THE CARIBBEAN EXPERIENCE IN THE FICTION OF V.S. NAIPAUL: A STUDY OF THREE NOVELS

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "The Caribbean Experience in the Fiction of V.S. Naipaul : A Study of Three Novels" being submitted by Ms. Shubhangi Vaidya in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy in this University, is a record of the student's own work, carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

It is hereby certified that this work has not been presented for the award of any other degree or diploma.

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I owe my all to my grandmother, Dr. Kamal Vaidya, and my late grandfather Dr. S.S. Vaidya. To them I dedicate this dissertation.

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: PREFACE :

In this dissertation, an attempt has been made to examine the manner in which V.S. Naipaul's novels portray socio-political reality in the Caribbean region.

It would not have been possible, given the cosntraints of an M.Phil dissertation, to have examined the entire corpus of Naipaul's writing. Hence only three novels have been taken up for study; these are 'A House for Mr. Biswas' (1961), 'The Mimic Men' (1967) and 'Guerrillas' (1975). This selection is by no means arbitrary; taken together, along with insights from his non-fictional writing, these three novels unfold a graphic account of Caribbean reality. They encompass the experiences of migration and homelessness, colonial dependence and mimicry, neo-colonial exploitation and racial self-assertion.

It has become fashionable in certain academic circles to dub V.S. Naipaul a rascist, imperalist stooge; a cynic and misanthrope. This study consciously avoids tagging, labelling and amateur, inept psychologising. This study is based on the premise that Naipaul, as an 'insider' as well as an 'outsider to West Indian society can and does provide valuable insights into its nature and functioning; and that his protagonists, rootless, adrift personalities, are representative of modern man's anomic situation.

INTRODUCTION

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born in Chaguanas, Trinidad in 1932. In 1950, he came to England to study English Literature at Oxford University. He started to write his first novel 'Miguel Street' in 1954; it was published in 1959, after 'The Mystic Masseur' (1957) and 'The Suffrage of Elvira' (1958). 1961 saw the publication of 'A House for Mr. Biswas', widely regarded as his most important novel. 'Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion (1963), 'The Mimic Men' (1967), and 'A Flag on the Island' (1967) were followed by his first attempt at historical writing, 'The Loss of El Dorado' (1969). 'In a Free State' (1971), Guerrillas (1975) and 'A Bend in the River' (1979) were followed, after a gap of eight years, by the novel 'The Enigma of Arrival' (1987).

Naipaul is also a highly regarded travel-writer. His sojourn in the West Indies in 1960, on the invitation of the Trinidadian Prime Minister, Dr. Eric Williams, resulted in 'The Middle Passage' (1962), an impressionistic study of colonial society in the West Indies. In 1964, 'An Area of Darkness' was published. It is Naipaul's account of a year spent in India his ancestral land, and the metaphoric severing of the umbilicus with all the resultant loss, a pain and, paradoxically, freedom. 'The Overcrowded Barracoon' (1972) is a collection of his longer essays; 'India : A Wounded Civilization' (1977) explores Indian attitudes against the back drop of the 1975 Emergency. 'The

Return of Eva Peron' with 'The Killings in Trinidad' (1980) studies Argentina, Congo and the Michael X Killings, 'Among the Believers : An Islamic Journey' (1981) chronicles his experiences in Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia; 'Finding the Centre' (1984), two personal narratives, clarify the processes that helped Naipaul evolve as a writer. His latest work of non-fiction is 'India : A Million Mutinies Now' (1990). Unlike the earlier books about India, Naipaul lets his subjects speak; constructing out of their narrative a sympathetic and sensitive picture of contemporary Indian reality. Over the years, Naipaul has also written numerous articles, book reviews and essays.

Naipaul is an 'Indo-Trinidadian'. His father's grandmother and his mother's father were among the thousands who made the journey across the seven seas from the depot in Calcutta to the sugar estates in Trinidad; lured, tricked and sometimes plain abducted by the 'arkatias' or recruiting agents. The Indo-Trinidadians or 'East Indians' are among the myriad ethnic groups that constitute the pastiche that is Trinidad.

For all its racial and cultural complexity, Trinidad is a small island of about 1,980 square miles. The 1960 census put its population at just under one million - 827,957 to be exact-of which Negroes constituted 43.5 percent, Indians (Hindus and Muslims) 36.5 percent, Europeans 2 percent and Chinese 1 percent. Those with mixed racial ancestry

constituted 17 percent of the population. Trinidad's religious diversity is even more marked. Catholics (36 percent), Presbyterians (4) Anglicans (21), Hindus (24), Muslims (6), Baptists (2) and numerous other Christian (6) and non-Christian sects (1 percent) are all to be found in this tiny island.[1] This tremendous diversity can be accounted for by casting a glance at the island's history. It would be in order to focus on the Indian immigrant experience in particular, and the pattern of relationship that developed between them and those who they 'supplanted', namely, the Creoles, the erstwhile slaves.

The island was discovered by Columbus for the King of Spain in 1498. The Spaniards were interested in creating a mining economy based on precious metals. This was believed to be the region where the fabled land of El Dorado was located; Spanish 'conquistadores' set about searching for it in right earnest. In the process they decimated the native Indians who were enslaved and sold to other colonies, forced to convert to Christianity and tortured or killed if they dared to resist. The natives proved incapable of adapting to the new order and it was in this context that missionaries like Bartolome de las Casas argued for the import of African slave labour. Africans, it was argued, were stronger, more adaptable and less primitive than the Indians; hence good slave material. The Spanish rule lasted three centuries, but they never really had the will nor the wealth to effectively colonize the island prior to 1783. That year, the King of

Spain offered land grants to settlers of Catholic persuasion. Trinidad was overrun with French emigres and their slaves - victims of the Jacobin excesses in France - and the French Caribbean settlement and development of the colony took off from that stage.

The British captured the island in 1797 and integrated it into their Empire. This stage of Trinidad's history witnessed the consolidation of the colonial order. Trinidad became a sugar supplier, its plantation system used African slave labour. The campaign against slavery that gripped Europe resulted in the abolition of slavery in 1834. The repercussions of abolition on the sugar economy of Trinidad could well have been disastrous. In order that the impact of abolition be softened, six years of 'apprenticeship' were proposed, in which the emancipated slaves would still be compelled to work for their former masters albeit for wages. However, apprenticeship was ended on 1 August 1838, a full two years before the actual due date.

