

**ETHNIC INDIAN IDENTITY IN THE CARIBBEAN:  
A STUDY OF V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS***

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**CERTIFICATE**

Certified that the dissertation entitled "**ETHNIC INDIAN IDENTITY IN THE CARIBBEAN: A STUDY OF V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS***" submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** has not been previously submitted for any other degree to this or any other university and is my own work.

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We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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## CONTENTS

	<b>Page No.</b>
<i>Acknowledgement</i>	<i>i-ii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>iii-iv</i>
<b>CHAPTER I:</b> EAST INDIANS IN THE CARIBBEAN: AN OVERVIEW	  1-36
<b>CHAPTER II:</b> FATHER AND SON: FAMILY RELATIONS IN <i>A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS</i>	  37-67
<b>CHAPTER III:</b> "IDENTITY" QUEST IN <i>A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS</i>	  68-90
<b>CHAPTER IV:</b> "REBELLION" IN <i>A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS</i>	  91-111
<b>CHAPTER V:</b> CONCLUSION	 112-119
 <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	 120-133

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## PREFACE

At the outset it needs mentioning that the present study is a modest attempt to bring a social science and literary approach to literature, that is, to V.S. Naipaul's *A House For Mr. Biswas*. Here social science is safely wedded to literature, to make literature a true 'Human Science' and inter-disciplinary. 'Behind a work there is a writer and behind the writer there is a society'. For the readers of Naipaul this dissertation provides insights, evaluations, and information about Naipaul and his background that could only be obtained through time-consuming, hit-and-miss research among scattered periodicals and books.

Naipaul was born in Trinidad in 1932 to a family of East Indian descent. His ancestors migrated from India when Trinidad was a Crown colony. Trinidad's Indians represent a large minority community (over a third of the population) whose presence on the island resulted from the importation of indentured labourers, between 1845 and 1917, with a view to providing cheap and malleable labour force for the sugar plantations in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery. Greatly adhering to the traditions of their native land, the Indians remained largely distinct from the urban and Creolised Afro-Caribbean majority and both the groups tended to view other's culture as uncivilised. So being fearful from outside and inwardly having a desire to create an identity of their own, Indian indentured immigrants of that distant island established, so to say, a mini India there, which, in the gradual process opened its gates to syncretic forms. Chapter-I of this dissertation deals with these aspects keeping in mind the novel under study, *A House For Mr. Biswas*.

In his Nobel Award ceremony acceptance speech Naipaul alludes to *A House For Mr. Biswas* thus: "... then intuition led me to a large book about our family life". At the centre of this family saga is the figure of his father, Seepersad Naipaul, the Biswas of the Novel. So this novel is a collaborative creation between a son and his father's life and writings. This is not to say that the novel is a biography, that Mohun Biswas and Seepersad Naipaul are one and the same, but that the fictional creation emerges from the son's forging into art of the father's life

and writings and his transformation of their voices by filtering them through his own. The son inherits the father's dream of becoming a writer, and by becoming a writer he in turn creates a fiction of his father and his father's dreams. Chapter-II highlights Naipaul's relation with his father and his family, and his father's relation with his family, and the traumas and tribulations faced by Naipaul's father, and it also focuses on, how Naipaul, by recording his ancestry creates an identity, which has larger ramifications for the Indian diaspora.

Chapter-III, titled "Identity Quest" in *A House For Mr. Biswas* is basically a quest for land, root and belonging. Through Mr. Biswas Naipaul exhibits that real life is going on elsewhere, that disorder is something peculiar to societies like Trinidad and that England by contrast is a coherent place where everyone is born to a position and identity. Mr. Biswas in this novel prepares his son, Anand to leave Trinidad for England. But the irony is that owning a house in London, Naipaul sometimes feels disgusted with the material pursuits of this metropolis. So Naipaul's position is like that of Hamlet's - 'to be or not to be'.

Chapter-IV narrates the rebellion, trials and tribulations of a vulnerable man (Mr. Biswas) in his endeavour to achieve self-hood both as a writer on his own and a human who seeks a house of his own. He stands out as a metaphor for a large number of colonials who are confronted with the worst of an endemically repressive colonial dispensation, and who despite their vulnerability and weakness, lack of support or guidance, demonstrate a persistent will, and struggle hard to find a vocation with dignity and to live in a house of their own.

Chapter-V i.e., the Conclusion is in the form of a critical contemplation on the observations made in the preceding chapters and it's an answer to the questions raised at the beginning of the study. On the whole the dissertation is a drive towards identity quest in Naipaul's *magnum opus*, *A House For Mr. Biswas*. This dissertation has followed several texts of V.S. Naipaul's novels published by different publishers and the sources are properly mentioned in the footnotes as well as in the bibliography.



CHAPTER I

**EAST INDIANS IN THE  
CARIBBEAN: AN OVERVIEW**

I was the only one whose fathers  
were not chained in the long  
journey out  
whose fathers came and kept  
if not the kernel, then the shell  
of an ancient culture;  
who had felt the lash but not the  
hopelessness, the forced descent  
into oblivion  
nor that basement worse than death.<sup>1</sup>

This is being realised by an Indian while attending a Creole literary discussion. People of Indian origin, especially in Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam, numerically almost equal to the Creoles, interact with the Creole hierarchy in a wholly different manner. Long kept from power and prestige, the Indians resent exclusion, but at the same time reject many Creole values, especially those of non-whites. Caribbean experience has deprived them of much of their heritage, but they retain far more of it than the African slaves did. But the questions to be mentioned and discussed in this context are, what led the Indians to look “closed” in an “open land” and whether the Indians have succeeded in reality to germinate an identity from that “closeness” or, that “closeness” has been drowned, leaving only its footprints for its younger generations, to march towards a new end?

In answering the question, why V. S. Naipaul decided to live and write in England, on his acceptance speech on being awarded the First David Cohen British literature prize in 1993 for a ‘life time of achievement’, Naipaul said: “When I was writing in the mid 1950s, there was no other place where I could have set up as English language writer, and found encouragement. So as a writer I was separated, and sometimes deeply separated, from my background - if you take Trinidad as my ancestral background.”

The concluding sentence of the passage cited is significant as it provides a valuable clue to the persona of exile that Naipaul assumed at the outset of his writing career and this can be linked with his ancestry of indentured labour, his *brahminic* upbringing (which he tries to subvert but that surfaces time and again in

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<sup>1</sup> Ramdath Jagessar, “On Attending a Literary Discussion”, *Moko*, No.5 , 27 December, 1968, P.3.

his writings) and his colonial education in Trinidad and England, all of which combined to breed an exclusivity, an impelling desire to assert and retain one's individuality.

“Our own past was, like our idea of India, a dream,” says Naipaul in *Finding the Centre*. This is true not only of the descendants of indentured workers in Trinidad but most of those in Mauritius, Fiji and other former colonies where they had gone towards the end of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century to work on the plantations. Documentary evidence shows that overseas migration was very rare in pre-colonial India though within the country the mobility rate among Indian villages was fairly high. While this pattern of migration has been an ongoing process from the medieval times, nineteenth century overseas migration was an offshoot of colonialism. The migration from India, mainly as unskilled labourers to provide a stable and manageable labour force on plantations in Mauritius, the Caribbeans and Fiji, began in the 1830s. European imperialist expansion in the nineteenth century with its new industrial and commercial ventures, especially in plantations, created the initial milieu for large scale migration which generated expanding demands for labour. In most cases, the colonial governments and planters working in tandem did not consider it economically or politically correct to recruit the indigenous people. With the progressive prohibition of African slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century, India became the main alternative source of labour. India had a huge population, millions living close to destitution; most of the sub-continent was under British control, which facilitated negotiations with foreign governments; India's climate was not unlike that of the Caribbean, and most of her people were accustomed to agricultural work. This was the main ‘pull’ factor. The officers or labour recruiters or *arkathis* went to remote villages in the interiors of the country stricken by drought and famine (often artificially created, as the colonisers shipped out food grains from India to their own armies fighting somewhere) or during a season when those working as tenant farmers or agricultural labourers were unemployed. On the other end of the spectrum, the fragmentation of the Mughal empire and the administrative reorganisation that the British colonisers introduced were greatly responsible for impoverishment in eastern and southern India and this

induced many to leave the country despite the traditional aversion to crossing the seas or *kala pani*. This was the 'push' factor.

Migration to the West Indies was organised by the indenture system introduced in the nineteenth century but discontinued in 1917, when the Government of India placed an embargo on indentured emigration. Emigration to Guyana and Trinidad started in 1838 and 1845 respectively. Indenture was basically a contract by which the emigrant agreed to work for a given employer for a period of five years for a specified wage. At the end of five years, the emigrant was free to reindenture or to work elsewhere in the same colony; at the end of ten years he was entitled to a subsidised passage. The fulfillment of the contract was governed by an immigration ordinance enacted in the country of destination. Prospective emigrants were testified before a magistrate in India that they understood the terms of the contract. The only qualification required was physical fitness and experience of agricultural work. Initially almost all these recruits were male, later a quota of forty per cent females per each ship-load was imposed by the colonial government.

Between 1845 and 1917, with a short break in 1845-51, Indians arrived steadily each year, the great majority being channelled through Calcutta; perhaps ninety per cent of the immigrants came from the Ganges plains, United Provinces, Bihar, Orissa and Central Provinces; a minority came from Bengal, the North West Provinces, and South India via Madras. By 1869 a total of 37,440 Indians had arrived in Trinidad.<sup>2</sup> The free return passage after ten years in the colony, which was insisted by both the colonial office and the Government of India, made the Indians seem like transient labourers, not a permanent addition to the population, and the indentureship system, by which the new arrivals were contracted to the plantations for a five-year term of unfree labour, kept most of the Indians on the estates as resident indentured labourers, severely restricting their freedom of movement and their contacts with the wider society. Further their languages, physical appearances, religions and culture were so strikingly different that the Indians were regarded as an exotic group, marginal to the Trinidad society,

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<sup>2</sup> Bridget Brereton, *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad 1870- 1900* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), P.176.

insufficiently integrated to be considered a part of it. So, these adopted children of a foster mother and posthumous father, in the absence of any real kinship or family bonds, instituted a bond of brotherhood known as *Jahaji* or *Jahaji Bhai* (ship brotherhood) among individuals who had befriended each other during the long voyages. The *Jahajis* often got themselves assigned to the same plantation and the same barracks, regarded each other as real brothers, and treated each other's children as close kin. Marriage between the children of the *Jahaji Bhai*s was considered incestuous. In Naipaul's *Finding the Centre*, there is a mention of Bogart (a character in the mentioned work) whose ancestors from Punjab travelled with Naipaul's grandfather in the same ship and developed the *Jahaji Bhai* kinship.

Life in the colonies was very hard. The indentured immigrants lived an isolated and insulated life and any contact with the outside world was mediated by the plantation manager, the magistrate, the police and the immigration department. Desertion laws, limiting their freedom, made them little better than slaves. The manager or his deputy herded the emigrants together each morning, assigned tasks, judged performances, gave a little permission to report sick, and chastised others for feigning sickness and those found guilty of indiscipline were sent to the magistrate's courts to be punished for breach of ordinance. In the barracks, also known as 'coolie lines', both because the labourers lived in them and there were lines of thirty or forty rooms constructed back to back, each family was allotted a room with no place for cooking, no bathrooms or toilets. To quote from '*Tota's Tale*', a poem by Satendra Nandan, a Fijian Indian poet, critic and statesman now living in Australia:

An empty line of twenty-four rooms:  
Eight feet by twelve feet.  
Once it housed native workers  
Eight died: Others fled  
Who would live among the dead?  
Homeless I had come in search of paradise  
This house of hell was now all mine.  
(Nandan, *Lines Across Black Waters*, 11-12)

It was Mr. Biswas's experience in the barracks of Green Vale that triggered his desire to own a house. Another Fijian Indian writer Totaram Sanadhya, referred to those dark, monotonous and menacing lines/barracks as 'bhut len'( lines of

ghosts/devils) and titled his book of poems *Bhut len ki Katha* (The Story of Devil Lanes).

Thus an indentured labourer lured by the promises of a life more comfortable than what he had led in his village plus a reasonably high pay, was for all practical purposes a slave, imprisoned in his master's estate with considerable limits set upon freedom. Possibly a racial memory of this prompted Naipaul to write: "Growing up in Trinidad, I had never wanted to be employed. I had always wanted to be a free man. This was partly the effect of my peasant Indian background and the colonial agricultural society of Trinidad."<sup>3</sup> Here, Naipaul does not mention the unequal power relations in the plantations and the politics of the desire for independence on the part of the descendants of indentured immigrants. By essentialising this desire and presenting this as an act of pure will, people in the space of the plantation are erased and the experience becomes the part of the diasporan aesthetics. Struggle for space in barrack life was replicated in Hanuman House where no one got enough space except for Mrs. Tulsi the Matriarch, her two privileged sons Shekhar and Owad and her sister's husband Seth who managed her estate. Everything had to be shared—space, lives and values, there was no privacy, no exclusivity. That was why the doll's house was broken up by Shama, it had been bought only for Savi, not for all the children and such a thing could not be allowed within the domain of Hanuman House.

During this period of hardship religion was used as a means to organise and orient their lives. Organisation of *yagnas*, the sponsoring of *pujas* and *satsangs* were forms of religious activities which became more and more frequent. Festivals like *Diwali*, *Id* etc. were celebrated with great pomp and show and participation extended to Hindus as well as Muslims. In this ambience, Tulsi Das's *Ramcharitmanas* acquired a new significance as the indentured immigrants visualised themselves banished from their familiar surroundings like *Rama* and undergoing great hardship. Along with this, *bhajans*, *kirtans* and readings from the *Bhagvad Gita* was the part of the immigrant's socio-cultural life apart from giving them a spiritual sustenance.

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<sup>3</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A Turn in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989) p.261.

A germination of socialisation in the lives and styles of Indian immigrants was to be marked in the gradual process. In this connection, reference can be made to Paul Gilroy, who in his most famous book on diasporic history - *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, juxtaposes the metaphors of 'root' and 'route' in his study of diasporic literature. The 'root' metaphor reconstructs memorially a pristine, pure, uncontaminated homeland to which the first generation immigrant dreamt of returning. In *A House For Mr. Biswas*, one reads about pundit Tulsi's dream of returning to India, a dream that became meaningless after his death. In *Finding the Centre*, Naipaul talks about his grandfather who died on his way back to his native village near Gorakhpur. The 'route' metaphor suggests the journey and the historical interactions between masters and indentured immigrants little better than slaves, which have forever 'contaminated' the diasporic ethos and memory. Vijay Mishra in his *(B) Ordering Naipaul: Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics*, locates the 'route' metaphor in two geographical spaces: the ship and the plantation barracks. Of the first, Mishra says: "The ship... is the first of the cultural units in which social relations are resisted and renegotiated. For the old, exclusivist Indian diaspora, the ship produced a site in which caste purities were largely lost (after all the crossing of the dark ocean, the *kalapani*, signified the loss of caste) as well as a new form of socialisation that went by the name of *Jahaji-Bhai* (ship brotherhood). Social interactions during these long sea voyages created a process that led to the remaking of cultural and ethnic identities, to a critical self-reflexivity of the kind missing from the stratified and less mobile institutions of the homeland."

On the other end, to reduce the financial liability of the colonial government for return passages to India; and to settle the free Indians in orderly communities within easy distance of the sugar estates so as to provide the planters with a convenient source of non-resident but seasoned labourers during crop, the colonial government offered Indians land. In Trinidad, in 1869, Governor Gordon agreed to grant the request of twenty-five free Indians for grants of crown land in exchange for forfeiting their claim to a return passage to India. Between 1869 and

1880, a total of 2,643 adult male immigrants were settled on 19,055 acres of crown land under the commutation scheme.<sup>4</sup>

Once Gordon had opened up the crown land to small purchasers in 1869, the way was open for free Indians to become landowners in the normal way. Between 1885 and 1886, twenty-four per cent of all crown land sales were to Indians; from 1891 to 1895 it was thirty-four per cent. At least 37,256 acres of crown land were sold to Indians between 1885 and 1900; by the later date, at least 56,311 acres of crown land were in Indian ownership.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Indians rented land from landowners of their own ways or, abandoned plantation land might be offered for rent in small holdings and taken up by free Indians. This led to the formation of the establishment of small 'Indian villages' and the transformation of the Indians into peasant proprietors. This established Indian peasantry cultivated a variety of crops and vegetables, but probably their most important contribution to the island's economy was in the production of a local food supply. They took enthusiastically to rice-growing, especially in the swamp land of the Caroni Savannah and Oropouche Lagoon; by 1896, 6,000 acres were in padi rice, providing one-sixth of local consumption<sup>6</sup>. Cocoa became popular with Indian peasants and the Indians too entered cane-farming; by 1906, they outnumbered Creoles in this field. The establishment of an Indian peasantry provided solid economic foundations for the development of an Indian community with roots in colony and it gave the Indians in the new peasant settlements a degree of economic stability and independence, which would allow the development of autonomous social institutions. So, free from the constraints of the plantation discipline, the Indian villagers found it possible, and necessary to recreate some of the social institutions of village India.

This was the story of the early immigrant life. But in the gradual process, the novel, *A House For Mr. Biswas* stands as a chronicle to the socio-political changes that swept over Trinidad in the early years of the twentieth century, giving a new direction to the second and third generation immigrants who had no plans of

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<sup>4</sup> Brereton, n.2, P.181.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.181.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.181.



going back to India. Mr. Biswas with his aspirations of getting a job and a house on his own was something of an anomaly in this society where power equations were gradually changing with money and success being prioritised. People like Tara, Ajodha and Mrs. Tulsi emerged as decision makers. However, their importance dwindled as Trinidad established contacts with the West, wherein persons like Mrs. Logie became synonymous with power and authority. Even Mr. Biswas gained status, first as a media person and later as the community welfare officer. Mr. Biswas's contempt for Mrs. Tulsi's younger son Owad who tried to dominate the household can be read as a coloniser-colonised relationship in a newly independent society where neo-colonialism often replaced the old order. In keeping with these changes, Western education gained importance. While the English medium school in Trinidad with its scruffy looking teacher and students in ragged clothes, is a caricature of Western education as it was imparted in colonies for a specific purpose, it was clearly the ambition of every immigrant parent to try and send their children abroad for higher studies. Mr. Biswas had to make do with whatever rudimentary education he could avail of locally but he, on the other hand, educated all his children; Savi and Anand got scholarships to study abroad.

The indentured immigrant had little or no contact with the world outside his plantation. But, gradually one finds his world enlarging as he attempted to find an identity for himself in the opportunities available outside the plantation. It is noticed in Mr. Biswas's progress through life, his struggles to get away from farming or working under the Tulsis, his achievements and failures, as well as the aspirations that he passed on to his son, Anand. With each new house that Mr. Biswas moved to, his personal world gained a little more space. The house on Sikkim Street where Mr. Biswas spent the last few years of his life was different from the other houses described in the book. For one thing there was nothing about it that would remind the occupants of their indenture or Indian origin. The garden with its rose plants, anthurium lilies and bread fruit tree, indicates a desire to adapt to the new environs, borrowing from the west only to bring order in their lives ("from their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent").

Thus, the changes in their lives are both sweeping and subtle. From being mainly agricultural at the beginning of the novel, society evolved into a more

complex web. Priority changed in the course of the novel, values became money-based and slowly individuals came into their own, shedding their group-based identity. The society in which Mr. Biswas spent the last few years of his life, was definitely a forerunner to post-colonial society though its postcoloniality had yet to acquire a definite shape.

## **I. Institutional Patterns of the Indians in the Caribbean**

So with these treasures in stock, the present study may now proceed to make an analysis of the institutional patterns of the Indians in the Caribbean, their relationship with the Creoles and Negroes, which in a binding spectrum creates an identity for Indians. Here one may assume that the immigrants had no intention, consciously or otherwise, of changing their way of life, that they expected to continue to live in the new land in accordance with the institutions to which they were accustomed and it is, therefore, likely that they attempted to maintain in the new setting, the cultural patterns they had learnt at home, and presumably valued. On the other hand, a complete and comprehensive recreation of the culture of the homeland was impossible unless villages were transported in all likelihood. So the problem that needs examination then is the extent to which the emigrant succeeded in approximating to the norms and institutions of their home villages and this can be discussed by pointing out some of the traits of the Indian institutional patterns in the Caribbean. Basically confining itself to the category of those migrants who formed overseas Indian communities from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the present study discusses briefly the nature of 'Indian' institutional patterns among them, namely, caste, family, systems of social control, dietary habits and religion.

### **I. 1. Caste**

Most of the contributors to a volume edited by Barton M. Schwartz<sup>7</sup> arrive at a common platform that castes don't form important units, nor are inter-caste relations significant in the community structure of overseas Indians. Smith and Jaywardena write of the East Indian community in Guyana that it's economic, political, and juridical relations "are not structured on caste lines" and for Trinidad,

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<sup>7</sup> Barton Schwartz, ed., *Caste in Overseas Indian communities* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing, 1967)

Niehoff reports that “caste is functionally a matter of little concern in this community”. In order to make sense of the near-universal report on the disintegration of caste in overseas Indian communities, one has to bear in mind not only the origin and composition of the populations involved but also the referent or referents of the caste being used.<sup>8</sup> Agents first recruited hill-country peasants and agricultural castes but finally enlisted any one from *Brahmans* to untouchables and as many as fifty different caste affiliations were likely to appear on the manifest of a ship-load bound for the Caribbean. So caste proportions among Caribbean migrants are hard to estimate; widely separated areas and eras were involved, and many Indians altered their affiliation *en route* and the Creole stereotype that all Indian migrants were low caste was baseless; there were *Brahmans* on almost every ship, but though, those of high caste were a smaller minority than in India. *Brahmans* in the Caribbean comprised only two per cent (British Guyana) to five per cent (Surinam) compared with eleven per cent in the United Provinces of India; and *Brahmana* and *Kshatriya* together were only fifteen per cent to twenty per cent of the Caribbean Hindus. Low caste Hindus ranged from an estimated twenty three percent of the Hindu total in British Guiana and thirty three per cent in Surinam to forty per cent or fifty per cent in Trinidad. Most numerous and degraded among these were the *Chamaras*, traditionally leather workers. Untouchables were rare among the Calcutta emigrants, but, with *Sudra* castes, were a substantial proportion among those who shipped from Madras.<sup>9</sup>

West Indian estate conditions made caste structure difficult to maintain, however. Even those able to withstand the polluting effects traditionally attached to an ocean voyage found caste habits inconsistent with plantation life. Many recruited as agriculturists were in fact small proprietors unaccustomed to manual labour; others were skilled gardeners physically unable to cope with estate work. *Brahmans*, becoming impoverished, were bound to become common labourers. Field and factory work and enforced barrack residence were incompatible with rituals of caste distance in food preparation and labour requirements vitiated caste occupational roles. Estate-planters largely ignored caste hierarchy in allocating

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> David Lowenthal, *West Indian Societies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 147-148.

authority and sometimes even reversed ascribed rank; managers and overseers tended to regard low caste Hindus as better workers than the more assertive *Brahmans*. And the scarcity of women - only one migrant in three or four ways was female - made caste endogamy impossible from the start. Thus, Hindus were unable to maintain a functional distribution of caste skills on any one estate. To quote Naipaul:

“Our community, though seemingly self-contained, was imperfect. Sweepers we had quickly learned to do without. Others supplied the skills of carpenters, masons and cobblers. But we were also without weavers and dyers, workers in brass and makers of string – beds”.<sup>10</sup>

So traditional India's major unit of caste organisation, the *jati*, almost entirely disintegrated in the West Indies. Clarke opines:

“There is no caste organisation, no caste council, and no set of rules to regulate inter-caste relationships and obligations at either a personal or group level. Children are not initiated into caste, and castes do not discipline their members for breaking caste rules; indeed, there are no rules.”<sup>11</sup>

Unable to name their own *jati* were thirteen per cent of those queried in Trinidad, twenty-five per cent in Guyana, and most Hindus in rural Jamaica. Intra-caste marriages accounted for less than half of all Hindu unions in Trinidad, one fourth of those in Guyana.<sup>12</sup>

From the above it becomes apparent that ritual purity and occupational specialisation were dealt a mortal blow by the circumstances of immigration and initial settlement. Secondly, the immigrants came from many different localities in India and were unable to reconstruct the small-scale organisation on which caste group and sub-caste group behaviour had been based. Thirdly, because the hierarchical position and customs of the groups within named sub-caste or caste populations often differed from locality to locality in India, there was often no

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<sup>10</sup> V.S.Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964), p. 31-32

<sup>11</sup> Colin Clarke, “Caste among Hindus in a Town in Trinidad: San Fernando”, in Schwartz, ed., n.7, p. 165-99, ref. P. 168.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.172

agreement on single standard of behaviour or status in the new country. Lastly, there could be no agreement on who had the authority to control behaviour, since caste and sub-caste leaders and councils in India had been recognised only by those in the same locality. Thus caste disintegrated in the Caribbean.

Although the caste as a functioning endogamous unit is gone, *Varna* to some degree substitutes for *jati* corporate identity in the Caribbean. In India the main sociological significance of the *Varna* is that it presents an all-India framework for reference, so that men coming from different local hierarchies and different linguistic regions can measure each other's approximate rank. This function of the *Varna* fits well into the overseas situation. Coming to the Caribbean, *Varna* roughly corresponds with class but lack *jati* prescriptive and proscriptive power; they do not organise rituals and are only broadly indicative of occupation. So caste attribution endures as a mark of status, but it has acquired Creole-like flexibility. *Brahman* is a term of general respect, and there are Indians who like to 'clothe their leaders in traditional dignity, and refer to the late Dr. J. B. Singh (a British Guiana leader of the 1920s and 1930s) as an 'Indian prince' because of his *Kshatriya* origin, but these are understood to be 'symbolic statements', not literal descriptions.<sup>13</sup> In like manner, low caste names are common terms of insult and abuse - thus in Trinidad, "man, you're jackass and from the lowest 'nation' on earth, the "*Chamaras*", or in Guyana, "you dirty *Chamar* bitch". But this has no reference to the caste of the person abused, who may be ... of any caste, or, indeed, a Creole.<sup>14</sup>

Caste has, in short, dissolved as a functional form but survived as an aspect of prejudice, a matter of style, as ingredient of personality. 'In Trinidad caste had no meaning in our day to day life; the caste we occasionally played at was no more than an acknowledgement of latent qualities; the assurance it offered was such as might have been offered by a palmist or a reader of handwriting'. Yet when it was rumoured that Naipaul's distant relative had married a *chamar*, nonetheless, the

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<sup>13</sup> Raymond Smith and Chandra Jaywardana, "Caste and Social Status among the Indians of Guyana", in Schwartz, ed., n.7, p. 89.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Niehoff and Juanita Niehoff, *East Indians in the West Indies*, Milwaukee Public Museum, Publications in Anthropology, No. 6, 1960, p. 91

notion appalled him, and the thought still occurs whenever we meet and that initial sniffing for difference is now involuntary.<sup>15</sup>

So caste in Caribbean Indian community only reflects rather than governs a person's social status. In these situations status was derived from elements such as education, occupation, wealth, and political power, which have no necessary connection with caste in immigrant communities. Indeed this secular aspect of caste is even more notable when we take into account the 'caste associations'. Clarke in his study of Trinidad mentions a multi-caste association in Trinidad, whose main duty is to manage the local temple; and in Guyana and South Africa there are a number of local associations, which are not formed along caste lines. To say that these are not caste based is not to preclude some caste bias in so far as their leadership tends to be in the hands of its higher caste members, who at the same time belong to the upper classes. The combined status indicates that political leadership may be more a class than a caste matter, though using the 'bonus of esteem' which higher caste provides.

To conclude one may opine that the only manifestation of caste for Indians in the Caribbean is that it provides an idiom for differences of power and status (which are actually based on other things) between Indians, so can it also provide an idiom for such differences when they extend outside the community. For example, Crowley in one of his famous articles, "Plural and Differential Acculturation in Trinidad" in his study of acculturation process in the Caribbean, especially in Trinidad, observes that Indians "are using Indian culture and often mythical caste... as a club with which to beat contemptuous Creoles."

