clothes than you could hang up on a nail." This wounds Mr. Biswas. He cannot reply at once. "I am giving you notice," he says at last (61). One notices that Mrs. Tulsi and her daughters only mention the fact that Mr. Biswas came to them. They never speak of their efforts to get him to join the system; of the original pressures which they applied to get him to marry Shama. It is important for the smooth running of the system that the impression be maintained that everyone joins Hanuman House of his own free will.

What Mrs. Tulsi has grasped is the fundamental idea that a slave system must be able to prove and contain all the apparent evidence of its own legitimacy. As Albert Memmi observes in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, "In order for the colonizer to be complete master, it is not enough for him to be so in actual fact, but he must believe in its legitimacy. In order for that legitimacy to be complete, it is not enough for the colonized to be a slave, he must also accept this role" (47). Hence Mrs. Tulsi, good colonizer as she is, justifies her exploitation with the explanation that she is really doing her subjects good. Her argument is the one which the ex-colonial peoples most bitterly resent, and also the one which gives them pause. Mr. Biswas "could not reply at once" partly because he suspects that part of what Mrs. Tulsi says is true, and he cannot afford to admit that any good at all can proceed from so iniquitous a system. "Virtues are imposed upon us by our impudent crimes, as T.S. Eliot's Gerontion puts it. It is the irony of the colonial process which paralyses Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, and humiliates Mr. Biswas. He knows at last that he has to forget all arguments of right and wrong, and leave the system once and for all: that too much energy has been lost in debate and in working out the paradox of the master-slave relationship.

Mrs. Tulsi is only one part of the power structure of Hanuman House. She can't rule alone. She needs Seth, who is as powerful a Father-Figure as she is a matriarch. Mrs. Tulsi divides power among the sisters and rules by checks and balances. By allowing her daughters the illusion of freedom and democratic rights, she practically controls their husbands. But she needs Seth, her

counterpart, to complete and fulfil the psychological requirements of slave-owner relationship. Not only a subtle manipulation of checks and balances, but sanction, discipline, power, obviously and ruthlessly wielded, are necessary. Seth is almost an allegorical representation of Power. It is amazing, on reflection, how little we are told of Seth. Time and again we hear of his big military boots, see him in his khaki uniform, note his big hands, and hear his voice. He is almost above the struggle. He controls it. But he can rule without Mrs. Tulsi no more than she can rule without him: for it is together that they fulfil the psychology of rulership.

Seth is aided in his job of preserving order by the husbands who accept their condition. The foremost of these is Govind who becomes policeman for his master. Seth uses Govind to win Mr. Biswas into accepting an estate job.

"You should give up that sign painting..."

"They are looking for good drivers on the estate..."

"Give up sign-painting? And my independence?" (42)

Independence is the ideal which Mr. Biswas seeks, and which he equates with identity. The irony is that he will soon be behaving exactly like Govind before Seth, and that he will eventually accept an estate job. But there is a difference between the weaknesses of the two men. Mr. Biswas continues to defy the system although circumstances force him to conform. Govind, on the other hand, beats up Mr. Biswas in order to achieve status in the eyes of the Tulsi world. It isn't that

Mr. Biswas does not deserve punishment, but it is the mean way in which the weakest character aligns himself with the forces of law and order and teaches others to conform. The children in Hanuman House are taught to ridicule the non-conformists in much the same way as the Creolized negro slaves were used to mock new arrivals from Africa into submission. It is worth noting, though, that Mr. Biswas wins the battle with Govind, for towards the end of the book Govind too is a rebel of sorts. He refuses to welcome Owad when the latter returns from England, he disturbs the house by his loud unmusical singing, and he comforts Mr. Biswas after his final encounter with Mrs. Tulsi.

Besides Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, there are the Tulsi sons, Owad and Shekhar. In them the hierarchy manifests its continuity, its indestructibility. Hierarchy is established, settled and perpetuated, and the brothers-in-law accept that rebellion is physically, morally and psychologically impossible. Religious ritual, presided over by the young sons (Mr. Biswas calls them "the little gods") or Hari, the symbolically constipated, negative and dying pundit who

is one of the Tulsi sons-in-law, helps to seal the system together. As in a slave society, the priest tightens the bonds between slave and master by inculcating a sense of moral obligation in the slave. The slave learns that his condition is divinely ordained and that rebellion is morally wrong.