The end of apprenticeship saw a qualitative change in planter-labourer relations. To keep up production to meet the demand for slave sugar in the British market, planters required a regular, docile labour force. The freed apprentices had to be enticed to work with high wages. In the words of Donald Wood, "Employers were involved in new kinds of labour relations, difficult to learn by those brought up in the easier and compulsive ways of slavery.

Where once they had driven, they had now to lead; they had to cajole men and women who were conscious that they were being wooed and for whom the canefields held degrading memories.[2] Efficiency fell off; production declined steadily year after year. The arrival of Chinese and Madeiran peasants and other European immigrants was seen as a hopeful sign, but they proved incapable of adjusting to hard labour in a tropical climate. The planters' last hope lay with Asia, and in particular, India.

The planters of Trinidad were not particularly enthusiastic about Indian immigration, to start with. 'Coolie' immigration to Mauritius (where they had been arriving since 1834) was stopped in 1840 when Parliament's attention was drawn to their ill-treatment and high mortality rate. But the need of the sugar colonies for immigrants far outweighed humanitarian considerations, and emigration of Indians was reopened in 1843, with stricter methods of surveillance than previously. In 1844, the idea of Indian immigration to the West Indies was favourably received by the Governor General of India. Calcutta and Madras were to be the two ports for emigration Rules concerning immigration were framed. Contracts were to be made for one year in the first place. Indians were to be allocated in large parties; they were believed to work better that way. Groups of fifty were to be under the control of a 'sirdar', groups of twenty-five under a headman. Magistrates could inspect estates and listen to complaints directly. Housing, medical care, a provision

garden, a yearly issue of clothes (dhotis, caps and jackets in place of the Negroes' shirts and trousers) and monthly food rations (including rice, dried fish, oil or ghee, chillies, onions, turmeric, tamarind) were to be provided gratis. Working hours and wages were fixed; during crop indentured labourers were bound to work as long as the planter deemed necessary; out of crop, they were to work nine hours a day. For their pains, labourers would earn Rs. 5 per month; headmen and sirdars Rs. 6 and 7 respectively. These wages compared unfavourably with what Creole labourers could earn, but were much higher than the wages prevailing back in India.[3]

The prospective arrival of the Indians was regarded with some trepidation by Trinidad's Christian ministers. Whilst the African was regarded as simple, malleable clay who could be moulded into civilized, Christian shape, the Indian was an inscrutable member of a society with a highly developed religion and philosophy; Hindu practices it was felt would be a sad example to the Creoles; newspaper reports of 'sati' and 'thuggee' were received with fascinated horror. Despite the concern regarding Indian dressing and eating habits and their reprehensible customs, it didn't occur to anyone at the time that their arrival would completely upset the balance of race relations. The European culture on the one hand and the African on the other would soon be confronted with a third one that did not fit into their interplay in any known or predictable fashion. "A new set of assumptions

and antipathies was brought into an already complicated situation, when an alien high culture, satisfied with its own values, was imported into a society where the dominant Europeans were wanting, whether consciously or not, to fashion the Negroes in their own image."[4]

The 'Fatel Rozack', the Mayflower of the East Indians of Trinidad, arrived from Calcutta on May 3, 1845, landing 225 passengers. Six died on the way; of the survivors, one was an idiot and two too ill to work. In the next three years, 5,167 Indians would join the 'Fatel Rozacks', many of them misfits who became vagrants; isolated, sick and destitute, stricken by their new environment. A minority always existed that was unsuited to manual work, for reasons ranging from health to caste considerations. Rajputs and Brahmins, in particular found agricultural labour galling; 'heading' manure was a deeply upsetting task, with the connotations of untouchability.

The assumption of office in 1846 of a Whig Government led by Lord John Russell indirectly spelt the end of the first wave of immigration. The Whigs brought in legislation which forced the West Indian planters to compete equally with foreign sugar by abolishing the fiscal distinction that existed between the two. To make matters worse, the financial crisis in Britain had a crippling effect on the Trinidadian economy, and sugar prices slumped. Wages slumped too; many planters were unable to pay their

labourers. Demand for labour fell; there were to be no further Indian arrivals in the turbulent 1840's.

The 1850's saw a decline in British public interest in the affairs of the sugar colonies; they were more or less left to their own devices, as the Mother Country had far more pressing matters to think about, like the Crimean War, for example. The plantocracy wanted Indians; the first batch of indentured labourers were on the verge of completing their five-year tenure; another labour crisis seemed at hand. But in 1851, the traffic was reopened, and continued smoothly until 1917 when the system itself was abolished. By the end of 1869, 37,690 Indians had come in since the landing of the 'Fatel Rozack.'[5] The 1850's and 1860's proved to be critical decades in the history of East Indian settlement for it was during this period that they became the dominant class of immigrants, the backbone of the agricultural economy, indeed, its saviours during a period of crisis. (The theme of the community as the 'saviour' of the Trinidadian economy was to become an important one when East Indians attempted to mobilise themselves politically).

They were now settlers, not just transient labourers; they had begun to put down roots and had adapted their culture to their new environment. Initially, they had been housed in 'barracks' on the estates, and had been subjected to a slave-like regimen. Many labourers returned to India after their five-year term. As an incentive to keep them on the

island, they were allowed to buy or rent plots of Crown land in lieu of the passage home. Thus, the barracks were gradually abandoned, and small Indian villages (like Morton Klass's "Amity") were established, where Indian village life was sought to be recreated. Their perceived insularity and isolation, their determined adherence to their customs religion and language and the almost complete absence of miscegenation strengthened the stereotypes that the older communities had constructed; Creoles had always looked down upon the 'coolies' who had, with such alacrity taken up the work which to the former, smacked of servitude and degradation. The high incidence of 'crimes passionelles' within the community, the seeming ease with which perjury was committed and the fanatical thrift that characterised the Indian community did nothing to make them popular with either the whites or the Creoles. The East Indians, for their part, prodded by fear and disdain towards the Negroes, adapted to Creole Trinidad by avoidance and withdrawal. Oxaal cites a government directive of 1890 which prescribed seperate latrines for Negro and East Indian estate workers. He also quotes the remarks of an Anglican Clergyman and school master made in 1888, opposing the idea of an integrated Creole-Indian school.