## **I. 2. Family**

Most Indians in the Caribbean consider the Patrilineal extended family as the ideal norm. Coming to India one finds that the joint family was and still is the ideal norm for Hindus. In India the joint families are highly correlated with commercial occupations. Among the agriculturists, the greater the land owned by a

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<sup>15</sup> Naipaul, *n. 10*, p. 36.

household, the greater are the chances of the household being a joint family. But after the recognition of individual rights in land in 1771, the disintegration of the joint family started on a large scale, as is evidenced by the fact of the increase in litigation over land owned by the family since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

As far as the overseas immigrants in the Caribbean are concerned, it is clear that they brought with them the ideal of the extended family, an ideal which achieved different degrees of success in the new environment. In Guyana the nuclear family is statistically the most frequent residential unit, even though the household head is of an age when he can form a more extended unit. Most households pass through a brief extended phase when the son brings his spouse home. After a few years, with the birth of the first or second child the couple establish their own residence. Close co-operation within the family may persist despite separate residences, especially if the son continues to depend wholly or partly on property conformed by the father. In general, extended family groupings are more stable and last longer, not in the plantations but in the rice growing villages, where the father's possession of land and the son's inability to find a satisfactory alternative source of income result in paternal dominance over an extended family unit. But even this arrangement does not last very long. The son gradually acquires his own property through partition of the patrimony or through wage labour. Two points become clear here: Firstly, the extended family is held to be desirable but not often practicable. Secondly, the fact that the nuclear family is the norm accepted by other ethnic groups in the society reinforces its significance as an alternative value for the Indians. The situation is basically similar in Trinidad and Surinam.

So this ideal patriarchal extended family faded gradually. The Caribbean estate life made this ideal economically and socially impracticable. Indians who left the plantations to become peasant farmers secured limited control over their children's families through land ownership, but this domination was of brief duration, except in Surinam and in parts of rural Trinidad. And where Indians remain tenants and wage earners, the nuclear household has generally supplanted

the extended family. Dying out along with the extended family is much of the traditional Indian dominance of husband over wife, father over Son. As scarce and hence valuable commodities, Indian women drove hard bargains from the start; today many of them go to work, keep their own money, and, except in the realm of sexual behaviour, resemble Creoles in their lack of subservience to men. Traditional marriage to a chosen groom may be terminated by separation and followed by a second union, formal or consensual, giving the woman more independence and power. Urban migration requires many Indian men to work far from home or renders them jobless, leaving women to shoulder responsibility for children and old people. Even in rural homes where fathers still rule, reverence for paternal authority is but a shadow of what it used to be.<sup>16</sup>

### I. 3. Clothing, Food and Language

Clothing, food and language display a common sequence of retention, gradual disappearance, then self-conscious revival in ethnic separatism. The elaborate *pagadi* headdresses, the ubiquitous long skirts and *orhnis*, *dhotis* and *shalwars*, gave way by the time of the Second World War to dress differentiated from Creole mainly by the vestigial head veils of East Indian Women and the ceremonial *dhotis* of some men. But imminent independence in India and rising ethnic tensions in the Caribbean impelled many East Indians to adopt imported *Saris* and other items of 'national' dress.

The decline and rejuvenation of Hindi follow the same pattern. Within a generation of their Caribbean arrival, indentured Indians, save those in Surinam, spoke English and had begun to forget their native Hindi, Tamil or Telugu. Although many rural Indians in Trinidad and Surinam continue to speak Hindi at home, almost all are bilingual in Creolese. National sentiment reanimated by Indian independence spurred prominent East Indians to advocate Hindi instructions in Schools, and Hindi has become an anti-Creole focus for urban Indians, even those whose ancestral tongue it was not.

Cuisine is the most ubiquitous and in some ways the most consequential Indian cultural survival and Indians throughout the Caribbean cling to traditional

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<sup>16</sup> Leo Davids, "The East Indian Family Overseas", *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 13, 1964, pp. 383-96.



dietary habits. The use of rice and edible oils, the preponderance of curry, and the indispensability of *masala* distinguish Indian meals, and foods such as *dahl*, *roti*, and *pawah* are virtually all that remain of Indian material culture in Jamaica. Women still grind spices and colour them with turmeric grown in their own gardens. Upland rice had long been grown by Creoles, but Indians were used to and preferred irrigated varieties. Indentured immigrants brought over wet rice, which became the staple crop among East Indian peasant farmers. Wet-rice cultivation today is distinctively Indian in Surinam and Guyana and is exclusively Indian in Trinidad, Jamaica, and the French Antilles, but as a food rice now belongs as much to the Creole as the Indian diet, even in territories devoid of Indians.

#### **I. 4. Social Control**

At the outset of this discussion it will be proper to demonstrate that in the old settled overseas Indian communities in the Caribbean one finds no particular agencies of social control because different countries have organised their social control agencies differently, keeping in mind, their geographical and demographic settings, and these agencies are different from the village and caste panchayats in rural India. But here an attempt has been made to trace out some of the common agencies of social control followed by these communities in different countries. A summary account of the ineffective panchayat organisation in the East Indian village of Boodram in Trinidad provided by Schwartz - based on his field work in 1961 and 1965<sup>17</sup> - will stand for the general situation regarding traditional procedures of social control in these communities.

There are five major agencies of social control in Boodram, each characterised by varying degrees of success. Two of these are associated with the Island wide socio-religious organisation, the Sanatan Dharma Mahasabha, and claim affinity with the organs of social control in India, the panchayats. Each of the two local Mahasabha groups claims to be the true representative of the larger organisation in Boodram. Because of this split, and the consequent division of the

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<sup>17</sup> R.K. Jain, *Indian Communities: Abroad Themes and Literature* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1993) p.21

village population, neither is very successful in the area of social control. They express a commitment to solve problems and conflicts that occur among Indians in Boodram, but neither group has been utilised by the villagers to any great extent. Not one dispute has been heard to be settled by the panchayats of the local Mahasabha groups.

The third organ of social control in Boodram is the village council and this group is deemed as the local representative of the Trinidad government, and is, in theory, directly responsible to the council of the country in which Boodram is located. Membership in the village council is open to all who are willing to participate and pay nominal dues, but the majority of villagers display little interest in the organisation, and the most active participants appear to be the younger males of the village. The leaders of the village council related that they had the power to arbitrate disputes, but have never done so. The stated purpose of their "power" is to keep minor disputes out of court.

The fourth method of social control in Boodram focusses upon the village *pundit*. For the most part, his attempts to maintain control within the village are limited to the settlement of disputes between two or more individuals or families. There are several limitations on the *pundit's* ability to handle such disputes. A *pundit* requested to act in an extralegal capacity usually recognises that: (a) his recommendations are not always accepted; (b) his decisions may not be treated as final; and (c) his suggestions are not always viewed as the best alternatives possible. In spite of these limitations, the *pundit's* continued participation in matters of this type constitutes a significant contribution to the maintenance of social control among Indians in Boodram. His major purpose is to keep situations of this kind out of the courts.

The final alternative in the area of social control, and the one most frequently and successfully used involves the police and the local courts. Most of these inhabitants in Boodram will use these constituted governmental agencies more readily than they will use those alternatives, which resemble traditional Indian methods of social control. However the courts render decisions which can

be enforced, where as the panchayat organisations lack the power for extended and continuous enforcement. The fact that most disputes covering a wide range of cases are referred to these agencies by the villagers, illustrates the intimate association the villagers have with the island-wide socio-political mechanisms. There is no territorial restriction involved, no group reprisal, and the individual does have the right to seek the intervention of higher legal and political authorities. All of these factors militate against the perpetuation of traditional methods of control found in rural India. As neither caste panchayat nor multi-caste village panchayats of the Indian variety exist in Boodram to enforce caste-organisation, caste-solidarity, whether vertical or horizontal, can't be expected in this setting.

### **I. 5. Religion**

If caste has lost most of its relevance in the Caribbean, this is by no means true of Indian religion. The Indians who migrated to such a far off land, religion was the means to organise and orient their lives. But the rigours of plantation life, the uncertainties of an alien environment and the competition from Christian missionaries changed the very complexion of religious activities among Indian immigrants. To take the case of the Caribbean countries, overseas Indians in these territories are divided among the world's three great beliefs - Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Among the Indians in Trinidad, the Hindus form sixty-five per cent of the population, the Muslims fifteen per cent and the Christians twenty per cent. Seventy per cent of the Indians in Guyana adhere to Hinduism, 18.3 per cent to Islam and about 10.6 per cent are the followers of Christianity. The Surinamese Indians comprise seventy six per cent Hindus, twenty per cent Muslims and four per cent Christians.<sup>18</sup> If one compares the religious classification of these Indians to that of the immigrants who first came to the Caribbean, it would be evident that there has been a decline in the percentage of Hindus and a comparable increase in the percentage of Christians. This phenomenon was especially relevant in the context of Guyana and Trinidad where in the year 1890 about eighty-five per cent of Indians were Hindus, fifteen per cent were Muslims and Christians accounted for only 0.1 per cent. Thus, the proportion of Muslims over the years has remained steady while Hindus have converted to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 23

Christianity.<sup>19</sup> One reason that could account for this is that the Monotheism of Islam, its organisation into *Jamaats*, its corporate acts of worship and its hostility towards Christianity gave its adherents a strong sense of identity, in contrast to Hinduism which was polytheistic, diffused and a household religion.<sup>20</sup>

At the beginning of the indenture period several Christian missions showed a great interest in converting the immigrants. The Canadian Presbyterian Church in Trinidad took upon themselves the task of proselytising the Indians. Attempts were made to indigenise the church for the Indians by adopting Hindi and *Bhojpuri* as the media for preaching and refining the singing of *bhajans* (devotional songs) and *Kirtans* (musical offerings to the deity).<sup>21</sup>

Despite some initial success the missions made little headway among the Indians in Guyana. By 1866 there was only one convert, the number going up only marginally in the later decades. The tenacity of Indians regarding their religion has been well stated by Bronkhurst: "Experience has taught me that it is almost impossible to make only impression for the good in the mind of adult coolies, they look upon the Christian missionaries with suspicion and merely as paid agents of the Government. Morally and spiritually they are as hard as stones and as cold as icicle. They say we have a religion as well as you and cannot forsake it for a new one".<sup>22</sup> Christian converts were ridiculed as "rice Christians" or "belly Christians", that is those who embraced the faith for economic benefits.

There is a direct relation between Hinduism and the caste system and caste is intrinsic in Hindu religious organisation. But the disappearance of caste boundaries implied the integration of a group with a common Hindu identity. The lower castes who had traditionally belonged to cults and sects with their own gods

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 23

<sup>20</sup> Colin Clarke, *East Indians in a West Indian Town: San Fernando, Trinidad, 1930-1970* (Boston and Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986), p. 99.

<sup>21</sup> R.K. Jain, "The East Indian Culture in a Caribbean Context", *India International Centre Quarterly*, 13(2), 1986, pp. 160.

<sup>22</sup> Chandra Jayawardena, "Religious Belief and Social Change: Aspects of the Development of Hinduism in British Guyana", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 8 (2), 1966, pp. 211-240.

and rites abandoned their distinctive practices, gave up animal sacrifice and discarded the entire gamut of spirit possession and demon invocations to come under the 'banner of the higher class cult' of the Sanatan Dharma.<sup>23</sup> Thus a process of Sanskritisation was in progress in the Caribbean which resulted in a religious universalisation. The orthodox Sanatan Dharma came to dominate the entire religious sphere and became the basis of religious unity.

Along with Sanskritisation, the religion of the Caribbean overseas Indians was also marked by a process of syncretism. This process of syncretism or synthesis operated at two levels between the north and the South Indians and between the Hindus and the Creoles.

At the first level one notices a north-south combine in Hinduism. The pressure from modernist elements made the South Indians abandon goat and fowl sacrifices and give up the observance of various superstitions. Jaywardena reports that in Blairmont, Guyana, out of five South Indian families only one practised 'Madras' rites, while in Port Mourant less than half observed 'Madras' rituals. The general trend was to adopt the predominant northern rituals and join the organisation of Sanatan Dhrama.

Syncretism at the second level occurred between the pantheon of Hindu gods and Catholic saints. Hindus frequently equated Christ to *Krishna* and *Hanuman* was seen at par with St. Michael, the warrior and Ogun, the Shango god of war. The most outstanding examples of syncretism in San Fernando, Trinidad, is Siparu Mai. The black Madonna, La Divine Pastora of the Catholic church of Siparia, located about twenty kilometres south of San Fernando, was worshipped by Creoles and Venezuelans as well as by Hindus, who identified her with the Hindu goddess Kali. Further, in the Hindu *Puja* ceremonies, offerings of *ghee* (clarified butter) were made from a half pint rum bottle, which had come to replace the traditional brass '*lotah*'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. pp. 227-28

<sup>24</sup> Clarke, n.20, p. 110-111

The rapprochement between Hinduism and Christianity and an attempt at standardisation was further noticed in the naming of the Hindu place of worship as "Church" and the publishing of booklets by Sanatan Dharma Mahsabha. The ceremony whereby a special relationship was created between the believer and his spiritual mentor (guru) was referred to as "Christening".<sup>25</sup> The Christian pattern of sitting in congregations on wooden benches, the notion of a pulpit, a *pundit* almost like a parish priest, God fatherhood and a Sunday Service in Hindu temples" were the visible marks of Christianisation of Hinduism.<sup>26</sup>

The interest in establishing a set of correspondences with Christianity might also be seen as an attempt to make Hinduism understandable and acceptable to the religion of the wider society, as well as to accord Hinduism a status comparable to Christianity which was the dominant and the more prestigious religion there.

The role of the Indian priest was extremely important in giving the Indians a psychological protection in a society basically hostile to them racially, socially, culturally and economically. The *pundits* would be the face of social and cultural resistance and they would propagate the traditional Indian values.<sup>27</sup> They warned the people against conversion to Christianity and did their utmost to counteract proselytisation by the Christian missionaries. In Guyana they performed ceremonies for all castes and accepted food and water from the lowest of castes. Like their Christian rivals, they treated the local Hindu community as a "parish" i.e., they visited homes of the sick, gave spiritual advice, etc.

One must also take note of certain reformist movements of which the Arya Samaj movement founded in India in 1875 by Swami Dayanad Saraswati is the most important one. The first Arya Samaj missionary to Guyana, Bhai Permanand, arrived in 1910 and was followed by others in 1929 and 1933. In Surinam from

<sup>25</sup> Jaywardena, n.22.,PP.232.

<sup>26</sup> Jain, n.21,PP.160.

<sup>27</sup> Kelvin Singh, "East Indians and the Larger Society", in J.G. La Guerre (ed.), *Calcutta to Caroni* (Trinidad: University of the West Indies, 1974), p. 49-50.



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1912 the Arya Samaj movement started its missionary activities and made rapid headway among people in the period between 1920 and 1930.<sup>28</sup> This movement advocated a return to the pristine period of the Vedas and condemned the caste system, the *purdah*, widow burning, child marriage and the idol worship of orthodox Hinduism. The rise of this movement in the Caribbean society should be seen partly as a rejection of the unjust hegemony of Brahmins over the Hindu *dharma*. It aimed at replying to the challenges of Christianity which was penetrating into the ancient Hindu culture.

In Guyana, Trinidad and Surinam, the Arya Samaj rallied Indian pride in their traditional culture by a reinterpretation of history. Not only did it bring about cultural renaissance but it also strengthened ethnic self-assurance among the Hindus. The Arya Samaj had a significant success among Indian expatriates, with a following of sixteen per cent in Surinam and around seven per cent in Guyana.

The Ahmadiya movement also made its impact among the Muslims of Trinidad and Surinam in the 1930s. It resulted in reappraisal by the Muslims of their own religion and culture.

To counter the rise of the Arya Samaj, Brahminism had to have a better organisation than the mutually exclusive network of priests. Thus the Sanatani formations, the religious organisation of the Hindus in Surinam and Sanatan Dharma Mahasabha received a renewed impetus in Trinidad. As has been pointed out, this process can partly be explained in terms of the Brahmin supremacy, i.e. the high status and power that the *pundits* wielded and partly in the perspective of class dynamics in the Caribbean setting. The Brahmin *pundits* constituted a distinct sub-class of the burgeoning middle class that had emerged among the Indians. This was a powerful group which exercised considerable influence among the common people and helped in the so called Hindu revival.

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<sup>28</sup> J. D. Speckman, *Marriage and Kinship among the Indians in Surinam* (Netherlands: Van Gorcum and Co, 1965, p. 47.

The festivals of *Diwali*, *Holi*, *Ramlila*, *Kartik Puja*, *Id-ul-Fitr* and Christmas were celebrated with a lot of pomp and fanfare in Trinidad. The competition with the Creoles also produced a strong tendency among the Hindus and Muslims to overlook their socio-religious differences and stress the fact that they were a group originating in India, which had a common history and, therefore, a common identity. Significant in this regard is a joint celebration of the festival of *Hossey* (*Muharram*) by the Hindus and Muslims. Also, although, it is true that Indian festivals were 'markers' of Indian identity vis-à-vis the Creoles, yet in some cases even the later joined in the Indian celebrations. They participated in the *Hossey* celebrations. The Indians were also involved in the Creole festivals of Carnival and All Saints Night. The inter-cultural solidarity between the lower classes of the Indians and the Creoles constituted a strong threat to the supremacy of the white rulers. This was dramatised in the *Hossey* rebellion (termed 'Coolie riots' in official reports) of 1884, which was brutally suppressed by the colonial authorities. Commenting on this unrest, Ken Parmasad observes:

"The riots showed a glimpse of the solidarity across race lines which would become an important theme in future years. The *Hosea* provided the kind of atmosphere and situation where this could develop. The slightest indication of this trend as was seen in 1884 was quickly legislated against by the state but this was destined to remain an ongoing preoccupation by those who sought to bring about meaningful change in society."<sup>29</sup>

More importantly, the vertical ties of ethnicity were strengthened through the instruments of religion. The rich and the poor, the office goers and the factory workers, the peasants and the labourers could all be mobilised together on the basis of ethnicity and through religion. Religious organisations could also be used for the formation of political parties, such as the Hindustani Political Party of Surinam. The Democratic Labour Party of Trinidad also had its origin in the Sanatan Dharma Mahasabha. The Hindu based Peoples Democratic Party, a creation of Bhadase Maraj, was another such example. Religion was also a treasury for political rhetoric of which the political leaders made good use. Cors Van dee Burg and Peter Van der Veer give an example where Lachman, a political leader

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<sup>29</sup> Ken Parmasad, "The *Hosea* Riots of 1884" (Master's thesis, the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, 1983), p. 66.



compares the situation of the Indians in Surinam in 1972 with that of the god Ram and Sita in the *Ramayan*. Lachman also portrayed himself as an ally of Ram in fighting the dark powers (Creoles) to protect the honour of the beautiful Sita (Indian girls and wives).<sup>30</sup>

Hinduism in India is a way of life while among the overseas Indians one finds a formalisation of religion. The organisation of *yagna*, the sponsoring of *pujas* and *satsangs* were forms of religious activities, which proliferated and became more frequent in time. Moreover, the household *pujas* in the Caribbean were commemorated by the erection of '*Jhandi*' (a tall bamboo pole flying a red pennant). These pennants remained until they were replaced by fresh *Jhandi* at the next *puja* so that one could estimate the proportion of Hindus in a local community by noting the forest of bamboo poles.<sup>31</sup> The outward organisational nature of Hinduism reflected the need of Indians in the Caribbean, bound by close interactions with Negro Christians, to proclaim their separate identity as Hindus. Religion has helped the Indians to carve out a niche for themselves in the multi-racial society of the Caribbean.

## II. INDIANS AND BLACKS

From the very beginning the blacks and the Indians have always implanted a hostile attitude to each other and this can be related to the colonial pattern of the Caribbean society where the slave masters set the kiths against the kins so as to fulfil their ends. In one of his historical works, Naipaul retorts:

"So in Trinidad, the English colonists were at first distinguished... by their intellectual liveliness... a carryover from the metropolis. In the slave society, where self-fulfilment came so easily, this liveliness began to be perverted and then to fade and the English saw their pre-eminence, more simply, as a type of racial magic.... the emigration of the ambitious was a further intellectual depletion.... The quality of

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<sup>30</sup> Burg Cors van dee and Peter Van der Veer, "Pandits, Power and Profit: Religious organizations and the Construction of Identity among Surinamese Hindus", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 9(4), 1986, p. 521.

<sup>31</sup> R.K.Jain, "Overseas Indians in Malaysia and the Caribbean: Comparative Notes", *Immigrants and Minorities*, 7 (1), 1988, pp. 123-43.

controversy declined, and the stature of men what remained was a colony.”<sup>32</sup>

At home the English man would die for liberty; abroad he preached slavery in some form. In England his justice to his fellow men was proverbial, but in the colonies he meted out justice with a very stinted hand. In order to rest their colonial fulfilments, the English colonialists found the stone like Negro Macho and clay like Negro brain as a safe anchor and set the Indians in Negro speculation as the thorn in the Negro soft petal walk to success. On the other end of the spectrum, Indians’ craziness to define themselves ‘Indian’ made them to look Negroes as mere nightmares for them. So a small islander in a Naipaul novel remarks:

“It never cross my mind that I could open a shop of my own. Is how it is with black people. They get so used to working for other people that they get to believe that because they black they can’t do nothing else but work for other people”.<sup>33</sup>

What creates the most Negro hostility towards the Indians is the Negro thought of Indians as ‘bonding’ together to define everything in the traditional Indian standards and values. Negro farmers in Guyana attribute Indian success to ‘coolie deviousness’ and fear being deprived of the little they have. An anthropologist records a villager’s suspicion that:

“De-cooliaman talking over de whole country. Dey bond themselves together to get all we own... Dey rent we land and take it away. Dey loan black people money and take all dey own. Dey smart people, you know. Cunning. Dey work cheap, eat cheap, and save and save. Black people can’t punish themselves so. If we punish ourselves like cooliaman, we slaves again”.<sup>34</sup>

On the other end, Indians feel ‘Contempt for the Negro.... Who allows his womenfolk complete sexual freedom, and does not even exhibit shame when his sister becomes an unmarried mother.... The Negro is too interested in “feting”:

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<sup>32</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Loss of El Dorado: A History* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969), p. 316.

<sup>33</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A Flag on the Island* (London Andre Deutsch, 1967), p.140.

<sup>34</sup> Leo Despres, *Cultural Pluralism and Nationalist Politics in British Guiana* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967), p.93.

dancing, carnival, and expensive clothes.... (to) know how to save money".<sup>35</sup> Indian attachment to property fuelled their mistrust of black power demonstrations in Trinidad in 1970. "We want no part of your struggle because you talk nothing but destruction", one Indian explained. "We have toiled too long and too hard to give up what we have (and what we have a hell of a lot)".<sup>36</sup>

Again Negro villagers, who view acquisitiveness as a genetic trait, are convinced that their Indian neighbours camouflage their wealth: "Indians have plenty of money, but they don't show it." Indians believe that "the Niggers sleep during the day and at night they walk around and steal. Stealing and killing - that's their work". This behaviour is ascribed to racial history: "They are the last people God made. They're an evil race".<sup>37</sup>

Indian attachment to endogamy stems from, with several other reasons, their stereotype of Negroes as lascivious, ugly, and evil. Blacks who advocate Creolisation, Indians charge, are "interested more in sexual union between Indians and Negroes than in unity of minds between the two races".<sup>38</sup> Liaisons with Negroes are considered polluting; parental disinheritance is a common, though perhaps often an empty threat. "If me dawta take up with black-man, Indian villagers in Guyana ask, "Who will take she of wife".<sup>39</sup>

Another cause of their hostility is due to their rivalry in riding the political ladder. The Negroes apprehend that they, under Indian political leadership will be slave to the Indians and on the other end Indians court the apprehension just the vice-versa. The Indian political leaders charge that the Negroes have drunk the goblet of power and now see no necessity to share anything with the Indians. In Trinidad Indians in the mid-1960s claimed that Negroes would rather have a dishonest Negro than an honest East Indian as Prime Minister.

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<sup>35</sup> Morton Klass, *East Indians in Trinidad: A Study of Cultural Persistence* (New York: Columbia University press, 1961), p.244.

<sup>36</sup> Grace Maharaj, "To the black people in T'dad", *Embroyo*, Vol.2, No.19, 24 March, 1970, p.9

<sup>37</sup> Allen Ehrlich, "East Indian cane workers in Jamaica" ( Ph.D. thesis in Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1969), p.129-134.

<sup>38</sup> H.P.Singh, *The Indian Enigma* (Port of Spain, Privately published, 1965), p..14.

<sup>39</sup> Despres, n.34 , p.93.

So it can be concluded that the usual response of the majority Negroes towards Indian folkways and mores, and of Indians towards Negro traits is based less on 'intermingling' than on 'negative indifference', frequently accompanied by ridicule or sarcastic expressions of antipathy, mistrust and hostility. Overt ethnic conflict is rare in Trinidad owing not to acculturation but rather to dissociation, a live and let live propensity to mind one's own affairs.

This however does not mean that the blacks and Indians always show the trigger to each other, but their inter-ethnic participation is marked in certain occasions. Obeah exerts an influence over the lives of Creoles and Indians alike. An orthodox Brahmin who has never eaten meat may be the organiser of this festival and play Guitar on this occasion. Similarly, the black participation immensely brings charm and joy to the Indian celebrations of *Hoseah*, *Id* and *Diwali*. In this novel Mr. Biswas's friendship with Mrs. Loggie (a black lady) giving him consolation during his turbulent period can be read as a renewed relationship between the blacks and the Indians. But the most important is the pleasure of a Trinidadian Prime Minister in seeing "a Negro Singer singing and dancing the East Indian Music, and all the East Indian children dancing African folklore at a Community Centre opening".<sup>40</sup>

## INDIANS AND CREOLES

The features of Creole society - hierarchical gradation, individual and group mobility, general acceptance of the structure - are consciously missing in relationships between Creoles and other West Indians. The term 'Creole' often differentiates West Indians of North European, African and mixed descent both from aboriginal American Indians and from more recent immigrants - Portuguese, Chinese, Indians, Javanese, and Syrian. These groups vary in their differences from and resemblances to Creoles, but each group, an entity identified by itself and others as culturally distinctive, enjoys cohesion based on a shared ethnic tradition. Between ethnic and racial distinctions there is no fixed line, and ethnic identities

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<sup>40</sup> Lowenthal, n.9, p.158.

and conflicts are often perceived and expressed in racial terms. Indeed, most West Indians do not use the word 'ethnic' and automatically transfer its meanings to 'race'. But in their sense of identity and in their relationship with others, these groups are predominantly ethnic rather than racial.

Indians are by far the largest non-Creole group and have had the most profound impact on Caribbean society. The nature of the Indian group in each Caribbean territory is, however, a function of its size. In Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam, where they comprise one-third to one-half of the population, Indians manifest a distinctive, flourishing culture and community and compete with Creoles for national power and Status. But the Indians of Jamaica, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and the Windward Islands, by contrast, are only small minorities - two to four per cent of the population. Far from challenging Creole hegemony, they hardly constitute viable separate entities and are in large measure subsets of the rural lower class. Although they are, with few exceptions, culturally similar to Creoles and physically dispersed among them, they are by no means integrated within Creole society.

However, 'Indian' Indians in the West Indies may be, they are not much like Indians in India. The customs and organisational principles of peasant communities of Oudh before the mutiny persist in, say, Trinidad, whereas they have considerably changed in India. The Trinidadian Naipaul, otherwise no traditionalist, records his sense of outrage:

"When I heard that in Bombay they used candles and electric bulbs for the Diwali festival, and not the rustic clay lamps, of immemorial design, which in Trinidad we still used."<sup>41</sup>

Indians themselves are often unaware that they have adopted Creole norms. Even when they are conscious that their culture is changing, they seldom recognise change as an adaptation to the wider West Indian world. "We were steadily adopting the food styles of others: the Portuguese stew...the Negro way with yams,

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<sup>41</sup> Naipaul, n.10, p.38.

plantains, breadfruit and bananas”; but, adds Naipaul, “Everything we adopted became our own; the outside was still to be dreaded.”<sup>42</sup>

Indians remain more ‘Indian’ in some ways than in others. But trait-by-trait generalisations grossly oversimplify; degrees and types of “Indianness” vary from place to place, from city to countryside, from old to young. Surinam’s rural Indians remain most traditional, urban Trinidad’s least. In Trinidad the Oropouche Lagoon, an area affected both by Presbyterian missions and by industrialisation, is more Creolised than conservative Caroni, where outside influences hardly affect peasant farmers.