Every feature of the Tulsi society works towards a general end of conformity. Any sign of individualism is punished in the children by severe beating. Much is made of this ritual beating in the book, and it is illuminating to see how in this respect Hanuman House conforms to classic slave society. Ralph Ellison shows how Southern negroes suppress impulses to individuality in order to adjust their children to the Southern milieu. The people thus produced are termed by Ellison "pre-individualistic" and they, in turn, perfect their elaborate defence mechanism. The society of Hanuman House is also pre-individualistic, and that is why Mr. Biswas's greatest crime is to have tried to be an individual. When he tries to make a sharp and complete break with Tulsidom, he goes mad. Trinidad laws do not permit the Tulsis to lynch, but they know how to commit symbolic murder. When Mr. Biswas, ignoring the pressures which the Tulsis bring to bear on the aspiring individual, gives his daughter a doll's house, he upsets the entire equilibrium of Hanuman House, and their rejoinder is to tear the doll's house apart.

The nature of Mr. Biswas's rebellion is determined by his character, which is saturated with the wit and irony of Trinidad speech. The Tulsis refer to him as "Creole"-which is the worst insult they know: "I hear they have made some Creole converts. Brothers for you, Mohun!" (53). Throughout the book Mr. Biswas rebels through the use of good, bad and sick humour, sarcasm, mama guy. But the Tulsis come to regard his rebellion into a joke, and accept him as a licensed buffoon, thereby neutralizing the effect of his wit. (His wife Shama calls him a "barking puppy dog".) Like the traditional negro comedian, Mr. Biswas is allowed to make those jokes which affirm his self-contempt and strengthen and justify the stereotype which his masters have created for him.

His is the rebellion of the small, the weak, the acculturated. But his quest is nonetheless worthwhile. At the start he tries to convert the rank and file of the Tulsis to his cause since he instinctively realizes that he isn't really at odds with them. He tries to convince people like Govind (whom he regards as a "a fellow sufferer", that his fight is really theirs, and his revolt the one they should be making themselves until individual struggles broadens into revolution; for Mr. Biswas is possessed by the idea that every man should enjoy what Dostoevsky's Labyadin

terms in *The Possessed* the minimal right—the right to have a cover over one's head. But the pre-individualistic Tulsis cannot recognize the value for which Mr. Biswas fights.

It is only when the Tulsis hierarchy begins to crumble that they rebel. Shekhar, the elder son, marries Dorothy, a Presbyterian Christian. Owad, the younger, is in England. Seth quarrels with Mrs. Tulsis, Hari, "the constipated holy pundit", dies. Autocracy has collapsed and so rebellion becomes possible. What follows is a general scrambling for wealth and power, the revolution of a rabble who have gained individuality without direction. The purity of motive and truth to instinct and necessity which marked Mr. Biswas's struggle against an apparently indestructible system makes his rebellion an affirmation of universal values, transforms it from being a sordid personal struggle to one undertaken on behalf of the group. Mr. Biswas doesn't know this, engaged as he is in the fight for a house; the Tulsis don't know it, engaged as they are in teaching their children to conform and mock at the rebel. It is not surprising, then, that with the return of Owad, the sisters willingly return to the old system, the old ritual, and the old death-in-life.

The crowning irony is that Mr. Biswas does gain his house, though it is irretrievably mortgaged to his uncle Ajodha. In order to escape bondage to his wife's family, he is forced to enslave himself to his own. The absurd situation is worked out to the end, which suggests no resolution of the problems posed by the book, but a further vista into futility and rebellion, concludes Gordon Rohlehr.

According to Robert Hamner, Mr. Biswas may be an archetypal "Everyman" but if so, he is a modernized version, for in his confrontation with the vicissitudes of life he expresses an acute awareness of the absurd. In each direction he turns he finds obstacles to his happiness, and he can discover no reasons for his predicament. Thus, he conforms to Camus' fundamental definition of the "absurd" which is neither a quality of the world, nor simply an idea born in man, but as a result of their being

situated together. The absurd man "feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd man is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world". After the novels of the 1950s and the 1960s, this type of literary figure is not new; it has been made familiar by the likes of Salinger, Bellow and Malamud.

Mr. Biswas partakes of this class and he also owes a great deal to the nineteenth-century school of social realists, whose leading characters, like Dickens's and Hardy's exemplify the contemporary society out of which they grow as they attempt to redeem it. Mr. Biswas, then, simultaneously embodies the alienated modern man and the sensitive though ineffectual reformer. His desperate bid for improvement is a self-centered one, but as Rohlehr points out, "The purity of motive and truth to instinct and necessity which marked Mr. Biswas's struggle against an apparently indestructible system make his rebellion an affirmation of universal values, transform it from being a sordid personal struggle to one undertaken on behalf of his group" (45). Perhaps he himself gives the best definition of his significance when, in answer to his son's question, "Who are you?", he replies, "I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know" (House 68). Mr. Biswas, then, is Everyman making heroically imaginative efforts to establish himself in an inimical world and asserting his right to fail in his own unique way.

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