"An Indian will not send his child to a Creole school. He is afraid of injustice being done to his child from the Creole teacher...... The Creole, as a rule, looks down on the Indian : he is a semi-civilised being .... He takes work

cheaper than the Creole will do, hence he must be ill-treated ,,,,"[6]

In a nutshell, East Indians were regarded by and large as a necessary evil by the majority Creole community. Confined as they were to the sugar belt, they could lead a more or less unhampered rural existence. The Creoles meanwhile had taken to Western education and occupations with a vengeance. It would be some time before the Indian community moved out of the villages and to the towns. 'A House for Mr. Biswas' (1961), the first of the three novels discussed in this dissertation documents exactly this process of disintegration of the Hindu clan and its dispersal and absorption into the wider society.

The end of the First World War heralded a number of changes in Trinidadian society; indenture was done away with in 1917; a coloured and black professional middle class was coming into being and was, with increasing stridency, demanding constitutional changes. The democratic sentiments and the idea of self-determination engendered by the war had stimulated political mobilisation among coloured West Indians. Early in 1925 Trinidad held its first elections to the Legislative Council; seven members were elected, prominent among them Captain Cipriani,, who was to become a consistent, dynamic working class spokesman. The inter-war years saw an acceleration in the pace of constitutional changes following the dramatic general strike of 1937. The

Second World War opened Trinidad to the outside world. In 1940, the U.S. concluding a deal with Britain, began to build air strips and naval installations in Trinidad. Tens of thousands of local people secured employment; the 'American Occupation' as it come to be called, exposed Trinidad to the efficiency and know-how of the Americans, besides bringing in easy money and earning Trinidads, the reputation of being a Caribbean fleshpot. As Oxaal remarks : "the white American and Caribbean military personnel ..... created something of a boom times atmosphere in the island. They drank great quantities of rum and Coca-Cola with local ladies of easy virtue at point Cumana .... where an observant calypsonian noted that both mother and daughter were working for the Yankee Dollar".[7] The post-war years saw the movement for independence under the leadership of the distinguished scholar, Dr. Eric Williams and his 'People's National Movement'. Independence was achieved in 1962, but the goal of decolonization, of restructuring the framework on which the old plantation society rested, proved elusive. Economic dependence on the west and its intellectual concomitants conspired to keep Trinidad and indeed, the West Indies as a whole, client economies, dependent on western goods, western ideas, western approval. 'The Mimic Men' (1967), the second of the three novels dealt with in this dissertation, examines the nature of independence in the region.)

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As Oxaal remarks, ..."he (Naipaul) articulates a definition of the West Indian situation recognized - if not often publicly expressed - by many of its leading politicians. Faith in the viability of the region is still the point around which all analyses and prescriptions for the West Indian future turns."[8] The neo-colonial 'mimic men' are finally overwhelmed by a combination of forces too strong to resist; on the one hand, the poverty and social distress of their lands, on the other, the unscrupulousness of foreign interests that have been granted carte blanche in the name of economic development. Their dependent plantation descended economies are sought to be bolstered up by rhetoric; mystification reigns supreme. Havelock Brewster brilliantly sums up the predicament of the dependent economy: "A predictable cluster of institutions develop, whose very physical presence is projected as the living symbol that governments govern. Central Banks Planning Units, Industrial Courts, Tourist Boards, Marketing Boards, Industrial Development Corporations, State Trading Agencies, etc., flourish but do not function. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that if these were all closed down it would have little or no real effect upon what actually takes place. There are the corresponding postures, business - like gait, planes, dictating machines and computerization, and, above all : the big voice from the little country on the world's stage - Punta del Este Cuban reconciliation, United Nations Human Rights, Lusaka non-alignment. And the GNP,

phallic symbol par excellence, rises ever upward at the involuntary command of honourable economic ministers."[9]

The growing disaffection with the "Afro-Saxons" in power notwithstanding, Dr. Williams and the P.N.M. stayed on in power. The late 1960's saw the birth of the "Black Power" movement in America. Stokely Carmichael, one of its major activists, visited Guyana with the "message". He was, however, banned from entering Trinidad. In Trinidad itself, radical students, unemployed youths and older radicals combined to form the N.J.A.C., the National Joint Action Committee. The 'cause celebre'' of the N.J.A.C. was the arrest of their 'black brothers' who were accused of smashing and burning the computer centre at Sir George Williams University in Montreal, Canada. The N.J.A.C. began to question Canada's role in the Caribbean; 'Canadian imperialism' and the P.N.M's perceived collusion with it became the issues of the day. The street march in support of the students on February 26, 1970, grew into demonstrations and later massive rallies protesting against the entire social and political system. As the N.J.A.C saw it, white power and the collusion of "Afro-Saxons" was the root of the problem in the Caribbean, and could only be remedied by Black dignity, the manifestation of Black consciousness and Black economic power. However, Selwyn Ryan points out that like so many other radical groups in the Caribbean, the N.J.A.C's skills were essentially destructive. It identified societal contradictions and mobilized the frustrations of

all levels of society but failed to channelise them in any meaningful way.[10] Demonstrations degenerated to 'Molotov cocktail parties'. On April 21, 1970, a state of emergency was declared, complete with a dawn-to-dusk curfew. Mutiny by a section of the 750 strong Trinidad Defence Force was quelled. Meanwhile, a U.S. naval task force was poised off-shore. By May, order of sorts was restored. Naipaul's views on the Black Power Movement stem from his disillusionment regarding the Caribbean predicament to him, Black Power is Carnival; it is a collective delusion that far from diagnosing and treating the malaise of post-colonial society, diverts attention away from it, leading to fantasy and play-acting. His novel 'Guerrillas' (1975) highlights the themes of dependence and neo-colonial bondage of a small island, where American business interests and military intervention are in the end all that is 'real' and significant.

The three novels taken up in this dissertation mirror three specific experiences in contemporary Caribbean history, namely, the East Indian experience, the transition from colonialism to independence and the experience of neo-colonial dependence and thirdly, the revival of interest in the obliterated history of the Negroes and the attempt to fight dependence by recapturing the mythical glories of the past. All three experiences are rooted in the human quest for identity and self-definition, the attempt to claim a history and locate the self in a rapidly changing world.