How ‘Indian’ the Indians remain, and how Creole they have become, are two quite different, though related, questions. Some Indians express the wish to be ‘just like a Creole’; others derogate Creole-like behaviour. Attitudes may range widely in a single household; an East Indian in Chaguanas, Trinidad, assured an interlocutor, “I m completely Creolised, man”, while his wife and daughters were in the kitchen singing Indian songs and dancing steps learned from Indian movies.<sup>43</sup> Market vendors make “no attempt to disclaim knowledge of Hindi, or familiarity with food, customs, or music which are identified as ‘Indian’ in Trinidad, but their children would often deny knowing about such “Old Fashion” things”.<sup>44</sup>

Some “Creolised” Indian women, charges an opponent of assimilation, “not only disclaim... any knowledge of Indian (ways) of life, but actually scoff at it”.<sup>45</sup>

In a Selvan story, a Negro overhears Indians and says to a friend, “Listen to them two Indian how they arguing about we Creole Calypso”. An Indian retorts, “Man I is a Creolise Trinidadian, Oui.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.35.

<sup>43</sup> F.T. Cloak Jr, “A Natural Order of Cultural Adoption and Loss in Trinidad” (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina), Institute of Research in Social Science, Working papers in Methodology No.1,1966, pp.110-111

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Lowenthal, n.9 , p.155.

<sup>45</sup> Singh, n.38, p.7.

<sup>46</sup> Samuel Selvan, “Calypsonian”, in G.R. Coulthard (ed.), *Caribbean Literature: An Anthology*, 1966, p. 72-83, Ref.79.

Thus the purely ancestral Indian culture and social institutions survive as ideals rather than as realities or endure in name but are Creolised in character and function. Many insistent aspects of Indianness are either syncretised adaptations to Creole life or deliberate resuscitations of all but forgotten folkways. An East Indian who visited Calcutta a century ago came back to Trinidad warning that “there was no use in those who were accustomed to the ways of this country returning to India”, because “the manners of the East were different and utterly opposed to the freedom of life that they were accustomed to here”.<sup>47</sup> Low-caste Hindus especially found it hard to “reassume their traditionally subordinate positions in a village in India after life and work in an island where the chance to better themselves was more easily attainable.”<sup>48</sup>

### III. 1. Indian-Creole Differences

Although little traditional remains and Creolisation is pervasive, Indian culture and social organisation, personality traits and values, are markedly unlike those of other West Indians. The Creoles and Blacks opine that the average Indian knows little of his past, would be unable to argue well for his way of life or his religion, but he believes in it nonetheless. Indians, one of them contends, “remain separate because they have little in common with the urban Negro people”.<sup>49</sup> Heightened by isolation, ignorance, and fear, these differences have engendered negative, persistent, and inclusive group stereotypes. The English preconceptions of Indians as intractable Orientals and the common observations about Africans as clay which could be easily moulded into a Christian and Western shape, and the Hindus and Muslims of India as stone that could only be worked painfully and with much toil, fuelled this indifference between Indians and Creoles.

Occupational specialisation further divides the rural Indians and Creoles. Because Indians were initially seen as temporary migrants, planters saw no point in teaching them highly skilled factory operations, which thus became exclusively

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<sup>47</sup> Lowenthal, n.9, p.156.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.156

<sup>49</sup> Ramdath Jagessar, “Indian Iceberg”, *Topia*, No.3, 16 November, 1969, p.7.

Creole. Indian indentures hastened the Negro plantation exodus, and over the next century more and more Creoles abandoned agriculture for the mines of Guyana, the oil fields of Trinidad, and government and other white collar jobs in Port of Spain, Georgetown, and Paramaribo. The successful Indian turned miller and bought more land for his sons; the Creole who made good left for the city.

Ethnic patterns of community organisation, family ties, religious life, and education reinforce these economic differences. While Creoles tend to act as individuals, Indians operate as nuclear family units, with clusters of families often forming village factions. Creoles gain status through schooling in European - that is, Christian language, culture, and manners; Indians both desire education as the highway to success and fear its anti-Indian bias. Indians long avoided sending children to school lest they be converted to Christianity and thereby lost to the family and community. The typical Indian felt, as a future chief justice of Guyana wrote in 1919, that to "send his boy to denomic national school to be taught English is to denationalise him and jeopardise his religious faith".<sup>50</sup> "An Indian will not send his child to a Creole school, he is afraid of injustice being done to his children by the Creole teachers, and of ill usage from Creole pupils".<sup>51</sup>

The young Indians who reach secondary school are even more competitive than Creoles. By comparison with Creoles, Trinidadian Indian students interviewed in 1957 expressed more concern about attaining prestige, displayed greater willingness to eschew present gratifications for future rewards, seemed more dependent on external approval, and felt more apprehensive about being let down or defrauded. An Indian student always sets his sight on long-range goals; achievement brings power and prestige; lack of achievement brings disgrace, and failure is due to some external force. Without apparent self-doubt, Indian students yearn for omnipotence: "I am always thinking that I will be one great man one day".<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> J.A. Luckhoo, "The East Indian in British Guiana", *Timehri*, Vol.6, 1919, p.61.

<sup>51</sup> Lowenthal, n.9, p.159.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160.



Lurid stories of Indian 'customs' such as infanticide, *suttee*, and *thuggee* caused West Indian planters, the Creole estate owners and officials generally to characterise Indians as stubborn, untrustworthy, and deceitful, with perjury a universal failing. The Indian behaviour with money and property, a striking contrast to that of Creole West Indians, Indian women wearing golden chains and jewellery - a walking repository of their husband's wealth, and the melting down of coins for gold bangles severely depleting currency supplies, brought Creole accusation of Indians depressing internal trade.

### III. 2. Indian-Creole Ethnic Segregation

The main components of Indian-Creole ethnic isolation are endogamy and residential separation. Indians generally disapprove of ethnic inter-marriage. For Guyanese Hindus a prospective spouse may be Muslim or Christian but should be Indian in any case. In Paramaribo one household in twenty-five is inter-racial, in San Fernando one household in nineteen, but in rural areas inter-marriage is rare. A study of Guyana in 1965 found "little evidence of any coalescing process between the Indian and African components of the population".<sup>53</sup>

Indian-Creole offspring, commonly called 'douglas' are said to suffer no special disability in Guyana and in urban Surinam, but mixed families seldom belong to Indian communities in rural Surinam and are more acceptable among Creoles than among Indians in Trinidad. The name is more widely applied, however, to the mixed offspring of dark Creoles than of light, let alone of white. As in one Creole colloquy, 'What else you could call her if she's Indian Creole? It ain't no insult'. 'You don't mean Indian-Creole you mean Indian-Negro'.<sup>54</sup>

Similar attitudes towards ethnic mixing entail quite different consequences where Indians are a small minority. In the French Antilles and in rural Jamaica formal inter-marriage is rare, but casual unions are common, despite parental antipathy. "Older people", reports a young Jamaican Indian, "are prejudiced

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<sup>53</sup> R.T. Smith and C. Jayawardhena, "Marriage and the Family amongst East Indians in British Guiana", *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol.8, 1959, pp. 321-76, Ref. P.356.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Anthony, *Green days by the river*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1967), p.10.

against the Negroes... With us things are different. We don't know about the old Indian ways. We're all mixed up".<sup>55</sup> Indian Creole mixtures, 'rials' in Jamaica, 'Chappe Coolies' in Martinique and Guadeloupe, are in fact almost as numerous as pure Indians. In Jamaica, unlike Trinidad and the Guyanas, they usually, adhere to the Indian community, especially if the father is Indian; but in Guadeloupe they seek to merge with Creoles.

### III. 3. Residential Separation

Residential segregation, though less intense than endogamy, also limits face-to-face contacts between Caribbean Indians and Creoles. Separation is most conspicuous in rural Surinam, where topography emphasises the isolation of government-sponsored ethnic settlements; river transport alone connects many rural communities. Moreover each ethnic element clusters in certain regions. Thus the 1950 census showed Creoles to be ninety percent of rural Coronie, Hindustanis eighty five per cent of western Nickerie, Indonesians eighty per cent of north-western Commewijne.<sup>56</sup>

Residential mixing is no guarantee of ethnic amity: Mixture generates stress, however, when large numbers of both groups live together in the same villages the community is usually riven by hostile factionalism. In most cases one major ethnic group heavily preponderates and endeavours to maintain its dominance. Mixed villages today are less common than before, during the riots of the early 1960s, Indian and Creole minorities fled from their villages to ethnic refugee settlements. Creole and East Indian neighbours in Chaguanas, Trinidad, are on good sepaking terms, yet ethnic neighbourliness is usually confined to casual encounters in street and yard. Indians occasionally attend Creole Fetes: Creoles are onlookers rather than invited guests at Indian weddings and festivals. Conflict may be acute when disparate ethnic groups are in proximity. Both Indians and Creoles in Jamaica cite near neighbours of the other ethnic stock as frequent sources of stress.

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<sup>55</sup> Lowenthal, n.9 , p.163.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 164

Ethnic rivals seldom distinguish specific or remediable complaints from inherent socio-cultural issues. Most ethnic complaints concern supposed inequities in employment, education and welfare, recognition of specifically 'Indian' cultural features, and Creole fears of Indian dominance. Independence has exacerbated stress. Having lost their mutual imperial adversary, Creoles and Indians now compete for the power and status formerly held by expatriates and local whites. Indians in the Caribbean long remained unassertive, as a consequence, in part, of planters' aim to keep them 'backward', agricultural and uneducated so as to ensure a supply of agricultural labour for the sugar and rice industries. Only after the turn of the century did Indians begin to take an active part in Caribbean affairs. The termination of indentured immigration during the First World War ended the most invidious distinction between Indian and Creoles, and the whole corpus of ethnic law gradually passed away. The 1930s and early 1940s saw the repeal of all discriminatory legislation, legitimising Hindu and Muslim marriages and enabling Indian children to be schooled without risking enforced conversion. New employment opportunities during the Second World War and adult suffrage soon afterward further stimulated Indian participation in West Indian life. The first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru's 1950 declaration that overseas Indians should no longer look to India as their homeland also spurred Caribbean Indian Creolisation. The end of empire forced Indians to compete out of fear of Creole rule, if not out of desire to share that risk.

Close links between ethnicity and occupation were formerly taken for granted. But Indians today aspire to civil service and white collar jobs once exclusively held by Creoles, and some Creoles venture into occupations, like taxi-driving once customarily Indian. And in all territories tension accompanies increased Indian participation in many walks of life. Creoles resent Indian incursions, Indians claim Creoles still hold them back. Thus endogamy greatly, and residential segregation moderately, the unequal distribution of jobs and the negligence of Indian culture, constrain the numbers, frequency and intensity of Indian-Creole contacts. But the Chief cause of ethnic conflict today is not the paucity of contact but its increasing frequency. In its origins, ethnic stress arises

from group isolation and differences in its dynamics, it reflects a growing realisation that the two groups must coexist, sharing power, rewards and status.

Coming back to the questions raised at the beginning of the discussion, this study finds that Creoles too readily assume that Indian culture is of trivial importance to Indians, whereas, to themselves: "Indians are another people with a defined traditional way of life, of religion, of behaviour, of thought.... They do not have to argue, to shout aloud that Indians are beautiful. They do have to justify their existence and claim equality. To them Indians are a superior people, and no question about it... The lotus blooms in the west, but it is still a lotus".<sup>57</sup>

But the Creoles who believe themselves the only true West Indians fail to recognise Indian traits in Creole culture. That carnival drumming has roots in Muslim *Hosein* and in Hindu drummer's skills, Creoles have forgotten. That rice in its present form is an Indian contribution to the basic Creole diet, they seldom acknowledge. Curried goat is such a universal favourite that most Jamaicans are unaware of its Indian provenance. Creoles characteristically see even *roti* as simply Trinidadian, not Indian. Despite of all these evidences of syncretism, Creoles are essentially unaware that they have borrowed Indian traits. They take for granted that Indians should become West Indian by adopting Creole ways, never the reverse.

On the other end, Indians bitterly resent the "Creole habit of looking at Trinidadians of Indian descent as Indians and not as Trinidadians... When a Negro says or does something, he is a Trinidadian, or a West Indian. When an Indian does or says something, he is an Indian." Integration, Indians feel, should be recognised as a two way street: "Bread is no more West Indian than *Roti* is. Cricket is no more West Indian than Hockey is. And (C.L.R.) James is no more West Indian than Bhadase Maraj is."<sup>58</sup> Caribbean integration, Indians insist, must involve Indian as well as Euro-African culture and values; Creolisation by itself is unacceptable because it requires only Indians, but not Creoles, to forgo their identity.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p.174

<sup>58</sup> Singh, n.38, p.11-12,14.

So in order to bolster their ethnic status and their 'Indianness', Indians reiterate the Indian ancient glories: "Indian culture should become a part of the way of life of all Trinidadians. Indians.... are not a sub-culture, but a rival culture and a strong resistant one... They are not, and do not care to be, part of Trinidad's cultural Callallo".

CHAPTER II

**FATHER AND SON:  
FAMILY RELATIONS IN  
*A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS***

“And before I died, before I became so removed from my talent, I wanted to write a book about my father and my background, the anger and terrible ambition, the sense of loss and defeat that made one want to be a writer.”<sup>1</sup>

“Of course my relationship with my father is the big relationship in my life. My father was extremely important in my childhood: nearly everything that I am because of this great link I felt with him, and a lot of my work - especially my early work - I meant to be dedicated to him.”<sup>2</sup>

“The writing that has mattered most to me is that of my father, which has never been published. It taught me to look at things that had never been written about before, and seemed dull in life, yet when transformed to paper became very surprising. A great deal of my vision of Trinidad has come straight from my father.”<sup>3</sup>

These assertions give some indication of the extent of the debt of influence that Naipaul owes to his father, Seepersad, and it is a debt which investigates his own ‘literary beginnings’ by means of an exploration of his father’s life. The autobiographical elements form a substantial component of Naipaul’s output, appearing not only in explicitly autobiographical works, but also in fiction, and *A House For Mr. Biswas* bears an ample testimony to this. It stands at an interesting point of inter-textual relations - using as a starting-point a story by Seepersad, incorporating his suggestions concerning subjects that his son might write about, and taking its cue from the tone of his stories and journalism. The Naipaul family also produced another writer in Shiva, whose novel, *Fireflies* covers similar ground that of *A House For Mr. Biswas*. There is a family resemblance which encompasses the preoccupations of the three writers: these include entrapment in a society of restricted opportunity, frustrated ambition and dreams of escape, and the rituals and customs of Hindu family life.

When *A House For Mr. Biswas* was first published in 1961, few readers could have known of the intimate connection between the author and his creation. Now, perhaps, the best known fact about this *magnum opus* is its autobiographical nature. In his Nobel Award ceremony acceptance speech Naipaul alludes to *A*

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewed by Mel Gussow, “Writer Without Roots”, *New York Times Magazine*, 26 December 1978, pp.22.

<sup>2</sup> Interviewed by Nigel Bingham, “The Novelist V.S. Naipaul talks to Nigel Bingham”, *The Listener*, 7 September 1972, pp.306.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewed by David Bates, “Portrait Gallery”, *Sunday Times Supplement*, 26 May 1963, pp.13.

*House For Mr. Biswas* thus: "... then intuition led me to a large book about our family life". At the centre of this family saga, is the figure of his father, Seepersad Naipaul, the Biswas of the novel. Echoes from and allusions to his father's works are ingeniously interwoven through the narrative. As he acknowledges in *Finding the Centre*:

"I was writing about things I didn't know; and the book that came out was very much my father's book. It was written out of his journalism and stories, out of his knowledge... it was written out of his writing."<sup>4</sup>

One of his father's short stories - "They Named Him Mohun" - an autobiographical fragment, was used as a starting point for *A House For Mr. Biswas* - emblematising both the personal and the literary debt that he owes to his father.

So persistent is the pressure of this filial bonding in Naipaul's works that it wells up again and again, even during his travels, when his memory is jogged by something, which takes him back to his days with his father. He dedicated *A Turn in the South* (1989) to his father "in ever renewed homage". When he visits Tuskegee he remembers having read the book *Up From Slavery* as a child in Trinidad. Memories of his father are intertwined with this memory: "My father had read me a story from the book... My father, born poor, and in spite of ambition always poor, liked stories of self-help and of men rising, from poverty. He suffered in Trinidad..."

Both the suffering and the ambition are poignantly reflected in Biswas's story.

Here the present study may make an attempt to point out the traumas and tribulations faced by his father, his father's journalistic and writing career, how his father has influenced him in his writings and life, how these aspects in real life have brilliantly been fictionalised in *A House For Mr. Biswas*, and how Naipaul, by presenting and recording his ancestry, tries to achieve an identity. The facts that chiefly emerge from his account of his father describe a man who was paradoxical in many respects, yet consistent in defying the barriers of his personal and social history in order to make himself a writer and finally to live in his home. Although Seepersad Naipaul's father, a pundit, died when he was an infant, his mother's

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<sup>4</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p.6.



tales of his cruelty oppressed him throughout his life. Left without resources after the father's death, his family was divided among relatives, whose decisions regarding the children seem to have been determined by their age, and Seepersad Naipaul, the youngest, was to be trained as a pundit, and thus was able to learn both English and Hindi. Rereading his father's stories and perceiving "the Brahmin standpoint from which they are written", V.S. Naipaul speculates that it was the "Hindu reverence for learning and the world, awakened by the beginnings of an English Education and a Hindu religious training" that instilled "the desire to be a writer" in Seepersad Naipaul.<sup>5</sup> He never became a pundit and had no training for any other work. Married into a wealthy family of landowners, he resented his dependence on them for housing and at times for menial employment.

The drive of Seepersad Naipaul's talent exploiting whatever meagre opportunities were open to him within the disparities of his background accounts, at least in part, for both his achievement and their psychic cost. If his brief formal education made him sceptical of pundits, it did provide an introduction to Hinduism, enhanced no doubt by the story-tellers whose recitation of the Hindu epics were a tradition of village life. His secular education, however limited, made him aware of writing journalism and fiction as a vocation, a prospect of self-fulfilment or at least a form of self-expression.

In 1929 Seepersad Naipaul began to contribute articles to the *Trinidad Guardian*; and in 1932 he was made staff correspondent in Chaguanas, the town in central Trinidad where the Capildeo family lived. "It was through his journalism on MacGowan's *Guardian* that my father arrived at that vision of the countryside and its people which he later transferred to his stories."<sup>6</sup> Encouraged by its new editor, Gault MacGowan, Seepersad Naipaul wrote articles that drew on his knowledge of Indian life in Trinidad and reflected the influence of "the reforming movement known as the *Arya Samaj*, which sought to make Hinduism a pure philosophical faith". Such views incurred the wrath of Hindu traditionalists and the orthodox members of his wife's family. A crucial episode that was to affect the future course of his life as well as his son's occurred in 1933, when he wrote an

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<sup>5</sup> V.S. Naipaul, "Foreword", *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories* by Seepersad Naipaul (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976), p. 8-13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15.

article critical of the Hindu remedy for an outbreak of paralytic rabies among cattle - the sacrifice of a goat to the goddess Kali. In return he received an anonymous letter, probably, says V.S Naipaul, from a member of his wife's family, threatening him with death unless he performed "the very ceremony he had criticised". Naipaul places great emphasis on this incident in the Prologue to an Autobiography, identifying it as a significant element in his father's breakdown. One can here imagine the conflict of a man who had begun to establish his identity as a writer, to find his own voice, forced into the role of orthodox priest performing a rite of self-renunciation.

Soon afterward the editor who had taught and believed in him left the *Trinidad Guardian*. To make matters worse, he was removed from the staff and demoted to the position of "stringer". His confidence, largely dependent on the success he had begun to achieve as a writer, was shattered. As V.S. Naipaul was to learn from his mother many years later, "He looked in the mirror one day and couldn't see himself. And he began to scream".<sup>7</sup> No more graphic example of the loss of identity can be imagined than this. Fleeing the scene where he had been compelled to deny his own truth, the heart of his vocation, he roamed about doing odd jobs and depending on various relatives. As Naipaul says, his father was "idle and dependent for four years" (1934-38).<sup>8</sup>

During this absence from home he sent his son a little book of poetry in which he inscribed the child's exact age: "3 years, 10 months and fifteen days" and his counsel: "Live up to the estates of man, follow truth, be kind and gentle and trust God".<sup>9</sup> This gift, which V.S. Naipaul describes as "really a decorated keepsake", reminded the son of his father's devotion even in his absence, but it was also, Naipaul says, "something noble, something connected with the word". Seepersad Naipaul managed to regain his job at the *Trinidad Guardian*, and the position he now held was that of reporter, which offered him little satisfaction, but his earlier writings for the newspaper, in which he was free to express his point of view and to forge his own style, remained for him the genesis of a vocation, which

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<sup>7</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1984), p.82.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.

<sup>9</sup> Lilian Feder, *Naipaul's Truth: The Making of a Writer* (New Delhi: Indialog Publications PVT. LTD., 2001), P.29.

he transmitted to his son. The boy read his father's early articles as "memorials of a heroic time I had missed". Surrounded by domestic turmoil - a reluctant move from Port of Spain back to a communal household, animosity within the extended family, lack of a modicum of privacy, and then a return to Port of Spain to a house increasingly occupied by relatives - Naipaul began to read stories his father had written for the *Trinidad Guardian* in the past. Also during these turbulent years, when Seepersad Naipaul found relief from his anger and depression by once again writing fiction, he engaged his son in the process. In his Prologue to an Autobiography, Naipaul tells of his participation in the creation of a long story, *Gurudeva*, "its slow making... from the beginning to the end... it was the greatest imaginative experience of my childhood... it was my private epic".<sup>10</sup> Having empathised with his father in the act of writing, he now "shared his hysteria".

The word "hysteria" appears often in V.S. Naipaul's autobiographical revelations, not only as an over-reaction to a specific concern, but more fundamentally as the "fear of extinction", the annihilation of the self that his father continued to endure and "transmitted" to his son. This, Naipaul says, was the "subsidiary gift" of his father. Only "linked with the idea of the vocation", his father's primary gift, could the fear "be combated".<sup>11</sup>

Seepersad Naipaul's stories are a vital portion of his heritage to his son, who considers them a "unique record of life of the century". He refers to the "knowledge" and "sympathy" that made it possible for Seepersad Naipaul to comprehend the changing course of this community rooted in "Old India" as it gradually blended into its setting in colonial Trinidad.<sup>12</sup> It seems likely that one of the offshoots of the evocation in the stories of ancestral beliefs and rituals was V.S. Naipaul's early and lasting attraction to the ancient world. Without distorting early societies into semblances of ourselves, we are nonetheless ultimately their "product". "Fortunately, the past never dies for man. Man may forget it, but he always preserves it within him".<sup>13</sup> Seepersad Naipaul's stories create this

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid,p.30.

<sup>11</sup> Naipaul, "Prologue to an Autobiography", in n.7, p.72.

<sup>12</sup> Naipaul, n.5, p.19.

<sup>13</sup> Numa Denis Fustel de Coulange, *The Ancient City*, Willard Small, transl. (New York,1956),p.11-14.

strangeness, this distance past of an unknown world, which, however different the context, suggests the remoteness of his readers' own past and evokes its presence in their inner narratives.

His characters, Hindus, who are either descendants of indentured workers or have themselves discharged their indentureship, range from landowners to the very poor, living in mud huts under the most primitive conditions. In a passage characteristically precise and imaginative, he conveys the atmosphere of one area, flooded for half the year. Engaging the reader through the phrase "made you think", he says: "From a quarter of a mile these huts made you think of some gargantuan, prehistoric monsters that had rambled in the slime and slush of the lagoon and then, no longer able to carry themselves, had died, greyed, become fossilised, and remained rooted and inert for ever". Yet its inhabitants rejoice in the rain and the mud as "a god send for the paddy crops" (*My Uncle Dalloo*). Almost all of Seepersad Naipaul's works, *Panchayat*, *They Named Him Mohun* (on which the present novel under study is based) and several of his other works deal with his surrounding, his relatives and his writing career and he treats all these, sometimes with irony and sometimes with pathos.

Listening to these stories as they were written, offering encouragement and suggestions, V.S. Naipaul was learning a great deal about the writer's craft. His father's stories, he says gave him "a way of looking, an example of labour, and a sense of the order and special reality (at once simpler and sharper than life) that written words could be seen to create".<sup>14</sup> Although V.S. Naipaul did not learn about the circumstance of his father's breakdown until 1970, from his sixth to his eighteenth year he was exposed to the lasting psychological effects of Seepersad Naipaul's surrender to the will of the clan.<sup>15</sup> The boy participated in the act of writing that remained his father's refuge, his means of restoring his fragile sense of selfhood. Inevitably, the self-confidence such trust could bestow on a child was tempered by his assimilation of his father's anxieties, the conflict produced in suppressing his own truth, his writer's identity, and his simultaneous need to articulate it. Furthermore, his belief in his son's gifts, his determination that he

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<sup>14</sup> Feder, n.9, P.34.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.35.

escapes the bonds of the clan and the limits of his society, fostered V.S. Naipaul's commitment to truth of his own past, to his emotional and intellectual vantages in the stages of his development as a writer.

Seepersad Naipaul wrote eloquently about the setting and customs of his childhood and about members of his extended family, but only one of his plots is based on an incident involving his parents. Although he said that he wished to write an autobiographical novel, he never produced one. It seems likely that recreating the deprivations of his youth, the cruelty he was told of and witnessed, his later humiliations by his wife's family, and his continuous frustrations at home and at work constituted too great a threat to the emotional stability he struggled to maintain. Years later his son would write that novel, fulfilling Seepersad Naipaul's aspiration in *A House For Mr. Biswas*, which he describes as "very much my father's book... written out of his journalism and stories, out of his knowledge... it was written out of his writing". In reconstructing his father's life he was also tracing the inception of his own process of self-creation.

The son of Mr. Biswas, Anand, endures domestic strife and poverty, his father's illness and absences, frequent moves from Hanuman House, the home of his grandmother in Arwacas (the fictional Chaguanas), to Green Vale, to Port of Spain, from there to Shorthills, and then back to the city, all of which are fictional versions of experiences Naipaul has recalled in later autobiographical novels. But the truth that Naipaul has said, this novel evokes not only events and feelings Seepersad Naipaul could not bear to face, but the son's ambivalent relationships with his father, his mother, and her extended family, in whose houses he lived for much of his youth.

In various contexts Naipaul has disparaged the clan with its emphasis on caste, a system he denounces. Yet looking back in his "Prologue to an Autobiography", he acknowledges, it could have been a psychological advantage: "for all its physical wretchedness and internal tensions, the life of the clan had given us all a start. It had given us a class certainty, a high sense of the self".<sup>16</sup> Undernourished and mistreated in the household of his grandmother - often for his

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.36.

father's transgressions - Anand is depicted as gradually conceiving a private sense of self within the contradictions of his extended family: their pride as prominent Hindus who observe the religious rituals but do not practice the values they profess, their petty tyrannies, their stinginess, their outright cruelties. In the novel, as no doubt in reality, his father's alternating submission to and rebellion against that family, his scepticism, his rage and wit, his idiosyncrasies and fastidiousness, however unsettling, provoked the boy to develop his own multi-faceted way of perceiving the world around him.

*A House For Mr. Biswas* portrays the tentative approaches and withdrawals of the early relationship between father and son. Having been absent during much of his son's early childhood, Mr. Biswas gradually reaches out to the boy who had belonged completely to the Tulsis<sup>17</sup>, among whom Mr. Biswas includes his wife Shama as antagonist. Naipaul has said that *A House For Mr. Biswas* was "created out of what I saw and felt as child".<sup>18</sup> Those perceptions and feelings emerge in Anand's gestures, in his silences and laconic responses, in his sudden exclamations of anger and oblique expressions of affection and loyalty. Episodes involving the boy that are not necessarily autobiographical in external detail elucidate his inner life, especially what seemed so "astonishing" to Naipaul as an adult, his internalisation of his father's "fear of extinction" along with his vocation. His fictional portrayal of Anand's unconscious identification with his father reveals psychological affinities that he does not probe in his autobiographical writings.

Both Seepersad and V.S. Naipaul were deprived of a father's presence in early childhood, and both were dependent on the arbitrary benevolence of their extended families. In the novel this similarity initiates an empathy that slowly develops between Mr. Biswas and Anand. During Mr. Biswas's visit to Arwacas, when he is living apart from his family at Green Vale, a sugarcane estate owned by the Tulsis, Anand is generally shy with him, avoiding any physical contact. Yet on one occasion, when he has defended the boy who has been unjustly punished, Anand seems "unwilling to let him leave. He said nothing; he simply hung around the bicycle, occasionally rubbing up against it". Only the gesture discloses his need

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<sup>17</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A House For Mr Biswas* (London: Penguin, 1992) revd edn, p.216.

<sup>18</sup> V.S. Naipaul, "Writing *A House For Mr Biswas*", *New York Review of Books*, 30, November 24, 1983, pp.22.

and gratitude for his father's protection. He is silent when his father asks: "You want to come with me?" He "only smiled and looked down and spun the bicycle pedal with his big toe,"<sup>19</sup> displacing his longing on the surrogate object. Each feels the other's vulnerability: Mr. Biswas "touched by the boy's fragility", the shabbiness of his clothing, his subjection to the harsh rule of the Tulsis. Anand is aware of their disapproval of his father, of the loneliness of his exile. Yet neither can express his feelings openly.

A more critical episode takes place during the period when Shama and the children come to spend the Christmas holidays with Mr. Biswas at Green Vale, where he is working as a "driver" or "sub-overseer". Trapped in a position for which he is utterly unfit, threatened by labourers evicted from the land they had rented, alone for much of the time in one room of barracks that houses twelve families, he has grown increasingly fearful and despondent. When Shama and the children arrive, he tries to disguise his terrors and his hostility towards Shama, pretending that his strange behaviour is due to physical illness, perhaps malaria. Yet, needing help so badly, he responds to her innocuous question, "something on your mind, man?", with a hint that it is indeed his "mind" that is the problem, obliquely disclosing the contents of a hallucination: "clouds. Lots of little black clouds", and then is outraged when she cannot grasp the "truth" in his play on words.<sup>20</sup>

Soon he is desperate and, when Shama tries to help him, fearing even her touch, he kicks her. Concluding that she has no choice but to take the children and return to Hanuman House, she is unprepared for Anand's decision to remain with his father. Neither the narrator nor Anand is explicit in rendering the boy's feelings, but they emerge empathically in silence and finally in a few words that seem forced out of him. Urged by his mother, by neighbour women, and his sister to leave, at first he says nothing, then simply, "I staying with Pa." Only after the others have left, when Mr. Biswas asks why he remained, does Anand reply: "Because - The word came out thin, explosive, charged with anger, at himself and

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<sup>19</sup> Naipaul, n.17, p.237.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid,p.275.

his father. Because they was going to leave you alone”.<sup>21</sup> It is not that he sides with his father; he has taken on the burden of their shared weakness.

Still, during their days together, the roles of father and son are ambiguous. For a brief time Mr. Biswas finds relief from his distress in his rare paternal capacity: he makes toys for Anand and teaches him bits of religion and science. He has taught Anand a lesson in self-assertion, a challenge he himself will not relinquish despite all obstacles. But nothing can avert Mr. Biswas’s breakdown or his son’s identification with his father’s fear of disintegration. Mr. Biswas’s last effort, his “ positive action”, a move from the barracks into the one furnished room of his first ill-fated house, proves disastrous. Pieces of asphalt that melt and leak from the roof are metamorphosed into snakes that inhabit his dreams. When their dog is killed by vengeful labourers, Anand grows hysterical and demands to go home. But before Mr. Biswas can take him to Arwacas, there is a storm, the house is flooded, and winged ants appear, increasing their terror. When lightning strikes the house and the lamplight is extinguished, their room becomes “part of the black void”<sup>22</sup> that Mr. Biswas had feared all along. Father and son are overwhelmed by ‘hysteria’.

Although Seepersad Naipaul’s breakdown had occurred during different circumstances, when his son was an infant, this episode, however fictional in chronology and setting, depicts the psychological condition that determined V.S. Naipaul’s assimilation of his father’s fear of the abyss, the “Subsidiary gift” of his dual legacy.<sup>23</sup> Anand’s need to identify with the father he had never before had the opportunity to know is revealed in brief but important incidents. He responds avidly to the attention Mr. Biswas pays him, to his efforts to teach him. When his uncle, a formidable presence at Hanuman House, appears and urges him to return home, he repeats a theological saw his father has taught him and, of obeying his admonition, “Remember Galilyo”, he decides to stay. Even as he takes on Mr. Biswas’s fear, he finds “compensations” in an experiment they perform together and in making an “electric buzzer”. Mr. Biswas’s hunger for knowledge, his

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid,p.279.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid,p.292.

<sup>23</sup> Feder, n.9, p. 38.



singularity and playfulness, shocking to the Tulsis, are attractive qualities to the child who has for so long been deprived of a father's example. Angry and frightened as Mr. Biswas abandons him for his delusions, Anand has no psychological refuge from the "void" his father's terror evokes.

The differences between the chronology of Mr. Biswas's breakdown as well as of subsequent episodes in the novel from those of Naipaul's autobiography intensify the intricate connections between the "fear of extinction" and the vocation of writing that the father transmitted to his son.<sup>24</sup> Seepersad Naipaul's most rewarding years on the *Trinidad Guardian* were those before his breakdown. The job to which he returned entailed more reporting, which he found unsatisfying. In the fictional version, as soon as Mr. Biswas has recovered sufficiently, he leaves his family and finds a job as a reporter on the *Trinidad Sentinel* in Port of Spain. This is V.S. Naipaul's reconstruction of his father's first experience on the *Trinidad Guardian* when, guided by a sympathetic editor, he was able to channel his bizarre fantasies in journalistic drama. Mr. Biswas's pleasure in his job and his pride in seeing his name and articles in print give him a new confidence, and he is able to return to his family with a sense of his own worth.

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When he appears at Hanuman House, Anand observes his father, who had been rescued by the Tulsis when he was sick and disoriented, now a successful writer, recognised by the other children as the *Trinidad Sentinel's* adventurous "Scarlet Pimpernel" who rewards those who identify him. Anand is still shy and laconic but, in a subtle contrast with an earlier scene, he no longer expresses his need for his father through a surrogate object: "Mr. Biswas held Anand to his leg and Anand rubbed against it".<sup>25</sup> Mr. Biswas's achievements impress even Mrs. Tulsi, who suggests that he and his family share a family with her and one of her sons in Port of Spain. It is here that Mr. Biswas, like Seepersad Naipaul begins to supervise his son's education, to temper Anand's impatience so like his own - by saying that the boy is helping him. Here too he begins to write stories.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in ibid, p.39.

Even during this brief period when Mr. Biswas's discovery of his vocation seems to be a redemption from his fear of extinction, its persistence is suggested in an episode involving father and son. On a Sunday at the beach with Anand and his two brothers-in-law, Mr. Biswas overreacts when the other men playfully duck him in the sea; he is irate, frightened, even tearful. Anand's danger of drowning is more decisive. When he is rescued by his uncle, father and son displace their terror on each other. But the next day Mr. Biswas writes an angry article about the lack of warning notices at Docksider. For Anand the threat of drowning becomes the subject of his first original composition. In "A Day by the Seaside", he avoids the stock phrases prescribed by his teacher "pounding surf", "laden hampers", and "delirious joys" and instead describes the water filling his mouth, stifling his effort "to cry for help", his fear of dying. It is not his father that he censures but the sea. The threat of annihilation had demanded a truth to his actual experience that his education would deny.

Father and son reach an understanding grounded on the assumption, suggested in Naipaul's autobiographical writings and explicit in *A House For Mr. Biswas*, that the father is training the son to leave him, to attain the fulfilments he was deprived of. Like Seepersad Naipaul, Mr. Biswas encourages his son to compete for a government scholarship, he shares his reading with him, he asks for his advice about his writing. All this is preparation for the boy's escape. When he makes Anand "write out and learn the meanings of difficult words" in Dickens, he explains, "I don't want you to be like me". Ironically, this concern only draws them closer in their aspirations and their fears: "Anand understood. Father and son, each saw the other as weak and vulnerable, and each felt a responsibility for the other, a responsibility which, in times of particular pain, was disguised as exaggerated authority on the one side, exaggerated respect on the other".<sup>26</sup>

But the inverse of their bond is inevitable anger at the circumstances that have forged it. Their temperaments are similar - high-strung, sensitive, quick to cover hurt with barbed words they later regret or, in Mr. Biswas's case, as his job and living conditions deteriorate, with violent acts. Anand, who uses expressions he has learned from his father to retort to an insulting classmate, also turns Mr.

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in, *ibid*, p. 40.

Biswas's words against him. Unaware that Anand wants to see a certain film in order to meet another student's challenge, Mr. Biswas says: "When you get to my age you wouldn't care for Westerners". Anand retaliates by joining his father's opening clause to words he had used earlier to express the wish that his son surpass him: "When I get to your age I don't want to be like you". He has turned obedience into cruelty. Both are contrite, but Mr. Biswas's efforts to make amends only lead to further conflict, which he lovingly resolves.

There is a significant difference in V.S. Naipaul's depiction of a painful incident in "Prologue to an Autobiography" and in *A House For Mr. Biswas*. In the autobiographical account he describes an especially difficult period when his father, overwrought by lack of privacy and insufficient food for the extended family, quarrels among and with them, "one Sunday evening, in a great, rage... threw a glass of hot milk. It cut me above my right eye; my eyebrow still shows the scar".<sup>27</sup> In the novel, Mr. Biswas, after flinging about and breaking objects in his room, "threw a glass of milk at Anand and cut him above the eye. He slapped Shama downstairs". The extent of his violence, particularly when aimed at the boy and his mother, intensifies the ambivalence of the relationship between father and son. It hardly matters whether such details are fictional or Naipaul omitted them from his autobiography out of respect for his father, out of a sense of decorum. They heighten a recurring motif in *A House For Mr. Biswas*: anger as a desperate means of self-assertion. It is an impetus to writing and can be a solace. Near the end of his life, when he is fired by the *Trinidad Sentinel*, Mr. Biswas misses his son, who is now in England. He "needed his son's interest and anger".

Thus, it's the love and responsibility of the father and son to each other that marks the central drive of this novel. In the three novels preceding the present novel under study Naipaul seems to have avoided presenting such a relationship between the father and the son. The hero of *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) loses his father early in the story. In most of the stories of *Miguel Street*, and in an early story - "The Enemy"- the same avoidance can be noted in the fatherlessness of characters. *A House For Mr. Biswas* helped Naipaul to find himself through the task of sorting out the meaning of his father's life. An important aspect of Biswas's

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, p.40.

achievement is the creation of a coherent, ordered past for his children: "Soon it seemed to the children that they had never lived anywhere but in the tall square house in Sikkim Street. From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent".<sup>28</sup> It's the every 'impulse' of Naipaul's memories of his father that has floated into this novel.

So in 1981, on hearing a section of *A House For Mr. Biswas* read on the BBC World Service, Naipaul could only weep.<sup>29</sup> His tears, he says, were "*lacrimae rerum*", 'the tears of things', the tears in things: to the feelings for the things written about the passions and nerves of my early life - there was added a feeling for the time of the writing the ambition, the tenacity, the innocence. My literary ambition had grown out of my early life; the two were intertwined; the tears were for a double innocence."<sup>30</sup> It may seem surprising that Naipaul uses *lacrimae rerum*, that most resounding of tragic phrases, to signify his response not only to remembrances of his childhood in Trinidad but to those arduous years in London when the joy of writing *A House For Mr. Biswas* was his "Eden". But the victory of creation emerged from "the fear of destitution", from "a vision of the abyss... that lies below the comedy of this book".<sup>31</sup> Virgil's line, "Sunt lacrimae rerum of mentem mortalia tangunt",<sup>32</sup> Includes the mind's awareness of destruction and death; Naipaul's quotation links the fear of extinction with the drive to creation in the minds of the author and his protagonist. Beginning with *A House For Mr. Biswas*, he transmits his legacy of his father to many of his fictive characters.

### **Mr. Biswas and his family**

V.S. Naipaul was the second of seven children and they lived for many years with his mother's family in a Hindu joint family set-up. He grew up surrounded by uncles, aunts and he estimates, about fifty cousins. Naipaul comments: "The large sprawling Hindu clan life... was like a crash course in the world you learned about cruelty, about propaganda, about the destruction of

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<sup>28</sup> Naipaul, n.17, p. 581.

<sup>29</sup> Feder, n.9, p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.41.

<sup>31</sup> Naipaul, n.18, pp. 22.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Feder, n.9, p. 41.

reputations. You learned about forming allies".<sup>33</sup> His journalist father felt stifled by this family life that left no room for privacy. "I think it's fair to say that our father found his family environment crippling and was almost destroyed by it"<sup>34</sup>, says the young brother - Shiva Naipaul. Biswas's aspirations for a house of his own in this 'Pandemonium' signifies his desire to transcend the squalor and makeshift quality of life in the society in which he finds himself - a desire for beauty and order and significance. The doll's house which he impulsively buys for Savi embodies both these meanings - by giving a present to his daughter Mr. Biswas flouts the Tulsi code and asserts his individuality; one of the reasons he is charmed into buying so expensive a present is the sheer perfection of the house: "Every room of the doll's house was daintily furnished. The kitchen had a stove such as Mr. Biswas had never seen in real life, a safe and a sink".<sup>35</sup> Hence the outraged reaction of the family and hence the description of the shattered house as if the assault made on it had been an assault on his own person.

Biswas's focus on his feelings of entrapment on the Tulsi family, and his rebellion against fate is partly a rebellion against the world the Tulsis represent: the orthodox Hindu world where the future is pre-ordained, and individuality submerged in caste identity and a predetermined succession of ritual attitudes. Biswas is caught up in marriage at an early age: "The world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He felt trapped".<sup>36</sup>

He ascribes his failure to get on in life to the family, and to the encumbrance imposed by his wife and children. At Green Vale he is wont to think: "He was 'trapped' in a 'hole'. 'Trap' she heard him say over and over. That's what you and your family do to me. Trap me in this hole".<sup>37</sup> The phrase is directly drawn from biographical sources; Seepersad had written to his son, referring to the difficulties of writing a novel while working for the *Trinidad Guardian*, "I feel

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<sup>33</sup> Chandra B. Joshi, "Autobiographical Element in A House For Mr. Biswas", in Purabi Panwar (ed.), V.S. Naipaul, *An Anthology of Recent Criticism* (Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003), p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 84.

<sup>35</sup> Naipaul, *n. 17*, p. 216.

<sup>36</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A House For Mr Biswas* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1961), p. 82.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

trapped”.<sup>38</sup> The oppressive quality of the family is suggested by the description of Hanuman House, which is compared to an “alien white fortress”,<sup>39</sup> its walls “bulky, impregnable and blank”.<sup>40</sup> The novel portrays the cruelty of family life: “Affection between brother and sister was despised. No alliance was stable. Only enmities were lasting”<sup>41</sup> A passage from *India: A Million Mutinies Now* furnishes an autobiographical parallel:

“Cruelty, yes: it was in the nature of Indian family life. The clan that gave protection and identity, and saved people from the void was itself a little state, and it could be a hard place, full of politics, full of hatreds and changing alliances and moral denunciations. It was the kind of family life I had known for much of my childhood”.<sup>42</sup>

There is a tyranny to conform, indicated when Shama is compelled to destroy Savi’s doll’s house - a miniature version of the house - which Mr. Biswas aspires to. Poorer family members have a status little distinguished from the servants. The family organisation engulfs the identity of the individual: “Biswas was expected to become a Tulsī”.<sup>43</sup> According to the ethos of traditional Hindu life, even emotion is somehow impersonal. Shama’s aspiration is

“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”.<sup>44</sup>

The Tulsīs, nevertheless, do not altogether account for Biswas’s frustrations. The novel manifests a certain ambivalence towards the extended family and the freedom that Biswas desires: the family is both constricting and supportive; freedom is both enviable and fraught with anxieties. The Tulsīs provide security and a solid sanctuary: Hanuman House is “an organism that possessed a life, strength and power to comfort which was quite separate from the individuals

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<sup>38</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Letters Between a Father and Son* (London: Abacus, 2000), p. 120.

<sup>39</sup> Naipaul, *n.36*, p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 73.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 372.

<sup>42</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *India: A Million mutinies Now* (London: Heinemann, 1990), p. 178.

<sup>43</sup> Naipaul, *n.36*, p. 88.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 144.

who composed it".<sup>45</sup> One compares Naipaul's observations concerning his childhood: "I had felt swallowed up by our extended Hindu family... but that family had given me a very bright idea of who I was".<sup>46</sup>

The novel balances a sense of the value of independence against a recognition of the terrors of freedom. The pattern is set early on when Biswas is given a day off from the rum shop: "As fatigue overcame him he began to long for the day to end, to relieve him of his freedom."<sup>47</sup> His rebellion against the Tulsis is presented as initially exhilarating, but subsequently depressing. The independence he wins for himself at The Chase fails to provide the fulfilments he had hoped for:

"He wanted to comfort her. But he needed comfort himself. How lonely the shop was! And how frightening! He had never thought it would be like this when he found himself in an establishment of his own".<sup>48</sup>

In a moment of subsequent disillusionment, Biswas feels trapped by the very impression he has been at pains to make on the world:

"Here, claimed by no one, he had reflected on the unreality of his life, and had wished to make a mark on the wall as proof of his existence. Now he needed no such proof. Relationships had been created where none existed; he stood at their centre. In that very unreality had lain freedom".<sup>49</sup>

Landeg White discusses the novel's recognition of complexity and contradiction, pointing to the way it portrays achievement and failure as part of a single experience, writing as an escape as well as a means coming to terms with life, and relationships both as a necessary extension of the self and as a trap.<sup>50</sup> Despite its acknowledgement of complexity, however, there can be no doubt that the novel thinks rebellion, independence and freedom preferable to capitulation and servitude.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 272.

<sup>46</sup> V.S. Naipaul, "My Brother's Tragic Sense", *Spectator*, 258, January 24, 1987, pp. 22.

<sup>47</sup> Naipaul, *n.36*, p. 58.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.58.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, P. 479.

<sup>50</sup> Landeg White, *V.S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 98

Rebellion against the Tulsi family, moreover, has overtones of futility, in view of the fact that the old order is itself in the process of collapsing under its internal stresses. Biswas's story unfolds against a background of wider social change on the island - the passing away of the rural Hindu way of life which Seepersad's stories had recorded. The decay of the Tulsi clan is matched by the degeneration of the body of Mrs. Tusli, the matriarch who had held the family together.

The rate of family disintegration is intensified by the Shorthills interlude, which is invested with mythic overtones: the description of the laying waste to an old colonial estate is suggestive of the pillaging of the New World under imperialism, while also prefiguring a future postcolonial disorder. Naipaul describes the incident on which the episode is based - when the Capildeo family lived on a former Cocoa estate outside Port of Spain - in terms of which he has also applied to the disruptions which attend the colonial situation:

“Unsupported by that Chaguanas world, with no one outside to instruct us in our obligations, even to ourselves, our own internal reverences began to go; our Hindu system began to fail”.<sup>51</sup>

*A House For Mr. Biswas* draws attention to the fecundity of the land, which, “though fruitful from a former cultivation, felt new”.<sup>52</sup> The descent of the Tulsis on the estate, located on Christopher Columbus road, is described as an “invasion”.<sup>53</sup> Its wanton devastation, as much though aimless stupidity as greed, is nightmarishly accelerated: within a few pages, the land reverts to bush, and the very soil itself is being sold off. The old ethos of communalism is replaced by new, individualistic imperatives: Biswas senses “It was now every man for himself”.<sup>54</sup> The incident sets the seal on the fate of the Tulsi clan.

In “*Writing A House For Mr. Biswas*”<sup>55</sup> Naipaul has said that he planned at first to shape the narrative around the acquisition of simple possessions by which a man is surrounded at his death. But “in the writing the book changed. It became the

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<sup>51</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1984), p. 40.

<sup>52</sup> Naipaul, n.36, p. 359.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 361.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 368.

<sup>55</sup> Naipaul, n.18.



story of a man's search for a house and all that a possession of one's own house implied. The first idea... wasn't false. But it was too formal for a novel. The second idea about a house was larger, better. It also contained more of the truth."<sup>56</sup> Thematically as well as structurally, the acquisition of the other bits of personal possessions of which an 'epic catalogue' is given in the Prologue is perfectly complementary to the central structural device of the search for a house. As M. Shenfield comments, each of the possessions catalogued in the Prologue is a "motif which will later be expanded into a complex episode in Mr. Biswas's life. By the end of the novel; one will be aware that each of these simple, even, pathetic, acquisitions represents a momentous effort, a whole campaign against hostile circumstances."<sup>57</sup> The various houses through which Mr. Biswas passes as temporary resident provide a closely integrated design to the novel. In part I, two such houses are of particular interest. One is the house at The Chase in which he finds himself as a result of his efforts to free himself from the Tulsis. However the independence this house denotes is deceptive, for it too belongs to the Tulsis as he realises during the house blessing ceremony: "Mr. Biswas found himself a stranger in his own yard. But was it his own? Mrs. Tulsi and Sushila didn't appear to think so. The villagers didn't think so".<sup>58</sup>

Naipaul frequently presents man's awareness of and links with the vegetation around him as reflecting his relationship with the land. At The Chase, Biswas had not thought it worthwhile to plant trees that would bear flowers or fruits in two or three years".<sup>59</sup> But in Mrs. Tulsi's Port of Spain house, so used does he become to thinking of the house as his own that "he made a garden and acquired new possessions".<sup>60</sup> That this was only a delusion is forced on him before long when the Tulsi family descends on the house for Owad's send off. "All at once his position became uncertain. He found himself squeezed into one room and for periods lost track of Shama and his children."<sup>61</sup> This was only a prelude, however. One afternoon he comes home to find his rose garden completely

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>57</sup> M. Shenfield, "Mr. Biswas and Mr. Polly", *English*, 23(1974),p.97.

<sup>58</sup> Naipaul, n.17, p. 151.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 186.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 346

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 360

destroyed. The rose garden embodies the same aspirations as the doll's house and like the shattered doll's house the description of the ruined garden reflects Mr. Biswas's personal anguish. The pain is made worse by Seth's bitter reminder of his insignificant present and past: "your father is a damn funny sort of man he says to the children. Behaving as though he owned the place. Let me tell you that when you children were born your father couldn't feed you".<sup>62</sup> The family always remains vulnerable to such barbs. Some years later, when Anand asks Ajodha, Tara's husband, for a contribution to a charity fund, Ajodha says: "you are funny sort of a family. Father collecting money for destitute. You collecting for polish refugees. Who collecting for you?"<sup>63</sup>

From such pain and humiliation the little house on Sikkim Street sets him free forever. Here he plants a garden again - roses and orchids and he also plants a laburnum tree which grows rapidly. "Its flowers were sweet, and in the still hot evenings their smell filled the house".<sup>64</sup> As Landeg White has said the house at Sikkim Street "is the culmination of former efforts".<sup>65</sup> So it is the "insuranburn" money for the house at The Chase that makes possible the building of the house at Green Vale. This house turns out to be a cruel travesty of his dream house and remains unfinished. Built on land belonging to the Tulsis it could never have answered fully his need for independence. Being in the country it would also not satisfy that other meaning of the symbol - the commitment of the Indian immigrants to the New World. For it was in the rural areas of Trinidad that the Indians clung to the past, denying the finality of their transportation. As in the case of the doll's house, here too the house and the man are closely identified. The ugly makeshift structure with the pitch snakes dangling from the roof reflects all the cruel limitations of Mr. Biswas's circumstances as well as his inner disturbance. A remark of Seth's hints at this identification: "On Saturday Seth said, what's the matter Mohun? You are the colour of this. He placed his large hand on one of the grey uprights".<sup>66</sup> Mr. Biswas's mental breakdown is paralleled by the burning down of the house. Both disasters pave the way for a new beginning.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 387

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 457

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 584

<sup>65</sup> White, *n.50*, p. 125.

<sup>66</sup> Naipaul, *n.17*, p. 271.

Part I of the book concludes with an image that takes us back to its opening section. As he is walking down the High Street of Arwacas, the whitewashed stones and palm trees that line the drive remind Biswas of “the legs of Pratap and Prasad when, as boys, they returned from the buffalo pond”.<sup>67</sup> Part II begins with a sentence that pointedly recalls the Prologue. So at thirty-one, Mr. Biswas begins life anew - almost as destitute and homeless as he was at six. But not quite. The yearning for perfection and order, as well as the desire for independence are still alive in his heart as he leaves Hanuman House and his family behind. From the bus that takes him to Port of Spain he fixes his eye on “a house as small and neat as doll’s house” for as long as it is visible.

In this section too Mr. Biswas builds a house of his own and this house is complete and built with proper materials. But having built it he “felt uneasy”. The site is not appropriate. Appearing to be violation of nature the house “stood red-raw in its unregulated green setting, not seeming to invite habitation so much as decay. Nor does it answer the needs of the family.” “...Shama had to walk a mile to the village to do her shopping, water had to be brought up the hill from a spring in the cocoa woods... the children wanted to go back to Port of Spain....The new house imprisoned them in silence and bush.” The quest, then continues. It is only in the house at Sikkim Street that all the separate but related meanings of the symbol find fulfilment. However it is the four hundred dollars he gets for the materials of the Shorthills house that make it possible for him to buy this house. It makes him independent of the Tuslsis and answers his need for order and coherence. It also symbolises his transition from visitor to dweller in the new land - at last he belongs. In this respect Mr. Biswas is representative of the immigrant community of Indians in Trinidad. The acquisition of the house denotes a break from the self-defeating hankering for the past and a realistic acknowledgement of and commitment to the present.

But *A House For Mr. Biswas* is penetrated through and through with irony. This ironical mode is established right in the Prologue. It is Mr. Biswas who sees his achievement of the house and the winning of Shama’s loyalty as personal

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 305.

triumphs. In a kind of cinematic technique the camera seems to shift from the exulting Mr. Biswas to the object of his exultations, revealing the “stupendous” achievement to be a “squat sentry-box like structure which has a staircase tacked on as an afterthought and in which, “the upper floor sagged; there was no back door; most of the windows didn’t close; one door could not open; the celotex panels under the eaves had fallen out and left gaps between which bats could enter the attic”.<sup>68</sup> The Prologue, in the prescribed epic manner, gives summary of the entire action of the novel. Naipaul makes no attempt to present Mr. Biswas as a conventional heroic figure. Both the Prologue and Epilogue have a deflating limiting purpose in keeping with the relentlessly unsentimental view of things maintained throughout the novel. The double-edged device of the epic conventions enables the writer to elevate Biswas’s stature to that of an epic hero and at the same time to undercut his achievement by implicitly acknowledging the absurdity of the comparison. While it suggests that Biswas’s life was a triumph over his limitation - it also points out the symbol of this triumph - the house is jerry-built, that he is duped into buying it at a price much higher than its worth and that it is heavily mortgaged.

Even in the context of the Indians’ search for a meaningful place in the Creole world of Trinidad, though Biswas’s shaky little house may signify journey’s end, it equally suggests that their position remains uncertain and shadowed with anxieties. Mr. Biswas’s “triumph” becomes even more ambivalent in that while he had always longed for and dreamt of escape and in the end accepts his Creole presence - his son Anand, like the boy-narrator of *Miguel Street*, has come to a different decision. He rejects the environment in which he has grown up and in which he has seen and understood only too well the pain and frustration of his father’s life. When Biswas is trying to console him for his anticipated failure in the exhibition with “you did your best. And no true effort is ever wasted. Remember that”, Anand retorts: “What about you?”<sup>69</sup> Earlier he had said to his father “when I get to your age I don’t want to be like you”.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 477.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 465.