This quest for identity is one which Naipaul himself has ceaselessly conducted and which is articulated in all of his work. Mr. Biswas, Ralph Singh, Jimmy Ahmed (the protagonists of the three novels identified for this study) are, like their creator, products of multi-racial, ethnically diverse societies; their ancestries are submerged in the tides of history; they are the 'nowhere men' of the New World. Satendra Nandan writes : "Virtually all of Naipaul's writings deal with the predicament of the 'unanchored souls. .... Naipaul's vision has never faltered, indeed it has widened, with a sense of urgency and immediacy, into a more universal fate, moving into other cultures, other lands, other peoples. However, the underlying, unifying reality is always the same. That he has made the Caribbean experience an integral strand in the pattern of human condition is his signal achievement.[11]

Naipaul's own need to find a centre, to anchor himself in a tradition and invest his life with an order has paradoxically earned him the label of an inveterate colonial, a rabid Anglophile who derides the Third World to please his western patrons. This study is concerned neither with corroborating these views nor with an impassioned defence of Naipaul's proclivities. What is attempted is an understanding of the search itself, as it emerges from Naipaul's writing. For a student of sociology, Naipaul's particularity, his many levels of marginality and his

perception of the world as an unattached observer as well as a permanent exile provide food for thought.

Naipaul spent his early childhood in Chaguanas, in 'Lion House', his mother's home. Hanuman House in 'Biswas' is fashioned after it. Its inhabitants, the Tulsis, bear a marked resemblance to Naipaul's maternal relatives. 'The younger god' is a take-off on none other than Dr. Rudranath Capildeo, Naipaul's maternal uncle and the first leader of the opposition in Trinidad ! Chaguanas was an Indian country town; its Hindi-speaking residents had simplified the name to 'Chauhaan'. It had its Hindu and Muslim districts; the traditional religious and caste rivalries survived intact. Despite the physical wretchedness and tensions that joint family living implied, it gave to its members " a caste certainty, a high sense of the self."[12] Naipaul recalls how his past seemed mythic and unreal; "I grew up with two ideas of history, almost two ideas of time. There was history with dates. That kind of history affected people and places abroad .... But Chaguanas ... had no dates. If I read in a book that Gandhi had made his first call for civil disobedience in India in 1919, that date seemed real. But 1919, in Chaguanas, in the life of the Indian community, was almost unimaginable. It was a time beyond recall, mythical. About our family, the migration of our ancestors from India, I knew only what I knew or what I was told. Beyond (and sometimes even within) people's memories was undated time, historical darkness. Out of that darkness (extending to

place as well as to time) we had all come. The land where Gandhi and Nehru and the others operated was historical and real. The India from which we had come was impossibly remote, almost as imaginary as the Ramayana, our Hindu epic."[13]

His father had been a remote figure during the Chaguanas sojourn; when Naipaul was six, their nuclear family moved to Port of Spain. Naipaul's fascination with the written word stemmed from his father's obsession and profession, writing. It was decided that he was to become a writer; he went to England with exactly this aim in mind, and enrolled for a course in English Literature. It was a mistake, in his view, as it only succeeded in making him aware of his lack of tradition. This was to plague his efforts at writing as well. He remarks: "the English or French writer of my age had grown up in a world that was more or less explained. He wrote against a background of knowledge. I couldn't be a writer in the same way, because to be a colonial, as I was, was to be spared knowledge. It was to live in an intellectually restricted world; it was to accept these restrictions."[14] To practice his art he had to relate literature to life; he writes about peripheral, seemingly anarchic and chaotic societies, he writes about anonymous men in search of a more dignified life. But, as Shashi Kamra points out, this search becomes a trap as it takes on the form of the original power/domination drive that enslaved his protagonists in the first place.[15]

This gap between the imagined and the actual comes through poignantly in Naipaul's account of his first visit to India, 'An Area of Darkness' (1964). He quotes from Charles Darwin's 'Voyage of the Beagle' : "Only the other day I looked forward to this airy barrier as a definite point in our journey homewards; but now I find it; and all such resting places for the imagination, are like shadows, which a man moving onwards cannot catch."[16] 'An Area of Darkness' is an account of loss. Unable to come to terms with the mythic lead of his childhood, Naipaul is forced to reject it, to come to terms with his homelessness. Naipaul's father had once looked into the mirror and had been unable to see himself. He had started screaming and had, for a while been seriously ill. Naipaul's experience of India can be compared to the incident of the mirror; he too searches for his reflection and fails to find it. In the words of Richard Cronin : "(Naipaul) comes to insist on his separateness from India as the only refuge from his hysteria, the only guarantee against the predicament that made his father mad ... He chose, in the end, to reject the part of himself that recognised India, and though the rejection entailed loss, it was a loss that he could survive."[17]

Satendra Nandan remarks that post-colonial society has produced at least three kinds of writers : those who search for roots in the lands of their ancestors; those who find meaning and belongingness in their own landscape, and those -- like Naipaul -- who reject their society and choose

exile. Nandan believes that Naipaul's isolation has not meant withdrawal, rather, it has conferred a detachment that has nurtured his independent and ironic vision.[18]

NOTES

1. cf. Selwyn Ryan - Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago. Toronto : University of Tornonto Press, 1974. p.3.

2. Donald Wood - Trinidad in Transition : The Years After Slavery. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1968. p.54.

3. cf. Ibid., pp. 112-113.

4. Ibid., p.111.

5. cf. Ibid., p.131.

6. cf. Ivar Oxaal - Black Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Race and Class in Trinidad. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Comapny, Inc., 1982. pp.45-6.

7. Ibid., p.61.

8. Ibid., p.282.

9. Quoted from ibid, p.292.

10. cf. Ryan, p.468.

11. Satendra Nandan - The Immigrant Indian 'Experience in Literature : Trinidad and Fiji in C.D. Narasimhaiah (Ed). Awakened Conscience. New Delhi : Sterling, 1978. p.348.

12. V.S. Naipaul - Finding the Centre. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1988. p.49.

13. Ibid., pp.51-2.

14. Ibid, p.27.

15. cf. Shashi Kamra - The Novels of V.S. Naipaul. New Delhi : Prestige Books, 1990 p.15.

16. Ibid., p.27.

17. Richard Cronin - Imagining India. London : Macmillan, 1989. pp.112-13.

18. Nandan, p.350.

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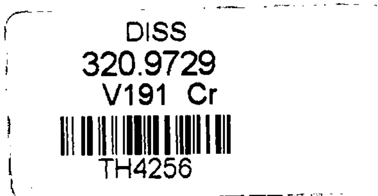

: CHAPTER ONE :

THEMES IN 'A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS'

Like Naipaul's earlier novels 'The Mystic Masseur' (1957) and 'The Suffrage of Elvira' (1958), 'A House for Mr. Biswas' (1961) is a continuation of the East Indian quest for order and meaning in the new world of Trinidad. According to Selwyn Cudjoe, the central concern of the novel is "locating the subject in the changing contours of his world as it emerges from the stasis of a feudal order to the fluidity of a nascent capitalistic society..."[1.] Gordon Rohlehr remarks that 'A House for Mr. Biswas' depicts "...a classic struggle for personality against a society that denies it."[2]

'A House for Mr. Biswas' is much more than a man's quest for a house. The house is primarily a metaphor for a lost past and wrenched roots; owning a house means recapturing a sense of security, a sense of place that were irretrievably lost when life in the Indian village was exchanged for exile to strange shores. Mr. Biswas's quest for a house symbolises a life-long struggle to achieve security in the flux of the New World. The novel chronicles a struggle to assert and maintain identity in the face of a social setting that denies it; where the rules of the plantation and the seemingly inexorable Hindu clan organisation conspire to crush any trace of individuality and ambition.

The novel also traces the gradual disintegration of the Hindu world of Trinidad, "...an enclosing self-sufficient world absorbed with its quarrells and jealousies, as difficult for the outsider to penetrate as for one of its members to escape..."[3]. Education, westernization, individualism and competitiveness edge out joint-family values; the post Second World War economic boom heralds the transition of a feudal, static plantation economy to a competitive, capitalist one. Naipaul captures the East Indian world in transition as many other great writers have done with other worlds.

Homi Bhabha remarks that "the driving desire of 'Biswas' conceals a much graver subject: the subject of madness, illness and loss, the repetition of failure and the deferral of desire; the trauma of being always inscribed between the unwritten..."[4]. Mr. Biswas's short life is a struggle to locate himself, lend order to his vagabond existence in the transitory world of Trinidad. His rejection of the oppressiveness and obsolescence of the traditional order embodied in his in-laws, the Tulsis, and his difficulty in adjusting to the demands of the new, modern one lead him to settle for a life which is "...awkwardly shot through with memories of a Hindu past and the complex ambition aroused by a modern, westernized present."[5]

The novel is located firmly within the history and geography of the Trinidad of the 1930's and 1940's. It opens

in a labourer's hut in the cane-fields of rural Trinidad and closes in a house in a Port-of-Spain suburb. During the course of this journey, Mr. Biswas's constant endeavour is to own a house. Twice he fails; the third attempt is a success; he dies shortly afterwards. The short life and petty struggles of a weak, often unpleasant, singularly unheroic 'hero' in a tiny island are given almost epic proportions, highlighting the sense of the Absurd that marks the novel. Our 'hero' epitomises the Absurd and moves through "dimension after dimension of nearly epic Absurdity,"[6] as Rohlehr aptly puts it. According to Camus, the absurd man "feels within himself his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."[7] In his quest for his house. Mr. Biswas faces ridicule, penury, threat; the world around him is seemingly oblivious to his needs and aspirations.

The Wanderer

Our hero's birth is inauspicious, to put it mildly. He is six-fingered and born 'the wrong way', sure indications that he will 'eat up his own parents'. He proceeds to do just that; Raghu his father, drowns whilst trying to rescue Mr. Biswas from a pond; the errant child meanwhile cowers beneath a cot at home. The death of his father signals the disintegration of the family; marauding neighbours force the widow to sell the hut and the plot of land, the elder sons

become estate labourers, the daughter is taken in as a servant by wealthy relatives, Bipti (the widow) and Mr. Biswas join the ranks of the poor relations living off the charity of Tara and Ajodha in Pagotes. "And so Mr. Biswas came to leave the only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own...

"When, years later, Mr. Biswas looked for the place where he had spent his early years he saw nothing but oil derricks and grimy pumps... His grandparents' house had disappeared, and when huts of mud and grass are pulled down they leave to trace... the world carried no witness to Mr. Biswas's birth and early years." (HFMB, 40-41)

At Pagotes, Mr. Biswas acquires an elementary education. He comes into contact with the Creole world through his friend Alec; he discovers in himself a talent for lettering which later catapults him into the bosom of the Tulsi family. His schooling comes to an abrupt end when he is sent off to train as a pundit under the tutelage of the austere Jairam. His apprenticeship ends in disaster; a disgraced and constipated Mr. Biswas is sent back to Pagotes. Another unfortunate apprenticeship, this time at a rum shop, also comes to a sorry end. Mr. Biswas decides to be his own man, he becomes a sign painter. Plagiarising fancy lettering from foreign magazines, he becomes an avid reader; he graduates to the novels of Hall Caine and Marie Corelli. "They introduced him to intoxicating worlds.

Descriptions of landscape and weather in particular excited him; they made him despair of finding romance in his own dull green land which the sun scorched every day." (HFMB, 78)

He becomes enamoured of the novels of Samuel Smiles, whose heroes are young and poor like him, yet inhabiting lands where ambition and drive are rewarded, where achievement has meaning. And Mr. Biswas begins to chafe with frustration, with the urge for romance, waiting for the world to yield its sweetness. He is thus ripe for the events that soon take place when he goes to Hanuman House at Arwacas and meets Shama.