Thus there is no “lived happily ever after” end to the story and Naipaul’s form remains uncompromisingly true to his vision of life. Mr. Biswas enters the house under the shadow of death - we know that he lives in it for five years only. Having fulfilled his life’s mission he becomes irritable and dissatisfied: “He grew dull and querulous and ugly”. Illness, disappointment in Anand and debt, dim much of the glory of his achievement. When the brilliant end of the novel quietly affirms Mr. Biswas’s triumph over his limitations, it does so without glossing over these continuing disappointments. The laburnum planted in the bit of extra land retrieved from the solicitor’s clerk grows rapidly and fills the house with the smell of its flowers. Mr. Biswas does not die unaccommodated and his death leaves a void and the children return after his funeral to an “empty house”. There is an oblique affirmation in the word “empty” here - an acknowledgement of the difference made by Mr. Biswas’s absence. Interestingly even this muted triumph is further qualified in a later novel - *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*.

For all its tragic undertow, *A House for Mr. Biswas* remains the most warmly human of Naipaul’s books. It has a quality of felt reality and an emotional resonance that Naipaul has not been able to recapture in any subsequent work. Mr. Stone’s world is darker and grimmer than that of Mr. Biswas. He at least had been allowed a measure of success and satisfaction even in his ramshackle house. Though he is ill and cantankerous and sacked from his job - the laburnum he had planted in his garden grows quickly and gives shade as well as sweet-scented flowers filling the house with their smell. But such is the grimness of the latter book that it seems to reach back to this pleasant vision of *A House For Mr. Biswas* simply to negate and cancel its value. Set against the vision of Mr. Biswas in his garden with the butterfly orchids and the flowering tree is the description of Mr. Stone walking up the street to his home “past the petty gardens of petty houses where people sought to *accommodate* themselves to life...”<sup>71</sup>

There is an allusion here - the inference is unavoidable to the preceding book, an allusion that further diminishes the value of Mr. Biswas’s limited achievement. Mr. Biswas’s house is certainly one of these petty houses and what for Mr. Biswas had been a triumphant act of self-assertion, a proof that he was not

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<sup>71</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963), p. 159.

leaving the world as he had come to it - “unnecessary and unaccommodated” - is seen in *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* as a pathetic attempt to *accommodate* oneself to life. While the meaning of Mr. Stone’s story the loneliness and isolation of the colonial is now extended to the metropolitan figure.

The lesson drilled into Mr. Biswas at Lal’s school, is incidentally, a pungent comment on the futility of the education imparted to the colonial subjects, an education, which served only to extend their subjection to the regions of the mind. David punter in his famous work, *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* compares Mr. Biswas to many characters in postcolonial fiction “who have been deracinated by imperial education”. Mr. Biswas was, we hear in a resonant phrase, never taught anything useful; he was taught ‘other things’ - things, we might literally suggest, *of the other* - by Mr. Lal, his teacher:

“He learned to say the Lord’s Prayer in Hindi from the *King George V Hindi Reader*, and he learned many English poems by heart from the *Royal Reader*. At Lal’s dictation he made copious notes, which he never seriously believed, about geysers, rift valleys, watersheds, currents, the Gulf Stream and a number of deserts. He learned about oases, which Lal taught him to pronounce ‘osis’... He learned about igloos”.<sup>72</sup>

Mr. Biswas’s attempts to take lesson from London School of Journalism make a similar point about the absurdity of trying to live by alien standards, a condition imposed on the colonial subject. The episode illustrates the “predicament of the artist in a colonial society. Biswas, like Black Wordsworth, tries to live by patterns established for him by his brother (white) Wordsworth”<sup>73</sup>

The organisation and functioning of the Tulsi clan is in some ways a subtle paradigm of the political history of the region. Naipaul has described the joint family in which he grew up as “a microcosm of the authoritarian state, where power is all important”.<sup>74</sup> While the exploitative, repressive power of the organisation is brilliantly portrayed, its sheltering, protective power is perceived with equal clarity. Hanuman House is from the first described as a fortress – protecting as well as imprisoning. Mr. Biswas rebels against Tulsidom because he

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<sup>72</sup> Naipaul, n.17, p. 46.

<sup>73</sup> David Ormerod in *Critics On Caribbean Literature*, ed. Edward Baugh, p. 87.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Michener, “The Dark Visions of V.S. Naipaul”, *Newsweek*, 16 November 1981, pp. 108.

realises that in exchange for its protection it demands the surrender of his identity: “Mr. Biswas had no money, no position. He was expected to become a Tulsi. At once he rebelled.”<sup>75</sup> At first the family makes a joke of his rebellion. Soon, however, Seth complains: “This house is like a republic already”, and Mr. Biswas is packed off to The Chase. Overcome by a feeling of loneliness and desolation, he begins to think of Hanuman House as a comforting haven.

Gradually he arrives at a new perception of Hanuman House. What had seemed chaotic at first is now seen to be a well-ordered and secure world. “He needed such a sanctuary”. Savi and Anand are well looked after at Hanuman House. Mrs. Tulsi takes special trouble in persuading Savi to eat fish. This may be seen as the “benevolent paternalism” which Naipaul has been accused of attributing to colonialism. At Shorthills, with Seth no longer in control, it is everyone for himself. The resulting situation is reminiscent of the scramble for power in many newly independent colonies. The widows’ desperate money making schemes, their lack of experience and know-how and the consequent failure of every scheme, recall the confused attempts of emerging nations at industrialisation.

Frequent change of the houses Mr. Biswas lives in is triggered by his nagging ambivalence and compulsive unease with all of them including the one he finally purchases for himself. It reflects not only his restlessness and homelessness, his disaffection and estrangement with his surroundings, his feeling of being ‘cut off’ and being ‘flung off the world’ but also reminds us of the similar predicament of Naipaul’s father, Seepersad Naipaul. Biswas’s perpetual quest for a house as home, as a location of belongingness, in this sense, contextualises the diasporic challenge and anxiety and the disturbing sense of exile, alienation and uprootedness experienced by the author’s father. In an extended sense, it presages the many journeys undertaken by V.S. Naipaul, his arrivals at no fixed destinations, and his selective intellectual odyssey. This endemically hurting underbelly of *A House For Mr. Biswas* constitutes the generic site for its author’s prolific, lifelong creative endeavour.

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<sup>75</sup> Naipaul, *n. 17*, p. 90.

One of the striking aspects of this novel, *A House For Mr. Biswas*, is Naipaul's presentation of his father, Seepersad Naipaul as the 'Everyman' of that period of the Caribbean. This novel is an impressionistic record of a life against a social and historical background in flux. As Naipaul states in "Writing *A House For Mr. Biswas*", "It does not tell a literal truth. The pattern in the narrative of widening vision and a widening world... derives also from a child's way of experiencing. It was on the partial knowledge of a child myself – and his intuitions and emotions that the writer's imagination went to work".<sup>76</sup> Our knowledge of the personal connection certainly enriches our response to the book, but the characters who people its world exist in their own right. Mr. Biswas commands our interest and sympathy not because he is Naipaul's father but because in him Naipaul has created an endearing emblem of our common humanity. So common, that a singularly insensitive *Times Literary Supplement (TLS)* reviewer complained: "Mr. Biswas is simply not worth all the detail that Mr. Naipaul spins so laboriously about him...He is a rather stupid little man... also cowardly and ugly, definitely not the kind of stuff heroes are made of."<sup>77</sup> This reviewer seems to have missed the point so well understood in the Nobel citation: "...in allowing peripheral figures their place in the momentousness of great literature, Naipaul reverses normal perspectives and denies readers at the centre their protective detachment". Biswas represents man at his most vulnerable – physically weak and ugly, socially powerless. He has neither money nor status. He often plays the buffoon as a cover for his helplessness. In one episode of the novel he tells Anand - "I'm not your father", and when a bewildered Anand asks him who he is, he replies – "I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know."<sup>78</sup> As Rohlehr<sup>79</sup> says - "Biswas is a representative figure, an Everyman".

## Conclusion

When Naipaul recalled the experience of writing *A House For Mr. Biswas* in later years, he thought of it all characteristically as a creative writer and kept all

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<sup>76</sup> Naipaul, n.18, pp. 22-23.

<sup>77</sup> "High Jinks in Trinidad", *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 September 1961, pp. 641.

<sup>78</sup> Naipaul, n.17, p. 279.

<sup>79</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, "The Ironic Approach", in R.D. Hamner (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul* (London: Heinemann Educational Books LTD., 1977) p. 191-92.



critical verbiage out of his observation. He remembered the little, mostly unnoticed things, experiences and events, related, in their various ways to the memory of his father. He wrote, "I had changed flats in London; and my mind went back to 1938, to my discovery of the few pieces of furniture which my father had brought with him to Port of Spain, the first furniture I had thought of as mine. I wanted to tell the story of the life as the story of the acquiring of those simple precious pieces. The book took three years to write. It changed; and the writing changed me. I was working about things I didn't know; and the book that came out was very much my father's book...it was written out of his writing."<sup>80</sup>

Strong parallelisms, therefore, between Mr. Biswas and his son Anand on the one hand and Seepersad and V.S. Naipaul on the other are too conspicuous to miss, and the book stays very much his father's book. In an interview given in 1972, Naipaul recalled that his relationship with his father was 'the big relationship' of his life, and added, 'Nearly everything I am, I am because of this great link I feel with him'. He acutely felt the pain of his father's frustrated ambitions, and in the same interview goes on to say, "I always felt protective towards my father. I never felt that he was the man protecting me. I always felt quite the other way around: that it was up to me to look after him". There is an indelible stamp of bonding between Naipaul and Seepersad in this book, and of their deeply felt sense of responsibility towards each other. Much later, in his Nobel lecture Naipaul again struck a similar note and observed that *A House For Mr. Biswas* is 'a large book about our family life. He added, "During this book my writing ambition grew. But when it was over I felt I had done all that I could do with my island material. No matter how much I meditated on it no further fiction would come".<sup>81</sup> It is obviously his father who dominates in this large book about his family life.

Biswas's increasing intimacy with Shama is part of his achievement, but is less central to the book than the developing relation of Biswas to Anand: the work is concerned with patrilinear legacies and homage. There is scarcely a mention of Anand's relationship with his mother, which is paralleled by the paucity of

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<sup>80</sup> Naipaul, *n.4*, p. 72.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Purabi Panwar, "Introduction", in Panwar, ed., n.33, p. 19.

references to his mother in Naipaul's interviews and non-fictional writings. "I love her", he wrote to his sister, "but who has shaped my life, my views, my tastes? Pa."<sup>82</sup> The relations between a mother and son do, however, form the subject of Naipaul's early story "The Enemy" (1995): the boy considers "this woman, my mother, as the enemy".<sup>83</sup>

The story incorporates elements of autobiographical material which is given a more extensive treatment in *A House For Mr. Biswas*. Some of the awkwardness of the relations of Biswas and Anand is anticipated by the boy's attitude towards his mother, "someone from whom I was going to escape as soon as I grew big enough."<sup>84</sup> While the conclusion of the tale suggests that, secretly, the boy has longed for his mother's affection.

Realising he will not fulfil his ambitions in his lifetime, Biswas transfers them to his son. He is pictured, towards the end of his life, with no other occupation than to "wait for Anand. Wait for Savi: Wait for the five years to come to an end. Wait. Wait".<sup>85</sup> Biswas's investment in his son is represented from Anand's point of view as faintly ridiculous, and as an embarrassment; his attentions are well-meaning but inept. Anand is partly a victim of his father's ambitions: his life is made a misery by the work expected of him: "Childhood, as a time of gaiety and irresponsibility, was for these exhibition pupils only one of the myths of English Composition".<sup>86</sup>

The novel's temporal scheme combines a cyclical structure with linear progression: Anand's life both repeats and transcends that of Biswas. Anand's physical frailty, too, is emphasised: "...the boy's narrow shoulder blades below the thin cotton shirt; the slender neck, the large head; the thin eczema-stained legs in small, loose trousers; the blackened soles."<sup>87</sup> Anand's ill-fitting and ungainly home-made clothes recall Biswas's unsightly flour sack trousers:

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<sup>82</sup> Naipaul, n.38, p. 139.

<sup>83</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A Flag on the Island* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1967), p. 62.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p. 71.

<sup>85</sup> Naipaul, n.36, p. 528.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid*, p. 345.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid*, p. 211.

“Mr. Biswas was irritated by his shyness, but he was again touched by the boy’s fragility and the carefully ragged “home clothes” which Anand, like the other children, wore the minute he came from school.”<sup>88</sup>

Anand’s humiliation - he has been afraid to use the school toilets echoes that of Biswas at pundit Jairam’s. Anand almost drowns, as Biswas was feared to have done as a child. Anand may share the humiliation of enforced dependency on the Tulsis, but he is permitted the possibility of an escape denied to Biswas. This is in keeping with the way the novel moves from the delineation of a closed world of ritual repetition, to a more open and uncertain world where ambition can be pursued.<sup>89</sup> It begins in a world of magic and predestination (the pundit may be satirised, but all his predictions come to pass), set in an “antique, ‘pastoral’ Hindu community”,<sup>90</sup> which denies any latitude for the exercise of the individual will. It charts a movement to the city, and to a more open-ended form of narration, akin to the Victorian novel rather than Hindu fable, in which there is greater scope for the individual to mould his or her fate. Constraints are imposed on Biswas’s capacity to shape his destiny: the prologue portrays Biswas reflecting back at the end of his life, and remains the pre-determined conclusion towards which he struggles and the novel progresses. Naipaul furthermore frustrates the expectations of narrative progression which attach to the realistic mode, by means of frequent repetitions: Biswas’s recurring frustrations and failures, his retreats from fragile independence into dependence. For the most part, the novel registers a shift away from magic to realism.

Naipaul has described his relationship with his father as: “The big relationship in my life, and what is odd about it is that I felt always protective towards my father I never felt that he was the man protecting me, I always felt quite the other way around: that it was up to me to look after him.”<sup>91</sup> Anand feels pain when others ridicule his father. There are times when Anand stands by his father - when he refuses to abandon him at Green vale, for instance - and times when Anand is unnecessarily cruel to him. Biswas’s relationship with Anand is

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 213.

<sup>89</sup> Homi Bhaba, “Representation and the Colonial Text”, in Frank Gloversmith (ed.), *The Theory of Reading* (Sussex: Harvester), 1984, p. 93-122.

<sup>90</sup> Naipaul, n.18, pp. 22.

<sup>91</sup> Interviewed by Bingham, n.2, pp. 306.

characterised by a succession of advances and retreats. Anand shows considerable embarrassment at displays of emotion. Even when he stands by his father he does so petulantly: "Because - the word came out thin, explosive, charged with anger, at himself and his father. 'Because they was going to leave you alone'".<sup>92</sup> Anand's failure to return to assist the family in its distress, when Biswas has a heart attack and loses his job, is based on historical events. The book does not in any way seek to excuse Anand for his cruelty, or to mitigate the importance of its effect on Biswas. "Prologue to an Autobiography" and *A House For Mr. Biswas* can be interpreted as seeking to make restitution for this absence. They look back relatedly to the father whom, like the narrator at the end of *Miguel Street*, Naipaul had ignored at the moment of his departure from Trinidad. "And it was with that sudden churlishness, a sudden access of my own hysteria, that I had left my father in 1950, not looking back. I wish I had".<sup>93</sup>

To conclude we may resort to Naipaul's article already cited, "Writing *A House For Mr. Biswas*", in which Naipaul has acknowledged his special relation to this book: "...of all my books *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I felt and saw as a child." The factual basis of the book does not, however, make it a work of documentary realism, and Naipaul was right to protest about this.<sup>94</sup> The book records the process of arriving at a new understanding of the past through recreating it imaginatively. One of the major strengths of this book is that notwithstanding his deep emotional involvement with his subject, Naipaul is completely successful in maintaining an ironic distance from it. The intensity of this emotional involvement can be gauged to some extent from what Naipaul tells us about his reaction on hearing a reading of this book over the radio, in Cyprus, in 1981 - "I was in tears, swamped by the emotions I had tried to shield myself from for twenty years".<sup>95</sup>

Having finished the book, which took three years to write, he found he "was unwilling to re-enter the world I had created, unwilling to expose myself

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<sup>92</sup> Naipaul, n.36, p. 251.

<sup>93</sup> Naipaul, n.7, p. 47.

<sup>94</sup> V.S. Naipaul, "Speaking of writing", *The Times*, 2nd January 1964, pp. 11.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Joshi, n.33, p. 83

again to the emotions that lay below the comedy”.<sup>96</sup> As in the preceding novels the comedy is poised on the edge of tragedy. Underlying the novel is the pressure of personal anxieties: “I can not easily present myself again the anxiety of that time. It is that anxiety - the fear of destitution in all its forms, the vision of abyss that lies below the comedy of the book”.<sup>97</sup> In another interview he says of his father: “I always felt an immense tenderness towards him. His death, when I was 21, remains one of the biggest events of my life”.<sup>98</sup>

The truth of this is movingly demonstrated in an incident that occurred nearly fifty years after his father’s death. Aseem Chhabra recounts that at a gathering organised at 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y, Naipaul’s new book - *Between Father and Son* was being released. But Naipaul did not read from this book - because “it is too emotional, too personal, too painful”, he told the packed audience. He chose instead a passage from his 1998 book - *Beyond Belief*. It was a passage, which told of a long estranged son - Rashid returning home to visit his dying, 88 year old father. Naipaul had not been able to make a trip to see his ailing father or to attend his funeral in 1953. And while reading the passage about Rashid, that day in January 2000, Naipaul broke down and “started to cry silently”.<sup>99</sup>

So, the carefully cool narrator of *A House For Mr. Biswas*, who turns out by implication to be the adult Anand, knows who he is by means of a painstaking narrative tracing his ancestry. It is in the process of recording his ancestry that Naipaul achieves his identity.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>97</sup> Naipaul, n.18, pp. 22.

<sup>98</sup> Michener, n.74, pp. 105.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Joshi, n.33, p. 83.

CHAPTER III

**“IDENTITY” QUEST IN  
*A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS***

A yearning for escape is, in fact, a search to find oneself; which is when all is said and done, a return to oneself.<sup>1</sup>

One of the main problems facing the West Indian writer is how to write a novel about houses. A house suggests clearly defined boundaries: physical, emotional, traditional. The traditional English/European novel is a 'house' and is usually, in one way or another, about houses.<sup>2</sup>

The structural potential and peril of the world, the structural understanding... is related intimately to the human being. That to my mind is the situation of the West Indian artist... the architectural problem that confronts him... man is frequently overwhelmed by the immense and alien power of the universe... man's survival is a continual tension and release of energy that approaches self-destruction but is aware of self-discovery.<sup>3</sup>

I've spent a lot of time... trying to define why one felt out of it, why one felt one didn't belong to this tradition of English letters. It was because its assumptions about the world were assumptions I could never make myself.<sup>4</sup>

V.S. Naipaul's writing career can be seen in terms of a journey, an 'infinite rehearsal'<sup>5</sup> and meditation on his diasporic experience as an East Indian West Indian and a continual reevaluation of the situation of his double exile. A journey as an immigrant writer in Britain and the location of that self in a world that is now not only post-imperial but also postcolonial - a country 'whose recent history of immigration ensures that the conflicts of postcolonial identity are now enacted on the site of the imperial power itself.'<sup>6</sup> This journey and the enigma of its many arrivals have been expressed over a period of nearly forty years and through a variety of narrative forms ranging from travelogue, to autobiography and history. Naipaul's fiction and non-fictional writings trace a symptomatic response to the need to discover an appropriate literary form for the representation of a psychic and symbolic sense of 'homelessness'. A need, as Bharati Mukherjee has

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<sup>1</sup> Alejo Carpentier: From an interview with Eclides Vazquez Candela, *Granma*, 6 April 1969; cited by Andrew Salkey as an epigraph to *Come Home*, Malcolm Heartland (London: Hutchinson, 1976), p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Brathwaite, "The House in the West Indian Novel", *Tapia*, 3 July 1977, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the writer and Society* (London: New Beacon, 1967), p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> V.S. Naipaul, "Without a Place"; interview with Ian Hamilton, *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 July, 1971, p. 897.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson Harris, *The Infinite Rehearsal* (London: Faber, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Gorra, *After Empire* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 8.

suggested, to write constantly about 'unhousing' whilst still remaining 'unhoused,'<sup>7</sup> to discover a new architecture for the imagination which would move beyond a sense of recurrent 'Shipwreck' and give expression to the 'restlessness' and 'disorder' brought about by the psychic and physical upheavals resulting from a history of Empire. Importantly, we are told through the words of Ralph Singh, narrator of *The Mimic Men*, that 'the empires of our time' have been 'short-lived' but 'they have altered the world for ever: their passing away is their least significant features'.<sup>8</sup>

Naipaul's project can be seen to be one which is firmly located in the need to come to terms with the effects of the 'passing away' of Empire, but more significantly, in the writing and rewriting of the self within the trauma of that history, which he has viewed as the psychic losses created by being both a participant and victim of the imperial process. In attempting over a long career, to write and revise his own location as twice-born 'immigrant', both within Trinidad as the descendant of an indentured Indian and again within Britain, he has constantly shown that the stories of colonialism and its post-imperial aftermath engendered what could be called 'narratives of anxiety'.<sup>9</sup> For in such narratives, the process of writing itself becomes a performative act of intervention and survival. It is a process that is delicately balanced, representing a search for a cultural and psychic equilibrium which constantly approaches 'self-destruction' but contains within it the seeds of self-discovery'.

Sir Vidiadhar SurajPrasad Naipaul had the misfortune of being born in the wrong place, a handicap he overcame by taking up residence in the right place. But he couldn't do much about being born at the wrong time, an injustice the world righted by stepping in his time. Today, Sir Vidia's nomadic status is fashionably in sync with the times as postcolonial writing and theory has made the third space a privileged for a writer to be in. Yet he is out of place among the wanderers of the interstitial space, the Rusindies, the Mukherjees, the Vassanjis. Unlike those who

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<sup>7</sup> Bharati Mukherjee and Robert Boyers, "A Conversation with V.S. Naipaul", *Salmagundi*, 54 (1981), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (Andre Deutsch, 1967), p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 6.



dream of 'imaginary homelands' to adjust to the trauma of displacement, he has opted for homelessness. As the paradigmatic condition of humankind in the postmodern world, homelessness might appear like a highly comfortable position to speak from. But Naipaul chose to occupy this uncertain zone before it had been so defined. His nomadic status made him a cultural oddity both among his 'placed' contemporaries from postcolonial homelands like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Nayantara Sahgal and compatriots like George Lamming and Wilson Harris. As a man without a nation, choosing residence in a nation that is not his own, he seemed to defy nationness as a valorising category. By viewing Naipaul as a nomad, a person without a fixed address who chooses to belong to a universal community, this Chapter aims to problematise the contested categories of home, belonging, nation and diasporas against the backdrop of an earlier phase of migration from the Indian continent. Naipaul emerges as the greatest problem, epitomising a particular diasporic ideology and transcending it. He is the mimic man who turns his master's tools both against the master and his own people, the man without a home, the stranger, at home in a homeless universe.

If India was 'an area of darkness', 'nothing was created in the West Indies'. He would have no home except the one that would not have him. It is surprising that his amnesia to the West Indies' contribution in shaping him did not extend to India in his Nobel Address considering 'India bashing' has been one of his favourite pastimes. But the expectation that he should acknowledge the three traditions shaping his consciousness is rooted in the originary myth of a homeland in earlier imaginings of the nation and the diaspora. The nation state has always been the defining unit in configuring diaspora's relations with the homeland as well as with adopted lands, which is mirrored in the literary classifications. India, West Indies and England are configured as essentially homogeneous identity spaces, which may claim or reject the itinerant writer. Naipaul himself partially supports the boundary making impulse by opting for Britain but it is still impossible for a writer to weave in and out of nation spaces eternally hovering in the hinterland between nations. Having to choose between homes, Naipaul settles for the romance of being a writer in exile. From here he returns to the sending land

in 'an enigmatic mixture of nostalgia and patrician disdain'.<sup>10</sup> He grandly announces, "certain societies are quite limited. It is difficult any how to be profound about them".

Vijay Mishra names Naipaul "the founder par excellence of the girmitya discourse" who "gave form and language to the Girmitya ideology".<sup>11</sup> 'Girmitya' is the distorted form of 'agreement' that began 'the saga of indenture', which transported peasant workers from parts of Northern India to the sugar plantations of the West Indies among other places.<sup>12</sup> The girmitya constructs what Naipaul calls 'our island India', which is "an over determined mini replica of the more conservative aspects of homeland life ritualised in the memory and action of the dispossessed."<sup>13</sup> The girmitya psychology is governed by "the logic of a fragment".<sup>14</sup> The Trinidad Indians define themselves in relation to an absent centre, the homeland they were forced to leave and the new land is always a point of transit, a temporary sojourn at the end of which they would return to their places of origin. The place of origin myth that undergirds diasporic consciousness becomes a subject of investigation in Naipaul's fiction and Naipaul sums up the girmitya ideology with a profound sense of cultural loss calling attention to the gap between the imagined and real worlds. The 'mythologised world' of the girmitya is a product of the fossilised memories of an old place and it substitutes for the dynamic reality of the real place "a synchronic principle which 'stills' history and constructs a world based on fantasies which have no real foundation in fact."<sup>15</sup> He documents the process of the progressively waning memory of the homeland in *A House For Mr. Biswas* that culminates in the fantasy of the homeland in Trinidad's 'little India'.

The notion of *home* plays an important role for most people as it provides a sense of belonging and security, and where one can decide on acceptable values and forms of behaviour. Home also has an opposing territorial connotation of

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<sup>10</sup> Homi Bhaba, "Naipaul's Vernacular Cosmopolitans", *The Chronicle Review*, October 26, 2001. <http://chronicle.com>.

<sup>11</sup> Vijay Mishra, *Satendra Nandan, The wounded Sea*. SPAN No. 32, pl-6, 1991, pp.2. [www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/litserv/SPAN/32Mishra.html](http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/litserv/SPAN/32Mishra.html).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Sally Pointon, "Tain-ting the colonial: V.S. Naipaul", *SPAN*, 34-35, 1993, pp. 3. [www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/litserv/SPAN/24-35/pointon/html](http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/litserv/SPAN/24-35/pointon/html).

<sup>14</sup> Mishra, n.11, pp.2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp.1.

making space through closure: “only those belong can come in, and a house-owner can shut the door on outsiders”.<sup>16</sup> The notion of home is not confined to a home but may be extended to a wider social space, even a nation. As Hage observes, *home-building* is “the building of a feeling of being at home” based on four ‘affective building blocks’: security, familiarity community and a sense of possibility’.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, *place-making* is defined as the reshaping by ethnic groups to construct their neighbourhoods to correspond more closely to their needs and values. *Place-making* process involves three sets of strategies - “naming, rituals and institutions”.<sup>18</sup> *Home building* and *place-making* are both important for community formation. Place-making is an essential aspect of migrant existence and the memory of the old place, however, imaginary, helps in “authentication, self-generation and legitimisation”.

While recognising the need for making a home, Naipaul is highly critical of the mythologised, claustrophobic orthodox Hindu world reconstructed in Trinidad. His peasants carry over items from their rural homes to the new plantation economy that are reduced to symbols in the absence of a real cultural memory. Ganesh, in *The Mystic Masseur*, discovers this to his dismay as Hindu rituals related to birth and death are re-enacted in a distant setting that desacralises them. On his father’s death, he performs the last rites perfunctorily “until it seemed that ritual had replaced grief”.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the harvest festival of the old land repeated in the new plantation appears to him “like the gaiety of a starving child.”<sup>20</sup> Mr. Biswas, in *A House For Mr. Biswas*, is even more impatient with the Tulsi Clan for descending to participate in every family gathering and the accompanying rituals. At weddings and funerals, the displaced population does attempt to construct a sense of community whose import is lost on the succeeding generations. Ganesh’s aunt who pays for his father’s funeral, explains the meaning of such gatherings to him, hurt by his offer to repay, “oh Ganesh boy, at a time like this you want your own family around you, but what family you have? Your father, he dead, your

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Castles and Alastair Davidson, *Citizenship and Migration: Globalization and the Politics of Belonging* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 130.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Mystic Masseur* (London: Picador, 1988), p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 58.

mother, she dead too.”<sup>21</sup> The novels strongly reinforce the need for *home-making* but interrogate ‘the logic of a fragment’ that equates home with a musealised homeland.

The house metaphor transmits the migrant’s sense of homelessness and need for *home-building*. Mr. Biswas, Naipaul and the migrant share the fate of moving ‘from one house of strangers to another’.<sup>22</sup> Mr. Biswas’s eviction from the various houses he occupies at different stages of his life parallels the threat of eviction facing every migrant and the desire for security. The Tulsi household, with all its shortcomings, functions like a Hindu patriarchy with reversed roles but undeniably provides a sense of security to its inmates. Though Biswas himself draws on this protective shell in times of adversity, he realises that the closed Hindu world with its stable hierarchies is at odds with the reality of the Trinidadian situation. Mr. Biswas protests against the crushing anonymity of the Hanuman House.

This novel could be read as an allegory of the painful progress of the major group among the Trinidadian Indians, Hindu northern Indians, to build a house on an island which still feels alien, unwelcoming and without the likely materials for a home. Each house Biswas inhabits, builds or owns is figurative of the condition of his situation and that of the Trinidadian Indians of the time. They range from the enclosed security of Hanuman House, the village shops in which the owners live, the unfinished attempts to build simple houses in the country to the half-modern, partly-owned house of Sikkim Street. Brought to Trinidad as indentured labourers to replace the freed black slaves, the Indians were isolated, worked on the sugar cane estates, reformed their traditional culture, even reconstituting castes, pinched pennies to purchase small plots of farming land and became owners of rum shops and small general stores. Later some invested in taxi cabs, became merchants or became wealthy when oil deposits were found on their land. It was not until the Second World War, when Americans built a national highway, that there were sufficient new opportunities, new money and modern roads for the Indians to move

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A House For Mr Biswas* (London: Penguin, 1992), revd edn, p. 8.

from the country to Port of Spain and begin their still uneasy accommodation with the urban, predominantly black and mixed Creole population.

Mr. Biswas's life bears an ample testimony both to the investigation of society and a story of discrete, differing, individual lives. Impoverished, living in rural Trinidad, Biswas could never be an inventor; there would not be the materials, the books, the supporting culture and opportunities. He could not be a writer. He would not be familiar with contemporary models, have other writers to help him or have access to a market. Biswas lives in an impoverished colonial society in which most people do not read, education is not easily available, English is not always used for conversations, literary models come from abroad and are inappropriate for local society. Literature, therefore, seems dead, part of the European past. There is little literature in which to learn, develop or operate. Biswas learns to write clear prose as a reporter and for a time there is a market for lively journalism; but when the newspaper's policy changes even that tiny literary market place comes to an end. So outwardly rejected and disharmonised and inwardly frustrated he engages himself in a quest to acquire something which he can proudly say as his 'own'. For such a rejected and displaced person, *Home* becomes his immediate quest.

Biswas's need for a house and family is partly psychological, as a result of early homelessness, lack of a father and need for mothering. When Biswas is expelled from Pundit Jairam's house and returns to his mother expecting welcome and comfort "instead of being pleased to see him... her manner was harsh... she shouted at him".<sup>23</sup> But he is also the equivalent of the orphan or fatherless hero of the novel who comes to the capital city to conquer. Biswas wants to impress, to achieve, to make his mark on the world, to rise above his birth and circumstances. And he does so, although in a limited way, by going to Port of Spain, by becoming a locally famous journalist, by working for the government, by bringing together his family and asserting himself as head of the family, by contributing to Anand's education, by gaining his wife's trust, by owning a car and purchasing a house.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

The house metaphor essentially captures the girmitya sense of displacement coupled with a fixation on the homeland, roots and belonging. Tehrer and Heller's concept of 'house rules' can help us in understanding the clash occurring due to the difference of the host's house rules with those of the newcomer.<sup>24</sup> Mr. Biswas has the audacity to demand the enforcement of his house rules while occupying other people's homes. This is pronounced particularly after his moving into the Tulsi household. Though unable to provide a home for himself and his family, he takes great delight in breaking the Tulsi 'house rules'. Biswas finds out, with each failure, that his ability to enforce his 'house rules' ultimately depends on his financial independence. As an occupant of the various Tulsi homes, he must perforce submit to its 'house rules' after a perfunctory show of rebellion. His purchase of a house is a triumph for this reason alone. The best thing about owning houses as Biswas realises, is "the right to bar entry, and to lay one's own 'house-rules', which means to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family, to wander freely from room to room and about his yard."<sup>25</sup> The ability to dictate house roles is linked to ownership of homes denied to the migrant. Ownership of land, 'his own half-lot of land, his own portion of earth' is to stake a claim to the land. Ultimately, it means to belong, to step 'into a welcoming world, a new, ready-made world' and not to be 'unnecessary and unaccommodated'. Biswas rejects the easier option of reclaiming a lost home for making a new home in the new place. The house on Sikkim Street is built on 'reclaimed swampland' and had been assembled from 'dismantled American Army Camps' in an urban, mixed neighbourhood. In this home put together with scrap material, Mr. Biswas retreats from the old decaying Hindu world of the Tulsis. The house is makeshift despite Biswas investing all his meagre savings and running a mortgage but it represents a triumph of sorts. Though it fails to offer Biswas 'a world of possibility' that he craved for, it paves the way for his children: "Suddenly the world opened for them",<sup>26</sup> especially for Anand, Naipaul's alter ego, who migrates to England.

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<sup>24</sup> Castles and Davidson, n.16, p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> Naipaul, n.22, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 586.

'The logic of fragment' that Mishra sees as defining girmitya ideology points to dual centres. If the West Indian fragment defines itself in relation to the Indian home-land, it also looks westwards to constitute itself in the image of imperial England. The tradition of modernity dichotomy is replayed on the West Indian landscape as a confrontation of orthodox Hinduism with colonial England. The two centres are strikingly similar in the gap they both evince between the image and the reality. If memory freezes India into myth, the English text produces the romances of England. Naipaul's *A House For Mr. Biswas*, while satirising the nostalgic return home to an imagined India, also reiterates the incongruity between the English text and the Trinidadian world. This chasm between the world and the text reinforces 'the logic of a fragment' as all important things are believed to have happened elsewhere. The West Indian is forced to choose between Hindu tradition and English modernity. As in other diasporas, the promise of eventual return to the homeland never materialises. The movement is onward not backward. Journeys are made to England and America, never back to India. Even the generation, which dreamt of such a return, realises that the future lies in the new centre. Like Anand, Naipaul moves on to England. Though Naipaul critiques the girmitya logic of a fragment as far as the old centre is concerned, he binds himself to the same logic by attaching himself to the new centre. "In Trinidad, feeling myself far away, I had held myself back, as it were, for life at the centre of things."<sup>27</sup> His rejection of one elsewhere leads him to his boundedness to another elsewhere. Though he is acutely aware of the contrast between here and elsewhere, he believes that experiencing the elsewhere can reduce it. He shares his protagonists' belief that the sole escape route out of the panorama of futility and absurdity they perceive in West Indies is the metropolitan centre. Like the older people in the Alien-Indian community in Trinidad, who "looked back to an India that became more and more golden in their memory,"<sup>28</sup> Naipaul, too, believes he was 'in the wrong place'. But he "didn't look back to India, couldn't do so." Instead, he looked "ahead and onwards, to England; but it led to a similar feeling of wrongness."<sup>29</sup> Trinidad was for him, as for them a period of waiting "for life at the centre of things."<sup>30</sup> But when he is at last "in the

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<sup>27</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 120.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120.

place that for all those years had been the 'elsewhere', he knew London to be fantasy."<sup>31</sup> The house "as a place of shelter, not as a place to which you could transfer (or risk transferring) emotion of hopes" still unsettles Naipaul, the new arrival in *The Enigma of Arrival*. He retains the girmitya attachment to land and the symbolic significance of its ownership. While Naipaul shares the sense of loss, his life and writing interrogate essentialist definitions of home and homeland. He casts himself in the role of the dispassionate recorder of the girmitya consciousness viewing the cultural baggage from the homeland as an expendable burden.

Towards the centre of *A House For Mr. Biswas*, Anand, Mr. Biswas's son and second child, surprisingly decides to remain at his father's incompletely built house at Green Vale although his pregnant mother, after brutality by her husband, flees to Hanuman House with her other children. Biswas has become mentally unstable through undernourishment, solitude and the harshness of his life. Abandoned by his family, trapped in a loveless marriage, poor and unable to get a foot up the ladder of life, Biswas fears being murdered by the resentful estate workers he supervises; his angry, irrational behaviour towards his wife is the start of a nervous breakdown. When he asks his son, who has lived until now at Hanuman House, why he stays with him, Anand replies "Because they was going to leave you alone".<sup>32</sup> After Biswas's dog is horribly murdered, Anand wants to leave but is delayed by his father, who can no longer face solitude.

Besides being threatened by the workers, Biswas is also threatened by the natural world. A terrible storm begins. Winged ants invade the house, bite Anand and soon die. A column of fire ants appear and soon capture and cart off the winged ants. Anand hears human voices outside the house which he and his father think are those of dismissed workers planning to harm them. The wind and torrential rain worsen; the roof shakes, some of the corrugated sheets are torn off or flap dangerously. The house seems likely to collapse. There is thunder, lightning, the wind blows out the lamp and "when the lightning went out the room was part of the black void."<sup>33</sup> Anand screams and screams as the wind sweeps through the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 124.

<sup>32</sup> Naipaul, n.22, p. 279.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 292.



now floorless, wall-less house until he sees a man carrying a hurricane lamp and a cutlass. It is a labourer from the barracks looking for a lost calf. The lamp illuminates a "wet chaos";<sup>34</sup> but Anand and Biswas are now saved, although the latter has temporarily lost his mind and does not know where he is or what has happened.

The biblical echoes are less of the rainbow after the flood than a return to the beginning of time before the creation, an unmaking, a decreation, of the protection, comforts and order offered by civilisation and society. In the Green Vale chapter the protections of society are removed until Biswas and Anand are isolated, helpless against the violence of others and the natural world. They are reduced to the condition of the insects who are defenseless against the attack of organised groups of other insects. Nature is uncaring, dangerous; life is short; creatures are naturally at war with each other and protected only by being part of a community. Biswas's fear of harm and death is also a fear of extinction, annihilation, the void. The void is in his mind, a kind of insanity in which his selfhood and individuality are lost. The stripping away of the physical comforts and protections of civilisation results in a loss of rationality, humanity, other kinds of consciousness than fear. He is metamorphosed into something primitive, subhuman. Although supposedly a rationalist he chants a mantra for protection. The chaos of Biswas's life has brought mental disorder. Such fears have now been transmitted to his son.

Here is the central vision that finds expression in Naipaul's language of order, disorder, extinction, void, and which influences the way he looks at society, politics and culture. The world is without purpose, violent, dangerous; in the natural world life is fearful, comfortless, irrational and brutal. Creatures organise societies for self-protection, they co-operate to assure essentials such as food and to build homes for comfort and refuge. While the effectiveness of societies to provide for their members differs, anyone outside society is likely to become a victim of the void. Well-organised societies with large resources and the ability to use their resources are most likely to resist extinction and to provide superior opportunities for their citizens. Achievement, whether through writing, or through

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 293.

building empire, is a way of leaving a mark on history, a way of avoiding annihilation and the void; it is a way of becoming more than the short-lived flying ant carried away for food by the fire ants.

So not at home either in the abandoned homeland or in the new land, Naipaul makes a home in another land, albeit in its fictionalised representations. Naipaul is like his 'mimic men', the proverbial brown sahib. Unable to inhabit dilapidated Hindu monument, he seeks tenancy in the world of the English text. The world of the text carries hints of the millennialism that represents the other side of the diasporic dream. Unlike Trinidad, which Naipaul dismisses as 'historyless', this world seems to be imbued with the antiquity that he sees as the hallmark of all great civilisations. The triumph of the text is reflected in his abiding belief in the civilisational dream notwithstanding the experience of indenture. Naipaul and his characters live too completely in the remote English text to insinuate an intimacy that is the prerogative of those who belong. The absent but familiar English landscapes of these texts invite instant recognition on his entry in England. Although he "hadn't truly seen those views before or been in their midst", he feels "he had always known them."<sup>35</sup> He had known Salisbury, for example, from the constable painting of Salisbury Cathedral in his third standard reader. His first impulse is to match the experience to its representation, he admits, "with the literary eye, or with the aid of literature".<sup>36</sup> Jack's geese transport him back to king Lear, just as the English winter returns him to 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'. Like the landscape, people also seem to have stepped out of poems and stories. Jack's father-in-law strikes him as "a figure of literature in that ancient landscape, a Wordsworthian figure: bent, exaggeratedly bent, going gravely about his peasant tasks, as if in a Lake District solitude".<sup>37</sup> Superior in his knowledge of English literature and history, he descends on England truly believing that he can possess it. When he finds reality to be at odds with the myth of "the perfect world", he merely puts the "perfect world of another time, an earlier time".<sup>38</sup> He subjects

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<sup>35</sup> Naipaul, n.27, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 132.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 121

England to the fossilising process that the older people did to India seeing it as “an unchanging world.”<sup>39</sup>

Though the stranger motif runs through Naipaul’s writings, nowhere is it stated as explicitly as in *A House For Mr. Biswas* and *The Enigma of Arrival*: “After all my time in England I still had that nervousness in a new place, that rawness of response, still felt myself to be in the other man’s country, felt my strangeness, my solitude.” The stranger by definition, is a person out-of-place. Naipaul is doubly estranged. Neither Indian nor British, he is suspended in the borderland dividing the two. Naipaul’s ‘undecidability’ fits Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of the stranger. Bauman defines the stranger as an undecidable that defies the ordered opposition of friends and enemies. Friends and enemies, despite or due to their opposition constitute the frame within which ‘sociation’ or ‘being with others’ is possible. The stranger, on the other hand, ‘threatens sociation itself - the very possibility of sociation.’<sup>40</sup> This happens because the stranger, as a member of the family of undecidables is neither/ nor but also either/ or. Naipaul is neither Indian nor British, but he could simultaneously be both and is, therefore impossible to classify. Naipaul, the stranger, represents an incongruous “synthesis of nearness and remoteness”. He feels “close to the village ways of his Asian community”,<sup>41</sup> but is unable to participate in the life or rituals of the community due to his formal schooling. A cross between orthodox Hindu and English gentleman he is “the true hybrid, the monsters: not just unclassified, but unidentifiable.”<sup>42</sup> He is ‘the third element’ who questions the Indian English opposition. His physical presence in a place is dissonant with his psychological or spiritual remoteness as in the Trinidad of his childhood. When in England, despite his nearness to English culture of the text, he is far from the reality of England. The India he knows is a “half-hidden world, that world removed in time and space from India, and mysterious to the man, its language not even half understood, its religion and religious rites not grasped”.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, “Modernity and Ambivalence” *Theory Culture and Society*( London: Sage,1990), vol. 7, p. 145.

<sup>41</sup> Naipaul, n.27, p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> Bauman, n.40, p. 148.

<sup>43</sup> Naipaul, n.27, p. 103.

While he roamed the English text with ease in Trinidad, Naipaul becomes aware of his 'out-of-placeness' in England: "a man from another hemisphere, another background, coming to rest in middle life in the cottage of a half-neglected estate, an estate full of reminders of its Edwardian past, with few connections with the present".<sup>44</sup> He looks at himself as 'an oddity' and feels 'unanchored and strange'. While his special knowledge of the past enables him 'to shed the nerves of being a stranger in England', he can never be part of its present. The stranger is a form of an 'unfamiliar' whose threat may not be silenced through segregation because he is "the man who comes today and stays tomorrow".<sup>45</sup> Estranged from the land of his ancestors through spatio-temporal distance as well as schooling, he adopts England as his chosen land to be shut out like a stranger. Unlike the 'unfamiliar', he is unclassifiable because he is ingrained in the knowledge and culture of the host country. A stranger here, with the nerves of the stranger, and yet with a knowledge of the language and the history of the language and the writing, he could find a special kind of past in what he saw. But his uninvited intrusion into the English life world makes him less than welcome. *Jus Sanguinis* rather than *Jus Soli* still appears to be the qualifying criteria for social acceptance in contradiction to national citizenship rules. Naipaul commits the original sin of late entry. Neither in Trinidad, nor in England did he belong 'initially', 'originally', 'from the very start', 'since time immemorial'.<sup>46</sup> The memory of his arrival makes his presence 'an event in history', rather than 'a fact of nature'. He ponders over the strange 'event' of his presence on the estate, which had a 'clear historical line' with a beginning and ending. "The stay of the stranger is temporary"<sup>47</sup> that fills Naipaul with a particular horror he names "the rawest stranger's nerves."<sup>48</sup> Though he has sworn to abide by the 'house rules' of the adopted home and has mastered its classification systems, the difference between 'downs' and 'meadows', for instance, he sees himself as a 'newcomer'. As he reviews his surroundings with a seasoned eye, along with the demystification of the English romantic sketch, comes an overpowering recognition of his outsider status. Certain aspects of

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>45</sup> Bauman, n.40, p. 149.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>48</sup> Naipaul, n.27, p. 52.

culture remain shielded from his eye, the practices of everyday life, certain turns of phrases and norms of behaviour. He realises that community and belonging are created not by possession of language or culture but through those rituals, those particular ways of doing things that reaffirm group solidarity.

The house motif pervades in Naipaul's loving description of cottages, barns and manors in all his novels along with the feeling of being part of 'an unaccommodating world'. Inhabiting a marginal space yet to become a zone of empowerment and resistance, Naipaul's inability to fit into any world fills him with "the horror of indetermination".<sup>49</sup> His response to the horror is assimilation. 'Assimilation' means 'making alike', which is the ideology of the nation.<sup>50</sup> Assimilation is predicated on the superiority of one form of life and inferiority of another and reinforces the inequality through attributing the inferior sectors of the power structure, their flaws. To be West Indian or to be Indian in the colonial era is to be equally stigmatised. Assimilation was the colonialist strategy to nip any possibility of resistance to the system through community institutions by inviting individual members of the stigmatised groups to join them. Though collectively groups were rendered powerless, individual members could rise above the stigma by meeting the conditions set by the gatekeepers of the dominant group. Naipaul and his protagonists are too happy to escape from the nullity and negation of colonised existence by observing these conditions to qualify as the 'Talented Tenth'. The sole route out of stigmatisation is individual, by approximating to the 'house-rules' of the master.

"Cosmopolitanism is a matter of competence, that is, a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting".<sup>51</sup> Naipaul the girmitya, the man without a home, transmutes into a man with many homes, or any home. Naipaul had always been willing 'to engage with the other', the colonial other in whose image he tried to cast himself. But as he revisits all the cultures that have shaped him, he finds a different way of relating not only with this other but also with others and with the self. His new knowledge

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<sup>49</sup> Bauman, n.40, p. 146.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>51</sup> Ulf Hannerz, "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture", *Theory Culture and Society* (London: Sage, 1990), vol. 7, p. 239.

ends his restlessness, his desire to escape. He accepts his homelessness as a permanent condition and movement as an essential aspect of his peripatetic existence. He realises that the girmitya has nowhere else to go. The sole choice before the girmitya is what the Trinidadian community has taken: “we couldn’t go back. There was no ship of antique shape now to take us back. We had come out of the nightmare, and there was nowhere else to go.”<sup>52</sup> Hanuman House is initially described as looking like a fortress; but Hanuman House is not a solid, evolving society, it is a temporary refuge for those by circumstances or personally unable to find a place in Trinidad. Rather than Hanuman House typifying Indian traditional culture, the Tulsi children go to Christian missionary schools, the husbands of Tulsi daughters live with the wife’s family (in stead of bringing the daughters to their own family as is customary in India) and there is an absurd mixture of Westernisation and ritualism. The makeshift, temporary nature of this small enclosed, self-protective community is revealed by its rapid disintegration, when the Second World War brought more opportunities for Indians to acquire the skills and means to enter the wider community. It was for Biswas a long-drawn-out time of futile rebellion, of not knowing what to do, before his journey to Port of Spain, a place where there were better opportunities for employment, a chance to make his mark on the world and save money to buy a house. So Biswas’s craziness to save money in order to own a house clearly speaks volume of the houselessness of the Indians in that island.

But Naipaul’s competence in the culture of the British others doubly qualifies himself as a cosmopolitan. He adds to it a ‘readiness’, a ‘personal ability’, to make his way into other’s cultures. Competence in other’s culture might be selective or complete but even a complete surrender to the others’ culture as Naipaul does involve a form of mastery. He has surrendered to that part of the other which the other claims to be universal and could be shared equally.

The journey from girmitya to cosmopolitan can be traced through Naipaul’s fiction and travelogues. Girmitya belongs to a different “era, another continent, another kind of travel, when a traveller might indeed never return, as many of us,

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<sup>52</sup> Naipaul, *n.27*, p. 317.

or our grandfathers, had never returned to India.”<sup>53</sup> Naipaul’s family farewell when he leaves for England for the first time is reminiscent of that era. The difference between this migration from the present global migration is not only of the inability of return. The girmitya migration is essentially the movement of ‘placed’ people to another place primarily for economic compulsions. The strong place attachment coupled with the uncertainty of return translates invariably in a feeling of cultural loss and spiritual affinity to the homeland. If the infrequency or absence of contact with the homeland creates the homeland myth, the strong place attachment is responsible for the ghettoised mindset. A member of ‘peasant India’, he moves out to a hostile world unused to the stranger, a world in which strangers are tolerated only in separate enclosures, which provide a sense of insecurity. This cultural anxiety, the feeling of being in the wrong place, and the transience of tenure is part of the collective unconscious that Naipaul inherits. “That village world had given him his prejudices and passions; he was interested in, had been passionate about, the politics of India before and after independence,”<sup>54</sup> he reminisces. His India fixation makes him ignorant not only of the ‘agricultural colony in the New World’ where he was born but also of other communities. During the next four decades he makes several moves, several journeys by ships and planes, each of which brings home his homelessness to him. In London he ‘found a city that was strange and unknown’ as strange as New York. Six years later, he returns to Trinidad, to ‘a world that had shrunk’. He leaves it after six weeks for England by a banana boat through Jamaica. Four years later, it had all changed for him, ‘the world, the mood, the vision, that very Atlantic’. He returns to the island a decade after his first journey out with a ‘security of a man who had at last made himself what he wanted to be’ only to find that ‘the place itself, the little island and its people, could no longer hold him’.

The world for Naipaul seems too narrowly defined, too simple, too tedious. But he must return to Trinidad, ‘the starting point’, to increase his knowledge and self-knowledge. While returning to its prehistory by peeling off the layer of imperial history, in attaching it to great names and great events, he rediscovers the lineaments of the world he had grown up in. He is amazed by the antiquity of the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.103.

place to which he belonged. The writing of his book helps him to arrive at a synthesis of the worlds and cultures that had made him. He intends to leave England at the completion of the book and be a roamer for a while, to live a hotel life. The first place he goes to is Trinidad: "to return to a place that was no longer mine, in the way that it had been mine, when I was a child, when I never thought whether it was mine or not."<sup>55</sup> His return to Trinidad is doomed because he imbues it once again with the same aura of romance that he did to all other lands and is dispossessed in the process. The recognition that there is no return home for his 'life's journey' makes him come to terms with the need for making a home in the place where he was. For himself has found an individual path:

"I no longer dream of ideal landscapes or seek to attach myself to them. All landscapes eventually turn to land, the gold of the imagination to the lead of the reality. I could not, like so many of my fellow exiles, live in a suburban semi-detached home, I could not pretend even to myself to be part of a community or to be putting down roots. I prefer the freedom of my far-out suburban hotel, the absence of responsibility like the feeling of impermanence".<sup>56</sup>

Not having a home no longer seems like a disability as his prolonged stay teaches him to spot other strangers besides himself, to distinguish between people who are in place and who are not. Naipaul's ability to distinguish space from place helps him to live in a place that is not his own: "In that unlikely setting, in the ancient heart of England, a place where I was truly an alien, I found I was given a second chance, a new life, richer and fuller than any I had anywhere else."<sup>57</sup> He makes a place for himself in his adopted land England by 're-placement'. Though he is aware that "fifty years ago there would have been no room for me on the estate", he relates to "the beauty of the place, the great love I had grown to feel for it, greater than for any other place I had known."<sup>58</sup> Even though he still feels like an outsider, he wanted to stay with what he found. His surrender to the alien culture now is a matter of exercising a personal autonomy with respect to the culture where he originated from.

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Anjali Gera, "Strange moves: Girmitya Turns cosmopolitan," in Purabi Panwar(ed.), *V.S. Naipaul: An Anthology of Recent Criticism* (Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003), p. 39.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Ibid, p. 40.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Ibid, p. 40.



Naipaul's relationship with his originary cultures had always been problematic. The Trinidad he knew was a small place, a village world that he had to leave for lack of opportunities. In spite of his later discovery of the antiquity of Trinidad and his recognition that 'the drabness I knew had been man-made',<sup>59</sup> he is unable to relate to its plantation culture that can accommodate only 'allotments' not gardens incongruous in a 'tropical and colonial setting'. The knowledge that the 'sacred places of our childhood' were irrevocably lost, that his being self-aware separates him from the 'earth rites' of the 'people of the countryside' makes it imperative that "we remade the world for ourselves".<sup>60</sup> His ability to move with ease between different worlds separates Naipaul from girmityas some of whom are still aboard 'in a free state'. Like Santosh in 'one out of many' who, despite being a 'free man' and 'a citizen' finds himself in a dark house whose "smells are strange, everything in it is strange".<sup>61</sup> His freedom to disengage from any world whenever he chooses to gives him an autonomy denied to the girmitya. "All the time", Naipaul the cosmopolitan, "knows where the exit is."<sup>62</sup>

The hallmark of cosmopolitanism is elective identity, which Naipaul had opted for before the current vogue set in. Naipaul delinks belonging from language, birthplace, race, nationality and suggests a different form of belonging that is akin to "learning a second language".<sup>63</sup> The tramp in "The Tramp at Piraeus" puts this question to the others: "But what's nationality these days? I myself, I think of myself as a citizen of this world".<sup>64</sup> Belonging is a matter of emotional bonding here like the one that Naipaul has with Jack: "And I had an immense feeling for Jack, for the strength and curious delicacy of his forking-and-lifting gesture, the harmony of hand and foot."<sup>65</sup> He finds a novel way of forming community. He is able to bond across class, colour, race, and nationality barriers with those who share his way of feeling. He feels 'a great sympathy' for his landlord, understands his malaise, sees it 'as the other side' of his own. He chooses

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 40.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 40.

<sup>61</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *In a Free State* (London: Picador, 1971), p. 52.

<sup>62</sup> Hannerz, n.51, p. 240.

<sup>63</sup> Gera, n.55, p. 41.

<sup>64</sup> Naipaul, n.61, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Gera, n.55, p. 41.

to write the master script of his identity free of all given, stable identities. This transnational community, a dream of modernity, is a complete possibility in the new global space. A writer might be born in one nation, live in another and yet belong to another.

Men need history; it helps them to have an idea of who they are. But history, like sanctity, can reside in the heart; it is enough that there is something here.<sup>66</sup>

Mr. Biswas in this novel under study always aspires for a 'history' in order to define himself, but the kind of 'history' that he discovers is deeply rooted in colonialism, traditionalism, orthodoxy, drum-beating and hatredness, which he fervently rejects. So Mr. Biswas is of the belief that real life is going to be on elsewhere, that disorder is something peculiar to societies like Trinidad and that England by contrast is a coherent place where everyone is born to a position and identity. So he longs for an ordered society in which, if only he could *look* like a shopkeeper, a lawyer, a doctor, a labourer, there would be a place where he could live in a style of his own. When he first arrives in Port of Spain, he gets the impression from the sweepers and the bread van and the street lights all going on together that here at last is a place against which he can begin to define himself. Here he becomes confident and optimistic because here he finds everything determined by alien standards, especially by English virtues.