The Tulsis of Hanuman House

"Hanuman House stood like a alien white fortress. The concrete walls looked as thick as they were... bulky, impregnable and blank... windowless... slightly sinister... The kitchen... was lower than the hall and completely without light. the doorway gaped black... blackness seemed to fill the kitchen like a solid substance." (HFMB, 80) The inhabitants of this transplant from the United Provinces are the Tulsis, a pious, conservative landowning family. The patriarch, the late Pandit Tulsi, had made his fortune and retained links with his family in India, the deference they commanded in their native district carried over to Trinidad. Painting signs in the Tulsi shop, Mr. Biswas is attracted to Shama, one of the innumerable Tulsi daughters. He summons up

the courage to drop her a love letter. The result of this amorous foray is sudden and startling; he finds himself betrothed to Shama! He is browbeaten into consenting to a simple ceremony at the registrar's office; his youth and poverty are deemed as no bar. It is sufficient for the Tulsis that he is a Brahmin, it is fortunate that this being a "love marriage", he cannot, in all good conscience demand a dowry. The marriage is just one of the numerous 'cat-in-bag' arrangements the Tulsis have to make, burdened as they are with so many daughters. After the ceremony, Mr. Biswas moves into Hanuman House. It is, he discovers, a model of efficient organisation.

Mrs. Tulsi heads the household. Seth, her brother-in-law, exercises authority on her behalf. The daughters lucky enough to wed well-to-do men, move to their husband's homes, as is usual, the less fortunate, married to destitutes and nonentities like Mr. Biswas, stay on, complete with husband. "The husbands, under Seth's supervision, worked on the Tulsi land, looked after the Tulsi animals and served in the store. In return, they were given food, shelter and a little money; their children were looked after; and they were treated with respect by people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis...
...Mr. Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsi. At once he rebelled." (HFMB, 97)

Given his prospects, his destitution and absence of close familial ties, Mr. Biswas's rebellion seems inexplicable. To an uprooted orphan, the close, engulfing world of the Tulsis could offer warmth, a sense of belongingness. But close examination reveals that the seemingly admirable reconstruction of the clan affected by the Tulsis has an exploitative, oppressive side. In his perceptive critique, Rohlehr likens Hanuman House to a slave society, erected by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who need workers to keep their empire functioning. "They therefore exploit the homelessness and poverty of their fellow Hindus, and reconstruct a mockery of the clan which functions only because they have so completely grasped the psychology of a slave system. Like the West Indies, Hanuman House is constructed of a vast number of disparate families, gratuitously brought together by the economic need of a "high-caste" minority. Men are necessary here only as husbands for the Tulsi daughters and labourers on the Tulsi estates. To accept Hanuman House is to acquiesce in one's slavery."[8] The Tulsi sons-in-law are forced to be subservient and deferential as they are "ghar-jamais", traditional objects of ridicule and satire. Occupying such a humiliating role may lead to two kinds of response: extreme compliance (as is the rule in Hanuman House) or rebellion, as we shall soon see.

The Tulsi daughters are kept in check by their demanding 'Mai' who keeps them happy by bestowing the

occasional favour, competition for which is keen. She remains at the centre of her daughters' consciousness, demanding constant love and worship. Being allowed to pick her lice or massage her head with bay rum is considered an honour. Mai's most effective weapon is emotional blackmail. While it works on her daughters and meeker sons-in-law like a charm, it fails to move Mr. Biswas, whose irrepressible wit leaves the matriarch literally speechless. Whilst Mrs. Tulsi rules by threats and tears, Seth, quite literally, wields the whip. Rohlehr observes: "It is amazing, on reflection, how little we are told of Seth. Time and again we hear of his big military boots, see him in his khaki uniform, note his big hands and square fingers, and hear his voice... But he can rule without Mrs. Tulsi no more than she can rule without him: for it is together that they fulfill the psychology of rulership."[9]

Hanuman House cannot function without the psychic emasculation of the sons-in-law and the meek compliance of their wives. Albert Memmi observes: "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."[10] It is hard to challenge the legitimacy of the power of Tulsidom, for, as ingrates like Mr. Biswas are constantly reminded, they owe their survival to the system. A familiar tirade goes as follows: "You know, nobody

hearing you talk would believe that you come to this house with no more things than you could hang up on a one inch nail..." (HFMB, 115) Mr. Biswas is constantly made aware of his poverty, his dependence, his insignificance. To this he responds with a quirky mixture of wit, defiance and querulousness which earn him the titles of 'serpent' and 'traitor'. He devises satirical names for the clan members:

'How the little gods getting on today, eh?' he would ask.

He meant her brothers.
... ..Shama wouldn't reply.
'And how the old queen?' That was Mrs. Tulsi. 'The old hen? The old cow?'
'Well, nobody didn't ask you to get married into the family, you know.'
'Family? Family? This blasted fowlrun you calling family?'
(HFMB, 104-105)

He scandalises the orthodox Sanatanist Tulsis by associating with the reformist Aryans, advocating women's education and the abolition of child marriage. He refuses to give up sign-painting. "Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No, boy. My motto is: paddle your own canoe." (HFMB, 106) And during the course of a particularly nasty quarrell, an apology is demanded from the 'Paddler'. Humiliated beyond endurance, Mr. Biswas loses his temper. "'The whole pack of you could go to hell!' he shouted. 'I am not going to apologize to one of the damned lot of you.'" (HFMB, 111)

Mr. Biswas's refusal to conform is, in the eyes of the Tulsis his gravest offence. Unlike his more docile counterparts in Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas is not trained in subservience, traditional reverence for age and clan loyalty is conspicuously absent in him. Exposed as he is to the Creole world of looser sanctions and nursing Smiles-inspired visions of the worth of the individual, Mr. Biswas refuses to give up his eccentricities, his personhood. His refusal to settle for the mundane contrasts sharply with Shama's expectations from life. Like her sisters, she wishes "...to be taken through every stage, to fulfill every function, to have her share of the established emotions... ambition, if the word could be used, was a series of negatives: not to be unmarried, not to be childless, not to be an undutiful daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow." (HFMB, 160)