But the question that can be asked at this point: is this the end of quest for Naipaul or for Mr. Biswas? The placelessness of a man (Naipaul) who, owning a house in London, finds the physical world irrelevant to his humanity; the placelessness of people who, in the acquiring of a political identity, have become uprooted within their own land. In the novel too the city Port of Spain which was a breeding ground of promise for Mr. Biswas very soon becomes a repetition of the dingy cafe in which, fleeing the crowded Tulsi house, he spends his evenings-- 'the chipped counter, the flies thick on the electric flex the cracked glass case'. Here the fundamental problem with Naipaul as with Mr. Biswas is that he lacks the morally and aesthetically coherent environment in terms of which he can begin to discover who he really is. He reads Samuel Smiles and tries to see himself as young and poor and struggling. But the romantic sagas of self-help make sense only in

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<sup>66</sup> Naipaul, *n.27*, p. 138.

countries where ambitions are credible, where heroes can propel themselves uplanders already in existence. So Mr. Biswas's journey from the old world to the new, from the generation of the old Indians in the arcade of Hanuman House to that of the new baby upstairs, thus becomes a journey from darkness to darkness, from a world where he is a creature of fate to a world in which he becomes a victim of circumstances, from an order which seems irrelevant to a disorder in which he is a noneity. He first vows to get a house of his own after being beaten up by Bhandat - 'I'm going to get a job of my own', he tells Bipti, 'and I am going to get my own house too'.

Returning from hospital after his first illness, he steps into a 'ready-made world' of his own creation, with a tidied garden and newly distempered walls, the perfect waiting in the garage and all his possessions ranged around him, justifying his claim to this portion of the earth. The 'house' here stands not only for status and security, order and beauty, a centre of light in the menacing void of past and future, but also it now becomes the creative side of his rebellion, the concrete proof that he is not anonymous, a positive achievement founded on and justifying his refusal to capitulate. His search for security and status, for an order which is aesthetically pleasing and morally coherent, for light in the menacing dark void, expands into a struggle against tyranny, an urgent need to leave the mark of his existence on the world, and into the slow recognition that his identity lies in the relationships he has created, in the wife and children for whom a home must be provided. The home that Mr. Biswas purchases is a home such as their father never enjoyed, a jumping-off ground for studies abroad. It becomes for Shama a place where she learns new family loyalties to her husband and her children, a possession of which she can boast of to the Tuttle 'this is just right for me.' It becomes for Mr. Biswas a 'ready-made world' of his own, not just the setting for final victories over the Tuttle and over the solicitor's clerk's plan to cheat him of part of his land, but the climax to a life time's vision, the 'place which had been hollowed out by time, by all that he had lived through', the place where right at the end despite the debt and Anand's absence – he can rejoice in Shama's attentions, in Savi's cleverness, in the butterfly-orchid and the sweet-scented shade tree.

So the 'house' seems to bring the breeze of promise and shower of solace to Mr. Biswas. It seems that Mr. Biswas has finally got his identity, but the irony here is that the 'house' for which Mr. Biswas engages his whole life accommodates him only for few days. But the significance here is that Mr. Biswas has transmitted this 'identity quest' to his younger generation, to his son Anand. In one of his articles namely, "Critics and Criticism", V.S. Naipaul claims: "What is that we look for when we go to the work of a favourite writer? It is, I feel, a peculiar type and venture – an adventurer with a mind, a sensibility, that appeals to us. A certain way of looking and feeling, which we think amusing or illuminating. We do not go for character or for language so much as for the writer himself. A writer stands or falls by his sensibility and our assessment of his work depends on our response to his sensibility." But it is very difficult to understand Naipaul's sensibility. He is highly critical of Trinidad for its colonial roots and he can not return to India for he looks to India as an area of darkness or a wounded civilisation. He makes an abode in England, but here he sometimes feels out of harmony for its material pursuits. So Naipaul's position is like that of Hamlet's - 'to be or not to be'.

To sum up, a descendant of the twice-colonised and culturally dislocated ethnic Indians in the Caribbean, Mr. Biswas doggedly turns his back on the only available option of agricultural servility for survival. But then, as one who is socially powerless, politically subjugated, without money and under constant pressure both from within the community (the Tulsi clan for instance) and from the exploitative ambience of the colonial Caribbean, he stands starkly threatened with complete erasure of his identity. The book narrates the trials and tribulations of this weak and vulnerable person in his endeavour to achieve selfhood both as a writer on his own and a human who seeks a house of his own. He may have, as the singularly insensitive *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) reviewer complained, nothing of 'the kind of stuff heroes are made of' but he certainly is, as Rohlehr rightly notes, 'a representative figure, an Everyman'. He stands out as a metaphor for a large number of colonials who are confronted with the worst of an endemically repressive colonial dispensation, and who despite their vulnerability and weakness, lack of support or guidance, demonstrate a persistent will, and struggle hard to find a vocation with dignity and to live in a house of their own.

The achievement of Mr. Biswas is certainly much less than he deserves, but the 'less' becomes 'more' when we recall that nothing was bequeathed to him and that he did leave a legacy of sorts for his children. But what remains significant is that 'the quest is on - still ought to be on' with his son, Anand.

CHAPTER IV

**“REBELLION” IN  
*A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS***

"A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea."

Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*.

"History is... the experience of Necessity... History is what hurts... what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis."

Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*.

Naipaul's *magnum opus*, *A House For Mr. Biswas* depicts communities being reshaped by larger cultural and social forces; moving from East Indian villages to Port of Spain city life, it records a colony's transition from a rural to an urban, industrialised society. Through the story of Biswas, whose life is a struggle between desire and necessity or dream and history - *A House For Mr. Biswas* tells a personal story and an ethnic, social history. At the same time, however, it also tells a story informed by the author's exile, and the ethnic communities and society of the novel are constructed out of that exile and a need to justify it. As Kenneth Ramchand has observed insightfully: "one suspects that the world of *A House For Mr. Biswas* is one modelled upon a society from which the author has himself wished to escape, and that this attitude is the source of some of the over-emphasis in the fictional construct."<sup>1</sup>

Through the interplay between Biswas's desires and his story's or history's modification and ironic reversals of them, *A House For Mr. Biswas* depicts the making of an individual's and family's cultural and social identity. Biswas undergoes a process of acculturation and socialisation, but his story is equally about his alienation, about belonging to a particular society yet living in 'exile' from it in his unrealised ambitions. In writing the novel Naipaul turns to his father's life and writings, but he also draws from his own experience of exile to create Biswas's sense of alienation and estrangement in the colony that he could not leave but which the author did. Biswas's alienation can be rooted to his lack of synthesis between his heart and mind, and his failure to bring his necessity, desire and rebellion arrive at a common platform. Like the romantics Biswas feels out of harmony with the harsh realities and oddities of a colonial set up, but unlike the romantics, who try to make an escape into the world of imagination, which they

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Timothy F. Weiss, "A House For Mr. Biswas," *On The Margins: The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 46.

consider as the ultimate real world, Biswas remains in this world, faces its absurdities and rebels against its set up. So it's quite proper to make a critical enquiry about the setting which has produced Mr. Biswas as a rebel. And in a combined whole Mr. Biswas's rebellion is a drive towards identity.

The death of Biswas's father has left him homeless and emotionally bewildered. The early affection which he feels for his mother dwindles when embarrassment and decorum prevent her from showing him any affection in the presence of strangers. But Biswas needs to be mothered and uses his aunt Tara as a mother-substitute until he allows himself to be browbeaten into marriage. It is difficult to imagine one less capable of physical or emotional love. He looks at his "comic-make believe clothes" regards his body with disgust, and swings his loose calf like a hammock or probes a stomach too distended to be fat. He confesses that "he don't look like anything at all."<sup>2</sup>

This sense of inferiority becomes particularly obsessive whenever Biswas is alone, and it leads to a grotesque exhibitionism which really indicates his need for love:

"There were whole weeks when he devoted himself to some absurdity. He grew his nails to an extreme length and held them up to startle customers... when his skin became pitted with little holes, he studied these with interest and found the perfection of their shape pleasing. And once he dabbed ointments of various colours on his face and went and stood in the shop doorway greeting people he knew."<sup>3</sup>

His conduct is roughly that of a child rejected by his parents. He needs a mother as well as a wife. Shama attracts him when she is mothering him, but he can't admit this. He is a difficult person to mother:

As he was lying in one morning she came and placed her palm then the back of her hand on his forehead. The action offended him, flattered him, and made him uneasy...

She undid his shirt and put her hand, large and dark and foreign, on his pale, soft chest.

...He wanted to scream.

... He was violently angry; never before had he been so disgusted by her. Yet he wished her to remain there. Half-hoping she would take him

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<sup>2</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A House For Mr. Biswas* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1961), p143.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.165.



seriously, half-hoping only to amuse and bewilder her, he said in his quick, high-pitched voice, "something in my mind all right".<sup>4</sup>

He is in a state where he can neither give nor receive the love he needs.

Rebellion in Biswas is defined by his state as a cultural, psychological and social orphan. So often his revolt contains a child-like rage and grief at violated innocence; and a child-like need to prove that his suffering is always the fault of someone else. Indeed he assumes that because he is oppressed and he is therefore innocent. This assumption enables him to justify some of the less pleasant aspects of his revolt; like kicking pregnant Shama in the belly, because he sees each new child as another Tulsi trap:

"He develops a nausea at the idea of birth".

"... almost immediately he began to hate her. Her pregnancy was grotesque' he hated the way she sat down'... he hated it when she puffed and fanned and sweated in her pregnant way".<sup>5</sup>

This nausea never quite abandons him. When he dismissed Shama he tells her to "Take your girl children and go."<sup>6</sup>

Later as a writer of short stories he has a recurrent theme:

"The hero, trapped into marriage burdened with a family, his youth gone, meets a young girl. She is slim, almost thin, and dresses in white. She is fresh, tender, unkissed; and she is unable to bear children. Beyond the meeting the stories never went."<sup>7</sup>

He wants, then, a cessation of the entire process of birth, and hopes for a sexless, sterile world in which he can be alone:

"He tried to think of landscape without people: sand and sand and sand, without the 'Oses Lal has spoken about; cast white plateaus, with himself safely alone, a speck in the centre."<sup>8</sup>

He longs for inertia, a relapse into darkness, a bed which he will never have to leave, the enswaddling warmth of the bed in the Blue Room of Hanuman House.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 247.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.246.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.249.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.311.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.240.

During the storm, Govind carries Biswas in his arms like a baby, while Anand walks in the rain.

Beneath this self laceration and playacting, this assumption of the grotesque mask lies a fear of the future, of objects, of people: of time, place and mankind:

“And always the thought, the fear about the future. The future wasn't the next day or the next week or even the next year; times within his comprehension and therefore without dread. The future he feared could not be thought of in terms of time. It was a blankness and void like those in dreams, into which, past tomorrow and next week and next year, he was falling.”<sup>9</sup>

Biswas is living to an extreme degree the anxieties of the uprooted man. His elaborate poses, daydreams, assertion of self and evasion of responsibility, are a result of the cultural, social and psychological nowhere-ness produced by his position as an untalented second generation Hindu in poverty-stricken colonial Trinidad. He is appropriately an orphan.

The social conflicts of Biswas's life derive chiefly from his caste and class designations as they predetermine other's judgement of him and as they grate against or affirm his own self-image and ideal. He will spend all of his life trying on the one hand to confirm that he is a Brahmin, and on the other hand to prove that he is not just a 'labourer's child.'<sup>10</sup> (i.e., someone fit for only the meanest kind of work). Although his father, Raghu, was a labourer who owned his own land, his accidental drowning and the villager's subsequent theft of the family property leave Mohun homeless and landless. As a boy he is already a kind of indentured worker in that he is sent by his mother to tend his uncle Bhandat's shop in order to earn his room and board. His perilous, powerless position in Bhandat's household - and symbolically in the East Indian community - is illustrated by the incident in which he is falsely accused of stealing money from Bhandat's till and then lashed on the face with a belt. Mohun is bruised into an early recognition of his dependency, and his lifelong goal becomes an escape from a powerlessness that his subservient relationship to Bhandat exemplifies. After being beaten by his uncle, he returns to his sister Bipti and says to her angrily: “I am going to get a job

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.171.

<sup>10</sup> V.S. Naipaul, *A House For Mr. Biswas* (London: Penguin, 1992), revd edn, p. 49.

of my own. And I am going to get my own house too. I am finished with this.”<sup>11</sup> A job and a house constitute two key elements of his dream because he seeks to escape from the battering and humiliation, the dependence and stigmatic identity of his inherited lower class.

His conflicts with the Tulsis also derive in part from caste and class designations. The Tulsis represent ‘Old India’; their patriarch, pundit Tulsi, occupied a high caste there and has transferred the respect due to that caste to his family in Trinidad, a “pious, conservative, landowning family”.<sup>12</sup> As a Brahmin, Biswas is also of a high caste, although the Tulsis do not treat him accordingly, assigning him instead to a low rung in the family hierarchy because he is the “labourer’s child” and because he does not contribute financially to the family enterprise. The hierarchy of people and space at Hanuman House, the Tulsi-store residence in Arwacas, reflects the lingering caste attitudes of the rural East Indian community. In that community the Tulsis are “haves” and Biswas is a “have-not”; their position gives them dignity, whereas his designation as labourer, his landlessness and joblessness make him a nobody. The Tulsis’ image of Biswas conflicts with his self-image as an important-person-to-be whose “real” life of achievements has not yet begun. For their part, the Tulsis are infuriated by Biswas’s refusal to work, either in the store or on the sugarcane estate; for his part, he is wounded by the family’s insensitivity to his Brahmin status and their seeming refusal to treat him as an educated, intelligent person. So to Biswas the Tulsis become the enemy, and he revels in imaginatively overturning the family hierarchy by mocking it and satirically renaming its members: Mrs. Tulsi becomes, variously, the “old cow”, the “old hen”, the “old queen”; Seth, the elder brother-in-law and business manager, the “Big Boss”; Mrs. Tulsi’s pampered sons, Owad and Shekhar, the “young gods”. Biswas’s obstinacy and mockery lead to his expulsion from Hanuman House. “This is gratitude”, Seth berates him. “You came here penniless, a stranger. We take you in, we give you one of our daughters, we feed you, we give you a place to sleep in. You refuse to help in the store, you refuse to help on the estate. All right! But then to turn around and insult us!”<sup>13</sup> It seems that

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.67.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.81.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.109.

Biswas wants, contradictorily, both to be treated as a Brahmin and to shatter the caste and class system; driven by his caste and class designations, his humiliation by and dependency on the Tulsis, and his romantic image of himself, he becomes the iconoclast, right in standing up for his dignity yet a bit ridiculous in his vexing behaviour towards the family on whom he and his wife depend.

Biswas's conflict with the Tulsis illustrates the novel's key conflict between desire and necessity. In part, Biswas lives in a fantasy; in his own eyes, he is not exactly who he is but the somebody he would like to be, and that the Tulsis do not share his great expectations for himself leads to his humiliation. Like the "romancers" of *Miguel Street* he lives a double life: his dream of future importance contrasts with the actuality of his jobs as storekeeper and plantation driver. He tries to escape vicariously, through the popular romances of Hall Caine, Marie Corelli, and Samuel Smiles, which intoxicate him with "worlds" beyond Trinidad. These exotic stories both fuel his fantasy and make him "despair of finding romance in his own dull green land."<sup>14</sup> They contrast with his inherited class identity and the limitations of Hanuman House, his rural community and colonial society. Given what he is and the agricultural colony in which he lives, what can he expect or even hope for? Especially at Hanuman House "there could be no romance"<sup>15</sup> - no hope of a new identity - he reflects with anxiety before marrying Shama and becoming a Tulsi. He joins the family out of necessity, yet once a member, he goes into an exile of sorts, turning to a fantasy of his future importance in order to convince himself and assert to the Tulsis that he does not truly belong to their enterprise. He clings to the belief that "real life was to begin... soon, and elsewhere".<sup>16</sup>

Biswas's search for a profession and his dream of a house of his own express the same desire for a sense of identity and belonging, and they meet the same obstacles and frustrations. Just as Biswas never really owns his own house, so too he never feels 'at home' in his work or in any group within the Trinidadian society. Above all, he does not want to work as an agricultural labourer, as his

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.78.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.93.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.147.

brothers, father, and grandfather have had to do as seventy percent of Trinidad's East Indian population did in 1917<sup>17</sup> and he does everything in his power to escape this inherited class identity. Yet at the Tulsi sugar estate in Green Vale, where Biswas ends up after his six-year failure as a shopkeeper in The Chase, he must do what is equally abhorrent: oversee, push, and prod labourers - not unlike his brothers, father, grandfather, or himself. His attitude towards and relationship with the estate labourers reverses his relationship of assigned subservience within the Tulsi hierarchy; at Hanuman House he is subject to their orders, while as a driver on their estate he oversees and subjects others. At first, he empathises with the labourers, understanding their awe of the "blue and green moneybags"<sup>18</sup> from which their wages are dispensed; he reflects that his brothers, Prasad and Pratap, are probably no different. In time though, he becomes unsympathetic, tyrannical; he imaginatively identifies with plantation "overseers of legend who rode on horseback and lashed labourers on either side."<sup>19</sup> The Green Vale labourers seem 'brutish', and Biswas wonders why they are paid as much as they are, a mere three dollars a week. He becomes to the labourers what Seth, the eldest Tulsi son-in-law, has been to him: the "enemy", someone and something to be plotted against as an agent of repression. The ironies of Biswas's situation wear him out eventually. He spends sleepless nights worrying that he will be attacked and that his recently built house will be burnt down.

As a driver, Biswas's dream of becoming a somebody recedes, becoming even more unreal. His attitude towards the Green Vale workers reflects his shame at his own class designation and his dependency on the Tulsis, who force him to work as a driver of men with whom he wants no connection but to whom he is connected by inheritance and circumstance. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century Trinidad, East Indians were assigned to the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder,<sup>20</sup> and it is from this degradation of the agricultural labourer that Biswas seeks to escape. Throughout his life he remains sensitive to his caste and

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<sup>17</sup> Weiss, n.1, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> Naipaul, *n. 10*, p. 208.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.208.

<sup>20</sup> Weiss, n.1, p. 55.

class designation, and this sensitivity is closely linked to his dream of a house of his own yet the painful reality of his “crowded, shabby room”:

“In Tara’s house (Biswas) was respected as a Brahmin and pampered; yet as soon as the ceremony was over and he had taken his gift of money and cloth and left, he became once more only a labourer’s child - *Father’s occupation: labourer* was the entry in the birth certificate... living with a penniless mother in one room of a mud hut. And throughout life his position was like that. As one of the Tuli sons-in-law and as a journalist he found himself among people with money and sometimes with graces; with them his manner was enforcedly easy and he could summon up luxurious instincts; but always at the end, he returned to his crowded, shabby room.”<sup>21</sup>

In this passage caste, class, house, profession, self-esteem, and belonging or not-belonging are all linked. The “crowded, shabby room” to which Biswas returns signifies his class designation, dependency, lack of accomplishment, and inner “exile” or sense of not-belonging.

As a reporter-journalist Biswas not only acquires a semblance of a professional identity, but also finds an outlet for his creativity and through writing takes control of his world, seeing and defining it in his own peculiar way. The power and romance of writing lead to his purchase of a typewriter, enrollment in a London Ideal School of Journalism correspondence course, and the beginning of a short story, “Escape”. His typewriter, bought during the flush of his expectations as journalist and writer, and his short story “Escape” signify his partially realised dream of another identity and life of “Escape” and Biswas’s other unfinished stories, the narrator elaborates: “their theme was always the same. The hero, trapped into marriage, burdened with a family, his youth gone, meets a young girl. She is slim... and dressed in white. She is fresh, tender, unknissed; and she is unable to bear children. Beyond the meeting the stories never went”. The wish fulfillment of these unfinished stories is transparent: the young girl is Biswas’s fantasy life; slim and pristine, she is not weighed down by necessity, burdened with a lower-class designation or the responsibilities of a family; she exists outside of history.

If “Escape” is the dream, the Deserving Destitute are the nightmare. As reporter for the *Trinidad Sentinel’s* Deserving Destitute’s Fund, Biswas travels to Port of Spain slums and sees and talks with people who have realised his worst

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<sup>21</sup> Naipaul, *n.10*, p. 49.

fears. The urban landscape of his investigations is grim indeed. Among the destitute Biswas encounters his uncle Bhandat, now deaf and having nothing better to do than try to get lucky and win the slogan contest for Lux Toilet Soap; he listens patiently to Bhandat's story - "a familiar story of jobs acquired and lost, great enterprises that had failed".<sup>22</sup> Would Biswas end his life like his uncle Bhandat? Would the journalist and aspiring short-story writer end up writing soap slogans? In his uncle Bhandat and among the destitute, Biswas brushes against all the shadowy possibilities of his life and the grim actualities of the colony.

Houses are the meeting ground for the clash between dreams and harsh actualities in Biswas's life. The idea of having a house of his own functions as a container of desires holding the same feelings invested in his search for a profession and his efforts to become a short-story writer. As a boy, he loses his home after his father's drowning and the family's property is taken; his dream of a house of his own, among other things, a longing for the lost father and lost security of his childhood. Except for brief periods of residency in houses he builds in Green Vale and Shorthills and in the house he buys on S'kkim Street, Biswas lives his life in other's houses. His dreams of independence are thus enclosed in a shell of those material dependencies. A history of humiliation, migrancy, and not-belonging is the context of the planning and construction of Biswas's houses at Green Vale, a process exemplifying what the narrator of *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* calls the betrayal of feeling through action, or what I have called the modification of the dream of necessity or history.<sup>23</sup> Biswas brings a romantic, pastoral vision to the plans for the house; he thinks of its site as a "bower", an enchanting word in a Wordsworth poem.<sup>24</sup> But the house's construction - with all the necessary compromises in scope and materials, and the disappointing unfinished product - mocks his dream. Because he does not have enough money to build the kind of house he envisions, each step of the construction meets qualification. Instead of concrete, as he desires, the house is built on wooden pillars; instead of pitch pine, a cedar floor is laid down; instead of boards separating the ceiling and roof, branches are put in place; instead of a new roof, a bent, rusty, hole-ridden one is installed.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.450.

<sup>23</sup> Weiss, *n.1*, p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> Naipaul, *n.10*, p. 238.

When the house is completed, its roof, patched with pitch tar, drips black “snakes” that snap and fall to the floor like tormenting demons. To make matters worse, the estate workers’ children drive nails into the floors and pillars and make mud marks on the floor and the crossbars. The house turns into an embarrassment - and a target, when in Biswas’s absence, disgruntled workers burn it down. Like the difference between the beautiful word *jasmine* and the dull vegetation,<sup>25</sup> the romantic word *bower* creates a feeling within Biswas that the actuality of his house and its location seem to betray.

The Shorthills house constitutes Biswas’s second attempt to realise his pastoral vision; although this time he can afford the preferred building materials and erects his home on a site “as wild and out-of-the-way as he could have wished”, its location dooms the enterprise. Shama, Biswas’s wife, has to walk a mile to the village for shopping, water has to be toted up a hill from a spring in the woods, the children must ride to school in the Tulsi family car, and Biswas must bicycle long distances to work every day. Like its predecessor in Green Vale, the Shorthills house goes up in smoke almost as soon as it is completed, though this time it is Biswas who accidentally sets it afire while clearing bush and forest - it is as if the dream house is too fragile and impractical to exist for very long amid the necessities of the work-a-day world.

The house on Sikkim Street, the only one that Biswas considers “his house”, is purchased as impulsively as the Green Vale and Shorthills houses are constructed. He buys it without noticing its considerable flaws, having in his mind “only a picture of a house cosy in the rain, with a polished floor, and an old lady who baked cakes in the kitchen.”<sup>26</sup> Although taken advantage of by a dishonest agent-owner, Biswas is deceived chiefly by his own desire for independence and belonging. His final life achievement, the Sikkim Street house, is thus a qualified one; he spends his final years burdened with a debt that he cannot pay back and that his family will inherit. But still, the narrator explains, the house means something more: “How terrible it would have been... to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent

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<sup>25</sup> Weiss, n.1, p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Naipaul, n.10, p. 566.



family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated".<sup>27</sup> In solemn phrases and cadences this passage transforms Biswas's story from a biography to a history of an ethnic group and dispossessed people of the world.

Biswas's story tells a colonial, Trinidadian story about a struggle to survive in what Naipaul describes as a "picaroon society". Because of its history of slavery, "mixed population", and "closed colonial system", the island "recreated attitudes of the Spanish picaroon world", he writes; in this society "the weak were humiliated... the powerful never appeared and beyond reach... no one was allowed any dignity... and everyone had to impose himself."<sup>28</sup> The individual had to depend on his wits, boldness, and endurance to get by. By "picaroon" Naipaul seems particularly to have in mind the tough, lower-class neighbourhoods of Port of Spain, where conditions were like those Biswas describes in his encounters with the "deserving destitute."

More generally, the picaroon society is a society of limitations, of a paucity of traditions and institutions where the individual carries the burden of making meaning and making his way; it is a society on the margins of other's power and prosperity, and for this reason its people may feel, as Biswas often does, an unreality and futility about their lives. It is a society of individuals in search of whatever identity they can make for themselves, not one of institutions conferring identity through educational and professional accomplishment. Individual's identity in the picaroon society may be both more fixed and more fluid than in societies with well-defined professions and institutions. A labourer is a labourer, and a shopkeeper is a shopkeeper; but beyond such basics, there is certain fluidity because in the colony professions and institutions have not yet developed elaborate and fixed rules.

In Biswas's career we see aspects of the individual's struggle to acquire a professional identity in a colonial society with aspects of the picaroon world.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 13-14.

<sup>28</sup> Weiss, n.1, p. 59.

About that society's limited opportunities, Naipaul has written: "I had been born in a static colonial time; and in Trinidad, where I spent my first eighteen years, I had known the poverty and spiritual limitations of an agricultural colony where, as was once computed, there were only eighty kinds of job."<sup>29</sup> In *The Middle Passage* and *The Overcrowded Barracoon* he elaborates further: "The only professions (in Trinidad) were those of law and medicine, because there was no need for any other; and the most successful people were commission agents, bank managers and members of the distributive trades."<sup>30</sup> In such a society, acquiring a profession can often be, as for Biswas, a matter of ingenuity and luck. Thus, without having any specialised education or work experience, Biswas gets a job as a reporter and later becomes a celebrity through his masquerade for the newspaper's Scarlet Pimpernel contest. The flush and fame are short-lived, though, for his identity as a professional is always insecure and fragile. It has not been conferred by an institution or a professional society, and therefore can disappear just as suddenly as it appeared. Throughout his working life, Biswas constantly fears being "sacked" not only because there is no network on which he can depend to find another job but also because he feels at times that he is masquerading as a journalist-writer. His idle typewriter and unfinished short story convey something of this insecurity; like others in the colony, he worries that he is not who he seems to be and is disappointed that he is not what he would like to have been.

In Biswas's sense of inverted reality we see an effect of his enclaved ethnic community and his colonial society. He believes that his "real life"<sup>31</sup> is always about to begin and that reality lies somewhere far beyond Trinidad. As a youth he turns to Samuel Smile's romances to find out about that world and lives in frustration that his own life cannot compare with the lives of the heroes of those romances. And just as Edward of *Miguel Street* looks to the United States as a land of greatness beyond the littleness and insignificance of the colony, so too even as an adult Biswas looks up to British educated Owad Tulsi as an extraordinary person who has been "where life was to be found".<sup>32</sup> Unable to go "there," Biswas

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 60

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.60.

<sup>31</sup> Naipaul, *n. 10*, p. 147.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.540

turns instead within: "He sank into despair as into the void which, in his imagining, had always stood for the life he had yet to live."<sup>33</sup> His despair is the feeling of futility produced by the colony, a feeling whose inverse is fantasy.

So as a man psychologically an orphan, socially powerless and uprooted, economically half-employed and dependent, Biswas becomes a rebel. But in order to understand Biswas's rebellion and to measure the success and failure of Biswas's rebellion one must understand the social structure of Hanuman House. The organisation of the Tulsi family has been critically singled out for being a 'microcosm of a slave society'. Satendra Nandan makes an extended observation of this aspect:

"...Hanuman House is more immediately symbolic of the slave world. Mrs. Tulsi needs workers to build her empire - She, therefore, exploits the homeless and deprived fellow Hindus. She has grasped the psychology of the slave system. Like the Caribbean society, Tulsidom is constructed of a vast number of disparate families, gratuitously brought together by the economic need of the high caste minority. To accept Hanuman House is to acquiesce to slavery. Mrs Tulsi, the cunning coloniser, justified her exploitation with her foxy explanation that she is really doing her subjects good. Seth, in his blucher boots, is the slave: master: a brutal and brutalising symbol. Mr Biswas's rebellion against such social and personal slavery provides the motivating thrust of the book."<sup>34</sup>

Mrs. Tulsi is the powerful mother-figure, and 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 illness in order to inspire feelings of guilt in those who have failed in their worship. Through the history and development of the first extended reference to illness in Mrs. Tulsi's fainting fits, which is, for the most part, a sham illness, an exact parallel for the history of colonisation on the island is worked out. If Mrs. Tulsi is the prototypical coloniser, the master, then the whole exercise is clearly aimed at subjugation and colonisation. It is to be noted that it is always the lesser *other*, the one who has generally been made to accept the supremacy of the master-coloniser, one of the sons-in-law who is generally the reason for the fit. The sickness becomes an occasion for an open declaration of battle, the illness becoming the weapon of assault. The aim is to vanquish; the end is always a truce enforced by the stronger

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.495.