Signs of individualism in the children too are ruthlessly extinguished. Ritual beating features prominently in the novel. The Tulsi daughters recall with a thrill of pride some of the legendary beatings administered by Mai, and proceed to carry forward the tradition. Ignoring the pressures applied by the Tulsis on the individual to dares to be different. Mr. Biswas gives his daughter Savi a doll's house one Christmas. It has cost him a month's wages, he is enamoured of its perfection, as is his child. Together, they examine it in sheer wonderment. The magic is shortlived. Goaded by the vicious comments and behaviour of an outraged Tulsi family, Shama tears the house to pieces. "The doll's

house did not exist. He saw only a bundle of firewood. None of its parts was whole. Its delicate joints were exposed and useless. Below the torn skin of paint, still bright and still in parts imitating brickwork, the hacked and splintered wood was white and raw." (HFMB, 219) It is ironic that the house Mr. Biswas gives his child is destroyed by the child's mother. Shama is still a Tulsi, her aspirations work at odds with those of her husband. The trauma Mr. Biswas experiences on seeing the wreckage of what was once whole and beautiful symbolises in small the psychic pain of being rendered homeless. Although the Tulsis eventually learn to cope with Mr. Biswas's dangerous wit by institutionalising him as the family wag, it is no longer possible for Mr. Biswas and the Tulsi clan to pull along together. He challenges their feudal world, prompting Seth to exclaim : "This house is like a republic already... the Black Age has come at last. Sister, we have taken in a serpent." (HFMB, 123-24)

In the Void

Unable to stick it out at Hanuman House any longer, Mr. Biswas is given an unexpected reprieve, the chance to run a Tulsi shop in The Chase, a rural outpost. Mr. Biswas moves out of Hanuman House with a donkey-cartful of possessions and a pregnant wife. He realises just how frightening independence can be. "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..." (HFMB, 145) So must his ancestors have felt, when they left the security of the village to cross the seven seas and landed up in barracks on remote sugar estates. The utter boredom and futility of life at the Chase bring home to him the dereliction and desolation of rural Trinidad. Never relinquishing the belief that his life has a nobler purpose, he plunges into philosophical tracts from the ancient Hindus to Marcus Aurelius. He feels their irrelevance to his condition; this heightens his frustration. He tries to create a fantasy-world of order and perfection in the form of landscapes; he paints graceful, symmetrical forest scenes all over the walls of his shop. He spends six years at the Chase, never ceasing to regard them as a temporary interlude, a prelude to a nobler, more meaningful life.

Such, alas, is not to be the case; after the failure and closure of his shop, he finds himself at Green Vale, a Tulsi estate, as a sub-overseer. If the Chase spelt isolation, then Green Vale epitomises death and decay. "Whenever afterwards Mr. Biswas thought of Green Vale he thought of the trees. They were tall and straight and so hung with drooping leaves that their trunks were hidden and appeared to be branchless. Half the leaves were dead; the others, at the top, were a dead green. It was as if all the trees had, at the same moment, been blighted in luxuriance,

and death was spreading at the same pace from all the roots. But death was forever held in check. The tongue-like leaves of dead green turned slowly to the brightest yellow, became brown and thin as if scorched, curled downwards over the other dead leaves and did not fall. And new leaves came, as sharp as daggers; but there was no freshness to them; they came into the world old, without a shine, and only grew longer before they too died." (HFMB, 206) Like the leaves on the Green Vale trees, his family too is growing; Shama is expecting their fourth child. The very sight of Shama has become abhorrent to Mr. Biswas; she stays with the children at Hanuman House. Thoughts of escape fill his imagination, yet there is nowhere to escape to, no way that the existence of his family can be wished away. His entrapment, social and psychological is complete. The only pleasure he can derive is from his relationship with his son Anand. Talking to the boy, playing, teaching and learning with him, Mr. Biswas transmits to his son some of his own obduracy, questioning mind and freedom of spirit. In later years, Anand comes to be regarded as a rebel; many of his escapades bear the stamp of his father's perversity. This single pleasure notwithstanding, Mr. Biswas's life has degenerated to a surrealist nightmare. External objects assume terrifying dimensions; death and destruction seem to lurk everywhere. He begins to lose his mental balance. "He was rocking hard on the creaking board one night when he thought of the power of the rockers to grind and crush and inflict pain, on his

hands and toes and the tenderer parts of his body. He rose at once in agony, covering his groin with his hands, sucking hard on his teeth, listening to the chair as, rocking, it moved sideways along the cambered plank. The chair fell silent. He looked away from it. On the wall he saw a nail that could puncture his eye. The window could trap and mangle. So could the door. Every leg of the green table could press and crush." (HFMB, 230)

His attempts to build a house end in disaster. Like the obliterated hut of his childhood and Savi's mangled doll house, the house he tries to build degenerates (for want of money and materials) into a derelict shack, makeshift and ugly like all the other houses he has known. It is in this tumble-down shack that Mr. Biswas suffers from a complete nervous breakdown one stormy night. Muttering "Rama Rama Sita Rama", Mr. Biswas and Anand try to keep at bay the terror of the night; the ancient 'mantra' a relic from securer times. "Lightning; thunder; the rain on roof and walls; the loose iron sheet; the wind pushing against the house, pausing and pushing again.
Then there was a roar that overrode them all. When it struck the house the window burst open, the lamp went instantly out, the rain lashed in, the lightning lit up the room and the world outside, and when the lightning went out the room was part of the black void.

Anand began to scream.

He waited for his father to say something, to close the window, light the lamp. But Mr. Biswas only muttered on the bed, and the rain and wind swept through the room with unnecessary strength and forced open the door to the drawing room, wall-less, floorless, of the house Mr. Biswas had built." (HFMB, 292)

The image of a lonely man pitted against an unforgiving landscape is a recurrent motif in Naipaul's writing. In a remote village in Surinam, Naipaul came across an old Indian man living in utter squalor. "He was going to die soon, on that moated plot in Coronie, and he spoke of death as of a chore... ..A derelict man in a derelict land; a man discovering himself, with surprise and resignation, lost in a landscape which had never ceased to be unreal because the scene of an enforced and always temporary residence; the slaves kidnapped from one continent and abandoned on the unprofitable plantations of another, from which there could never more be escape."[11] It is with just such an image that 'A House For Mr. Biswas' opens. "Bipti's father, futile with asthma, propped himself up on his string bed and said, as he always said on unhappy occasions, "Fate. There is nothing we can do about it..." No one paid him any attention. Fate had brought him from India to the sugar estate, aged him quickly and left him to die in a crumbling mud hut in the swamplands; yet he spoke of Fate often and affectionately as

though, merely by surviving, he had been particularly favoured." (HFMB, 15)