<sup>34</sup> Satendra Nandan, "The Diasporic Consciousness", *Interrogating Post-Colonialism: Theory, Text and Context* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1996), p. 61.

power, when forgiveness lingers stiflingly in the air, giving a one-sided edge to Mrs. Tulsi and the like. The end to keep the other subjugated is conclusively achieved, and a clear signal that rebellion will not be brooked under any circumstances is sent out to potential offenders.

When things threaten to go out of hand, the sinister declaration, 'Mai faint' sets a complex and esoteric ritual in motion. The hidden parallel power politics of switching and reallocating roles, wherein the childless widow Sushila, temporarily becomes an authority to reckon with, exciting the envy of all the other sisters who vie, in turn, to rub one limb or the other, hints at the underlying tensions and complexities. The effect is equally ominous. The house becomes dead:

Sushila, the widow, came to the top of the stairs and said authoritatively, "Remember mai".

They all remembered. Silence for the sick. The scene was over.<sup>35</sup>

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 the 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".

Hence Mrs. Tulsi, good coloniser as she is, justifies her exploitation with the explanation that she is really doing her subjects good. Her argument is that one which ex-colonial people most bitterly resent, and also the one which gives them pause. 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 forced upon us by our impudent crimes," as T.S. Eliot's Geronion puts it. It is this irony of the colonial process which paralyses Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, and humiliates Mr. Biswas. He knows at last that he had to forget all arguments of right and wrong,

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<sup>35</sup> Naipaul, *n. 10*, p. 198.

and leave the system once and for all: that too much energy has already 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 divided 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 fulfill the psychological requirements of slave-ownership. Not only a subtle manipulation of checks and balances, but sanction, discipline, power obviously and ruthlessly wielded, are necessary. Seth is the representation of this power. Time and again we hear of his big military boots, see him in his khaki uniform, note his big hands and square fingers and hear his voice. So it is together that Mrs. Tulsi and Seth fulfill the psychology of rulership. Seth is aided in this job of preserving order by the husbands who accept their condition. The foremost of these is Govind who becomes policeman for his master. The children in Hanuman House are taught to ridicule the non-conformist in much the same way as Creolised Negro slaves were used to mock new arrivals from Africa into submission. 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 perpetual, and the brothers-in-law accept that rebellion is physically, morally and psychologically impossible. Religious ritual, presided over by Hari, the symbolically constipated negative and dying pundit, helps to seal the system together. 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.

This totalitarian clamp is further backed by more physical reminders:

"The jalousied window in the thick clay-brick wall was closed, keeping out daylight... There was a smell of ammonia, bay rum, rum, brandy, disinfectant, and a variety of subterfuges."<sup>36</sup>

"... The marble topped bedside table was a confusion of bottles, jars and glasses. There were little blue jars of medicated rubs... tall green bottles

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.199.

of bay rum... a mixture with a pink sediment and one with a yellow-brown sediment."<sup>37</sup>

The mounting of this impressive epic catalogue of medicaments is enough to daunt even the most courageous of dissenters, and is integral to the elaborate charade on the part of the dominating party to exert emotional pressure; to wield as an emotive lever, put to consummate political use, to intimidate and to coerce.

So every feature of Tulsi society works towards a general end of conformity. Any sign of individualism is punished. But Mr. Biswas is astute enough to understand the clever deployment of this insidious weapon, and instinctively rebels, refusing to fall in with the rules set down, realising that giving in means complying with the tenets of slavery. He blithely plays with the sag of his 'hammock' like calf muscles, fails to show concern for the 'ailing' power-wielding matriarch's medical condition, and worst, displays no evidence of contrition. This results in the identification of Biswas as a troublemaker, who evidently requires subtler but harsher measures of control.

But in the initial stage, Biswas's rebelliousness against this wall of oppressive opposition bears but limited fruit. Apart from giving him a fleeting sense of merely having made a point, in actual far-reaching terms, it is quite ineffectual. The manner, in which he displays his rebellion, by rejecting Tulsi food and going out and eating inordinate quantities of Salmon, is but a comic and mean effort from which he gains little. Rather, he does great disservice to himself because he himself falls ill. Thereafter, food often evokes a sensation of nausea and is invariably linked with his existential anxiety. It is clear, therefore, that Biswas's most consuming malady is a psychological one: one of depression, the 'nervous conditions' that Fanon talks of, born of his yearning for moorings and an independent identity. In fact, the magnitude of this condition has even moved some critics like Selwyn R. Cudjoe to suggest rather severely that Naipaul characteristically displays a misanthropic tendency to externalise his own neuroses by projecting them onto others.<sup>38</sup> Careening into the abyss of a debilitating persecution complex that constantly makes him feel that he is 'trapped', he suffers

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.200.

<sup>38</sup> Selwyn R. Cudjoe, *V.S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts press, 1988), p. 223.

from a severe nervous breakdown. Alienated from the self, he battles against what seems an irrational fear wherein he feels both physically and mentally threatened. He frantically covers his vulnerable parts. "I am not whole", he laments.

Fear and depression having overtaken him, professional doctors and 'quack' curers are called in to give him attention. But the process of treatment is also going to be fraudulent and not quite what he needs, since the Tulsis, the wily colonisers, have now cornered him in a situation where he is totally at their mercy. They are quick to realise that ideally, to safeguard their supremacy, he needs to be kept pegged to this position. Once again, all their instinctive atavism comes to the fore in their call to the thaumaturgies, high-handedly heralding that purification and prevention were better than cure. The kind of treatment that he gets is a mere colonial palliative and not a permanent cure; a mere ruse, meant only to strengthen the Tulsi hold. Realising that he is far from being cured, he himself decides to go to the specialist the Arwacas doctor had recommended. It is here that he meets other people who are sick. He recognises that his malady is singular in that the causes are beyond the scope of mere traditional therapy. Without any money in his pocket and believing that he is there on false pretences, he is quite out of his depth. He beats a hasty retreat, telling the fish-faced receptionist confidentially, "you know, I am not a sick man at all".<sup>39</sup> The agonising throes of postcolonial awakening that Fanon, Memmi and other thinkers have discerned, assail him. Without intellectually apprehending the complexities, he now instinctively arrives at the crucial postcolonial awareness that this battle is not going to be a straightforward one, simply because it is being waged on too many fronts. More importantly, he realises that he has to carry on the struggle; that it is necessary to stay his ground. The colonial malady of subjugation requires urgent redress and Biswas's awareness of this is the foundation of the discovery of a postcolonial remedy. The search for the remedy is not going to be easy, will entail much heartburn, may not even end in total success. But the important point is that the recognition of the need for an alleviation from secondary, subsidiary status is absolutely the first necessary step on the road to self-hood and self-realisation.

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<sup>39</sup> Naipaul, n.10, p. 315.

When Mr. Biswas has prepared himself for this battle of self-hood, the power mongers play out classic divisive political moves in tandem with colonialist tactics, turning kiths against kins and making insidious inroads into his personal world. All the sisters and sons-in-law, who had accepted her control unquestioningly, were brought together by the attack to present a formidable force against the transgressing son-in-law. Biswas's greatest crime seems to be his attempts to be an individual. When he tries to make a sharp and complete break with Tulsidom, Biswas does go mad. Trinidad laws do not permit the Tulsis to lynch, but they do know how to commit symbolic murder. When 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.

"None of its parts was whole. Its delicate joints were exposed and useless. Below the torn skin of paint... the hacked and the splintered wood was white and raw... The edge of a wall scraped against his shoulder, tearing his shirt and tearing the skin below..."<sup>40</sup>

It is Biswas who is being torn apart, and this encounter with the full malice of the pre-individualistic world leaves him tired beyond irony, and beyond speech.

"And suddenly his rage had gone. His shouts rang in his head, leaving him startled, ashamed and tired. He could think of nothing to say."<sup>41</sup>

This inner weariness too is a dimension of rebellion, this sudden apprehension of a silence that mocks the rhetoric of protest, and of a malice at the heart of things which paralyses both speech and pre-meditated action. The next stage is a retreat from complexity, a simplification of the issues, and a blind commitment to action. Biswas lacks the strength to take this final step, and gains it only at the end of the book, when after another paralysed silence he decides to leave Hanuman House for good.

The nature of Biswas's rebellion is determined by his character, which, as we have noted, is saturated with the wit and irony of Trinidad speech. The Tulsis refer to Biswas as "Creole" - which is the worst insult they know. I hear they have made some Creole converts. Brothers for you, Mohun! Throughout the book

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.219.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 220.



Biswas rebels through the use of good, bad and sick humour, sarcasm *mamaguy*. But the Tulsis come to regard his rebellion into a joke, and accept him as a licensed buffoon, thereby neutralising the effect of his wit. Like the traditional Negro comedian, Biswas is allowed to make those jokes which affirm his self-contempt and strengthen and justify the stereotype which his masters have created of him. Yet in the early stages of revolt, before the Tulsis learn that the best way to contain the rebel is to convert rebellion into a joke, Biswas's wit wins him temporary emancipation from Hanuman House. The Tulsis send him to The Chase to run a Tulsi shop, though there are several similar shops in that little village. It is a dubious independence, given in conditions which guarantee failure. Biswas discovers that the task of changing from irony to construction, from the rhetoric of rebellion to the silent prosaic act of independence is beyond him. In fact he doesn't even know what to make of his freedom:

"How lonely the shop was! And how frightening! He had never thought it would be like this when he found himself in an establishment of his own. It was late afternoon; Hanuman House would be warm and noisy with activity. Here he was afraid to disturb the silence, afraid to open the door of the shop, to step into the light."<sup>42</sup>

Independence is a decaying rusty shop, with fly-blown groceries in a backward antediluvian village, where there are many other such shops competing for the same customers. Moreover, the shop belongs to the colonisers, who have perfected the tradition of absenteeism and have learned how to be invisible while they continue exploitation. So Biswas achieves only age in his six years of independence, and has to return to Hanuman House for comfort and sanity, and for a definition of identity and status. He still judges himself for the most part, by their standards, and is grateful now for their good opinion.

It is worth asking what is the social and universal significance of the rebellion of a mediocre, ridiculous man? Biswas certainly is 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. Riding like a Beckett character on his bicycle, moving countless times with his cumbersome furniture, savouring the bitter irony of his position as an investigator of deserving destitutes, he is *l'homme* absurd. But Biswas is also

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.145.

*l'homme revolte*, since he is persistent in his desire to understand existence and make sense of his milieu. It is of course true that Biswas does not court much success, but the purity of motive and truth to instinct and necessity which marked 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 the group. Biswas is possessed by the idea that everyman should enjoy what Dostoevsky's Lebyadkin terms in *The Possessed* the minimal right - the right to cover one's head. Biswas's continuous struggle for this right makes others in the Hanuman House to fight for their place in this world. Govind who was the policeman of this colonial dispensation and who had once beaten Mr. Biswas in order to achieve status in the eyes of the Tulsi-world, becomes a rebel towards the end of the book. He refuses to welcome Owad when the latter returns from England; he disturbs the house by his loud unmusical singing, and he comforts Biswas after the final encounter with Mrs. Tulsi. Shekhar, the elder son, marries without Mrs. Tulsi's permission. Owad, the younger, is in England. Seth quarrels with Mrs. Tulsi; Hari, the pundit dies. Autocracy has collapsed and so rebellion becomes possible. What follows is a general anarchic scrambling for wealth and power, the revolution of a rabble who has gained individuality without direction. So it is not surprising 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 when Biswas does gain his house 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. But a new promise rests on the discomforts of the younger generation, which, being on surer ground as a result of their parents' struggle, is unwilling to cede any power to the erstwhile colonisers.

So Biswas is so strongly an individual. He is a man without a past, an orphan wavering between equally dubious cultural alternatives; winning a sort of independence and returning in humiliation to the people he is still forced to fight; turning anxiety into absurdity by using humour as a weapon and an escape; trying

to create an identity from the void, and sometimes unknown to himself, exercising and expressing identity in the very act of searching for it. Through will, chance and changing circumstances his life has evolved from homelessness, dependency on others, poverty, lack of a recognised place in the world (his birth was not even officially recorded) to a homeowner, head of a family, a father of two children who are studying abroad. He has created a place for himself in the new world in contrast to the futile poverty to which he appeared destined as a child. In *West Indian Literature* Bruce King, one of the prominent literary critics, writes that *A House For Mr. Biswas* “has a reputation as a New World epic celebrating the struggles of an immigrant towards acculturation and success.” Indeed, the narrative shows Biswas’s successes and defends his desires, which sustain him and give him the ambition to be somebody other than a labourer and the courage to strike out into the unknown beyond his rural East Indian community. “Life has to be lived”, the novel’s narrator remarks matter-of-factly, and indeed Biswas lives his life with courage, resourcefulness, and dignity.

CHAPTER V

**CONCLUSION**

Watching a dramatisation of the *Ramayana*, the Hindu epic, performed by the descendants of East Indian indentured labourers on the edge of the Caroni plain in Trinidad, Derek Walcott, one of the prominent literary genius of the world, searches initially for the words to articulate a sense of elegiac loss fitting to this contemporary enactment of an ancient ritual in East Indian village, a village far removed from the original sources of its diasporic history. Yet he comes to realise that the condition of loss - 'evocations of a lost India' - with which he wants to frame the scene are misplaced: why "evocations"? Why not "celebrations of a real presence"? Why should India be "lost" when none of these villagers ever really knew it, and why not "continuing"? For the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. And it is loss, he suggests, that frequently rekindles the desire in the artist to recreate, to give shape to the past and see the world anew. Walcott's revelation here is an instructive one, for Naipaul's understanding of his diasporic inheritance can also be seen to facilitate a process of 'making' and 'remaking' the fragmentary memory of an Antillean and diasporic past. In terms both of cultural and historical displacement as well as imaginative reconstruction, Naipaul can be seen to be writing identity through a process of symbolic and aesthetic renewal. His works can be seen to represent the enactment of a journey, where the textual spaces created by the writing process itself becomes a fictional frame, an 'imaginary homeland' built on the fragments of memory and desire that enable the heterogeneous elements of his complex past to be constantly negotiated and refigured.

In this context it may be worth considering briefly the historical background to the East Indian presence in the Caribbean islands, a historical process that has been described as the 'second system of slavery' in order to understand the extent to which the 'coolie odyssey' acts as a symbolic repository in Naipaul's work. When slavery was abolished in 1833, there was a labour shortage in the plantation as many of the ex-slaves refused to work. Accordingly, indentured labourers were brought in from India, China and Portugal as sources of cheap labour. The indenture system lasted from 1845-1917 and whilst the labourers were offered a passage back from home after their indentureship had expired, some were never able to make it 'home' on account of debt, and others were encouraged to

stay and take land in lieu of the chance to return. Vijay Mishra has described this phase of the Indian diaspora as the 'pre-modern phase'. Interestingly, whilst the image of the 'Black Atlantic' and its slave ships - crisscrossing the Middle passage - has often been cited as a powerful trope and image for the 'double-consciousness' of contemporary modernity, a means by which we can perceive the extent to which the borders of the modern world have always been mediated and transformed by the black presence in European history, little attention has been given to the parallel effects of the experience of the Asian diaspora, a series of historic and cultural passages which have involved similar crossings of national and political boundaries. It is an identity that is built from the outset on the historic admixtures of different cultural groups and the need to recognise and live alongside differences. And whether we are focusing on the descendants of that early 'pre-modern' phase, in which there is a constant attempt to hold on to the essentialised rituals of the past, or the more recent, later twentieth-century phase, in which the migration of people has largely been voluntary, there is not usually any possibility of permanent return. Returns, such as they are, are usually figurative or metaphoric, symbolic and imaginative reconstructions of the 'homeland' fictions - the creation not of 'actual cities or villages', but invisible ones - Indias of the mind.

So being conscious of the lack of possibility of a permanent return to their homeland and being devastated and frustrated by the black macho and the Creole partial and colonial attitude towards them the Indian indentured immigrants tried to build a mini India in that distant island. They continued to live in the new land in accordance with the institutions to which they were accustomed in the homeland and they attempted to maintain in the new setting the cultural patterns they had learned at home and presumably valued. But in the gradual process certain changes were to be marked in the social, cultural and religious spheres of their lives. These changes were caused due to several reasons. Firstly, these indentured emigrants were volunteered as individuals not as groups and most of them were unrelated to one another and found themselves among strangers during the voyage and on the plantations to which they were assigned. Since the immigrant labourers came largely from one cultural region, it is likely that they drew on common experiences, values and training in order to develop norms in terms of which they could relate to one another. But the actual institutions they attempted to recreate,

complete with sanctions to ensure conformity, did not exist in the social system of the plantation. Thus it is likely that a more pragmatic attitude to the maintenance of traditional norms and the adoption of new ones was given a free rein among the Indians of the indenture countries. By contrast, under the 'Kangani' system, traditional ties of caste, kinship and village community governed the recruitment, the migratory process, and the initial settlement of migrants. So, the norms of these institutions continued to regulate the relations among immigrants in the new setting.

Secondly, the colonial government in India and the planters had a heavy investment share in the indenture system. So once the labourers were brought to distant plantations, the owners of their services were reluctant to exercise their control indirectly through a free market or through negotiation with their leaders. The immigrant labourers were therefore closely regimented, having no scope for a mutual adaptation between the organisation of the plantation labour force and traditional institutions, as was possible in the Ceylonese and Malayan plantations under the 'Kangani' system. Thirdly, the Caribbean was far away from India and this long distance curtailed almost all contacts of the immigrants from their homeland. Fourthly, the economic circumstances of the immigrants were important for the persistence of traditional institutions because of the power derived from the wealth. As the indentured immigrants were labourers, they were not favourably placed and they were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, their bargaining power was less and they were constrained to adjust to whatever demands were made by those who controlled the means of their livelihood. This entailed close association with other ethnic groups, cultural borrowing and adaptation. The last but not the least one is the structure of the host society and its policy towards the immigrants. The main point here is whether the immigrants were defined as a social group in such a way as to impede or prevent their absorption into the wider society. Such a policy slows down the process of integration and isolates the immigrants as a distinct socio-cultural entity in many fields of activity. The widespread adoption by immigrants in intra-group relations of categories of distinction prevalent in the broader society signifies complete integration, while the degree to which they are isolated is reflected by the extent to which social life is regulated by distinction derived from the ancestral culture. In the Caribbean, initial seclusion in the

plantations was followed by a relatively unrestricted freedom to counter all strata of the wider society. There were impediments, but these were largely economic and social disadvantages which the Indians shared with other lower class of the rural society. All these factors along with several other aspects which has been elaborately discussed in Chapter One of the present study, led to the development of syncretic forms, unknown in the homeland. This led Indians to look 'open' in this new land, leaving more space for the younger generation. Anand in this novel under study is a true representation of this trend.

Coming to the novel, *A House For Mr. Biswas* we find that Biswas represents in many ways the culmination of the early phase of Naipaul's writing, where the Tulsis build their world on the need to both somehow preserve the past - that lost world of India that will never fully return - while at the same time replacing that nostalgic desire with what inevitably becomes a Creolised local version. Hanuman House, like Biswas's life, is a house built on shaky foundations, constantly shifting and shored up by the perpetual enactment and performance of ancient rituals, many of which have become bastardised - emptied out of meaning but which simultaneously built on the power of the remaining original fragments to replace the original desire. The Tulsi household thus aspires to the "lost condition" of India whilst at the same time replicating a space where centres and peripheries, motherlands and diasporas enter into relationships of mutual reinforcement.

One of the critical perspectives on the novel, that of fiction informed by history, emphasises Biswas's story as construct - it is a fictionalised biography of a father, overwritten by the son's own story of exile. Just as *The Enigma of Arrival* honours a deceased brother and sister, so too *A House For Mr. Biswas* honours the author's father through the act of the novel's composition and through the fictional personage of Biswas. The Prologue touches on the themes of his life, such as his dreams of a profession and a house of his own, cherished objects like his yellow typewriter, his disappointments and successes, and it then recounts his life's story from birth to death. The novel divides that story into two parts: Part One traces his familial origins and childhood through the years of dependency on his uncle Bhandat and later on the Tulsi family to his desperate departure for Port of Spain and the beginning of his career as a reporter for the *Trinidad Sentinel*. Part Two



follows his career at *Trinidad Sentinel*, his changes of jobs and residences, his son's rising expectations contrasting with his own waning ambitions and sense of waste, his failing health and dismissal from the *Sentinel*, and finally his death of a heart attack. Within parts one and two, the chapters divide according to the major fluctuations in his life, particularly changes of jobs and residence. The determinants behind these changes are the basic needs for food and shelter and his human need for identity and dignity. The novel's chapter divisions thus suggest that his life is largely shaped by basic necessities, which are a constant pressure on him and his family, reversing his intentions and undermining his dreams.

Selwyn Cudjoe, in *V.S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading*, calls the novel, *A House For Mr Biswas*, a "prose-tragedy", explaining: "the tragedy of Mr. Biswas is that because he has not fulfilled his *dharma* (the duty and morality that befits his caste) and his own *dharma* (his personal morality and duty) towards his mother and his kind, his *karma* becomes predictable and inevitable....Mr. Biswas, the contemporary anti-hero, is destined to wander in an alien land, unable to realise himself". Cudjoe is right that Biswas never really belongs within his family, community, or society; he always remains the iconoclast, the outsider, the man on the margins. Informing Biswas's wandering in the wilderness is not only the character's experience of unfulfilled *dharma*, but also the author's own experience of exile. For Biswas is a fictional representation informed by the life of the author's iconoclastic, alienated father, as well as the son's experience of exile. That exile overwrites the fictionalised biography of the father, superimposing one story of wandering on another. In this sense, it is Naipaul the exile who is Mr. Biswas, the author creating a character in the spirit of his father yet also infusing that character with his own exile's alienation and wandering. So the novel tells a two-sided story: It is about a third generation immigrant from an enclaved, rural, ethnic community who succeeds in making his way in an industrialising, urbanising colony; but it is also about his unfulfilment and not-belonging in that colony, about a sense of shipwreck that author as exile infuses into the fictionalised story of his father. His life's wanderings leave behind a typewriter, unfinished manuscripts, and a mortgaged house - themselves two-sided symbols of his material achievement and the ironies of his unfulfilled dreams. *A House For Mr Biswas* at once honours a real father, hallowing his life's struggles and ironies, and

overwrites his fictionalised story with the life of the son, whose exile shapes the fictionalised father's alienation in the colony he will never fit into and never escape from. This recording of his father's life and family creates a new promise and vigour for Naipaul in his quest for identity.

Throughout the novel, the literal search for a house ranging from a hut in the cane fields of rural Trinidad to a house on the suburbs of Port of Spain, as a source of identity, becomes a metaphor for the ever-increasing difficulty of establishing a centre, however makeshift, within the society and creating a structure from which to write. In fact, when Biswas finally achieves a roof over his head, a space where finally 'their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent', we can hear an overt echo of Naipaul's own displacement as he struggled to write his own novel about Biswas, living in a solitary attic room in Stratham Hill. It was a period, as Naipaul describes it, of anxiety and destitution, a period when, having no money, 'I went to London from oxford... in 1954... to make my own way as a writer'. The book would not come immediately; its writing took several years for its subject (the life of his father and the loss of a rejected colonial childhood) was too close. Naipaul was unable to read the novel again for twenty years. With the completion of the novel came calm, but also the realisation that the house of fiction which it represented could never be revisited again, for he had exhausted the possibilities of the form and the material of its local setting.

To be an Indian from Trinidad is to be unlikely. For this word 'Indian' has been abused as no other word in the language; almost every time it is used it has to be qualified. Interestingly, Naipaul is not only anticipating here the discursive power of stereotyping and the eroticisation of the East in the imagination of the West, but also illustrating the degree to which his bifurcated and hybrid identity - as a 'colonial' and an East Indian West Indian - has been constructed by those very same discourses. And it is important to notice that from a very early stage in his thinking, Naipaul was already highlighting the extent to which his imagination was fired and educated by the indeterminate cultural landscape of diaspora. What, he asks, do we mean when we talk about an 'Indian' from Trinidad? And he continues, describing the historical context for indenture: 'so long as the real Indians remained on the other side of the world, there was little confusion. But

when in 1845 these Indians began coming over to some of the islands Columbus had called 'the Indies, confusion became total'. It was a confusion, however, that was to be both disturbing and creative for whilst, as Naipaul argues, the East Indian must remain in perpetual exile, a restless 'immigrant of the New World' for whom there can be 'no true return', no 'El Dorado'.

It is significant that the nature of Naipaul's exilic consciousness, in which memory of home becomes paramount, differs considerably from those well-known modernist figures, Joyce, Conrad, Nabokov or T.S. Eliot. These writers were individuals who left their countries by choice to live as metropolitan exiles, whereas Naipaul's East Indian ancestors were part of a larger historical process, twice dispossessed, both as nineteenth-century indentured labourers in Trinidad and, later as subjects of the British empire. As such, they were representatives of the global history of indentureship, a crucial element of Naipaul's diasporic imagination in which the 'East Indian of the West Indies' has been given epic status. So, in writing about himself, Naipaul has written about others; through an art at least partly autobiographical, he has topped experiences and constructed fictions that define aspects of the colonial and postcolonial world. The key to this link between self and others is the experience of exile, which has enabled him to treat his own alienation and dislocation as an instance and analogue of the changes and search for identity of colonial and postcolonial people. Like societies in transition and development, the exile lives in an in-between that must be constructed syncretistically into an identity; it is through this in-between, this sharing of both origins and ends that he "finds his centre"; it is through dislocations that he locates who he has been and is becoming.

This novel is a quest for order and meaning in the New World of Trinidad. The desire for order that eludes Mr. Biswas during his life time comes to fruition in the end. By acquiring a house, the object that symbolises stability, order and coherence, he rises above the waste and stagnation of his colonial predicament. Biswas's attempt to escape the confines of this stifling 'alien fortress' is the efforts of slaves and coolies to escape from their inhuman bondage. Biswas's heroic struggles to attain dignity and fulfil his aspirations and his transformation from a slave to place, history and dignity to a free man make him a knight fighting for his

fellow colonial comrades against colonialism. He himself realises and makes other realise that everyone is an 'individual' and everyone should enjoy what Dostoevsky's terms in *The Possessed*, the 'minimal right' - the right to cover one's head. The purity of motif and truth to instinct and necessity which marked Biswas's struggle against an apparently indestructible system makes his rebellion an affirmation of universal values; transform it from being a sordid personal struggle to one undertaken on behalf of the group. Biswas's rejection of the roles offered to him, the dutiful son-in-law, the resident sign-painter, the obedient shopkeeper, the friendly uncle, means that he is on his own, and as soon as he detects the nature of a role assigned to him, including that of husband and father, he changes, he leaves to begin again on his own terms. He brings a metamorphosis in Shama and Anand who had belonged to the Tulsis. Shama comes to realise her loyalties towards Mr. Biswas and her family. So after serious hazards in his voyage of self-hood, Biswas arrives at a safe anchor in his 'own' new home.

Biswas through out his life engages himself in the quest of an exploration of landscapes in order to build a 'real' home, a true place of belonging. 'Ought oughts are ought' is instilled into Biswas by Lal at the mission school. But Biswas succeeds in building his 'cosmos' out of 'Ought'. Though he fails to court the good will of fate to live much in his 'cosmos', yet he dies with the contemplation that his family won't be homeless wanderers, unsure of themselves and their fate. He has succeeded in his desire to 'lay claim to one's portion of the earth'.

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