To survive in the West Indies is to triumph, according to Naipaul; it is the Indian ability to accept and rationalise suffering that has helped the community to make out, against all odds. The East Indian community accepts, adjusts, survives, but Naipaul's Biswas, "armed with only a flair for eccentricity and an extra dimension of sensitivity, feel(s) incapable of reconciling (him) self to the world in which (he) is born."[12] Mr. Biswas embodies his creator's frustration at the manner in which his society has shaped. It is a typical colonial society, which in David Ormerod's words, is "...built on slavery, on exploitation and the crassest of materialism, with no political or cultural identity."[13] The East Indian community is, in Naipaul's words, "a peasant-minded, money minded community, spiritually static because cut off from its roots, its religion reduced to rites without philosophy, set in a materialist colonial society: a combination of historical accidents and national temperament has turned the Trinidad Indian into the complete colonial, even more philistine than the white."[14]

While Mr. Biswas strives to fight off attempts by the Tulsis to undermine his independence and strives to emulate his Samuel Smiles heroes, he cannot fight the baggage of three hundred years of history; the coolie lines of Green

Vale ultimately claim his sanity; he has relived the terrifying experiences of his ancestors. He has experienced the immigrant experience of which he himself is a product. He also discovers, during these futile, wasted years of his New World 'ban-vas' how difficult it is to change from irony to construction, from the rhetoric of rebellion to the silent, prosaic act of independence. Equipped with few skills, living in a society where the ambitious, aspiring individual is an anomaly, he realises that "ought oughts are ought", the schoolboy mantra assuming a more profound, terrible meaning.

A New Beginning

It is Tulsidom that comes to Mr. Biswas's rescue. The oppressive order he has tried to circumvent, now shows is solid, sheltering side. "He welcomed the warmth and reassurance of the room. Every wall was solid; the sound of the rain was deadened, the ceiling of two and a half inch pitchpine concealed corrugated iron and asphalt; the jalousied window, set in a deep embrasure, was unratlled by wind or rain." (HFMB, 295)

In this protective cocoon, Mr. Biswas soon regains his physical and mental health. The quantities of Ovaltine and Ferrol he consumes eat into his meagre resources. The Tulsis lose patience; Mr. Biswas takes stock of his life. "He was the father of four children and his position was as it had been when he was seventeen, unmarried and ignorant of the

Tulsis. He had no vocation, no reliable means of earning a living." (HFMB, 303)

Leaving Shama and the children in Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas secretly leaves for Port of Spain, to start a new life away from the cloying Tulsis, to paddle his canoe. At last he gets a job as a reporter in 'The Trinidad Sentinel', which prides itself on being a purveyor of the yellowest possible journalism. At last he finds his vocation, writing, which enables him to externalise his irony, frustrations and longings. He produces macabre items like the notorious "Daddy Comes Home in a Coffin" piece. His attempts to write fiction, though, are unsuccessful. He never succeeds in finishing a story entitled 'Escape'. The hero, trapped into marriage and saddled with a family, meets a young girl. She is thin, unkissed, fresh and tender; she is dressed in white and is mercifully barren. Beyond the meeting the story never progresses. His writing is perfectly in tune with the urge that prompted him to paint soothing, ordered landscapes at the Chase; the urge to escape the stress of his present. The burden of his wife's oppressive fecundity drives him to find freedom in the arms of a barren, sexless heroine; the burden of his four growing children and lost youth cause him to seek the ultimate release-death - "Daddy Comes Home in a Coffin." The desire to escape stress causes him to equivocate between the order and solidity of Hanuman House to the uncertainty and chaos of the outside world. Caught

between two equally dubious alternatives, his flight takes the form of fantasy and imagination.

Once established in Port of Spain, he reconciles with the Tulsis and moves his family to the city. The snag is that they occupy a Tulsi house; even though they pay rent, Mr. Biswas feels an unpleasant sense of bondage. The Tulsi shadow chases him everywhere. Like the ubiquitous Tulsi plant in every Indian courtyard, the Tulsis remind Mr. Biswas of an aspect of his past, indeed, of his very Indianness. But removed from the congenial soil of Arwacas, the plant begins to wither; the depredations of a new age and its new values undermine its very essence.

The Decline of the Tulsis

It is not just Mr. Biswas who moves from country to town. Mrs. Tulsi sets up an establishment in Port of Spain to keep an eye on Owad, the 'younger god', who studies there. Her absence from Hanuman House brings to the forefront the rivalries and jealousies seething beneath the calm surface. Seth, Mai's right hand, is isolated and forced to move out. With one ruler of the empire in self-imposed exile and the other deposed, the communal organisation of the household breaks down. Death claims the pundit, Hari, his place can never be filled. Shekhar, the 'elder god' who could have assumed charge is completely under the thumb of Dorothy, his aggressively westernized Presbyterian wife. Dorothy wears short frocks, speaks to her daughters in

Spanish, is rumoured to use her right hand for 'unclean' purposes and treats her sisters-in-law with an amused condescension that infuriates them.

Apart from the authority structure, religion had contributed to keeping the Tulsis united. Even though certain Catholic practices had always been in vogue (eg, the celebration of Christmas in true Creole style, complete with cherry brandy and ice-cream and the use of symbols like the crucifix for its magical value), the Tulsis had always been aggressively Sanatanist, as their violent reaction to Mr. Biswas's heretical Aryanism once revealed. Yet, Mrs. Tulsi eventually takes refuge in Roman Catholicism. "For every puja Mrs. Tulsi tried a different pundit, since no pundit could please her as well as Hari. And, no pundit pleasing her, her faith yielded. She sent Sushila to burn candles in the Roman Catholic Church; she put a crucifix in her room; and she had Pundit Tulsi's grave cleaned for All Saints' Day." (HFMB, 521-22)

It would be simplistic, though, to regard this development as a clash between two mutually opposed worlds, one triumphing over the other. For, as Naipaul points out in 'An Area of Darkness'(1964), "...the worlds were juxtaposed and mutually exclusive. One gradually contracted. It had to; it fed only on memories and its completeness was only apparent. It was yielding not to attack but to a type of seepage from the other."[15] This seepage manifested itself

in religious practices, habits of speech (Hindi giving way to Creole English), dress, the race to acquire a Western education and manners. Nevertheless, the rituals that had once held the family together were fast eroding and being abandoned.

The move to Shorthills, a cocoa estate in northeast Trinidad signifies the end of Hanuman House. "Despite the solidity of their establishment the Tulsis had never considered themselves settled in Arwacas or even Trinidad. It was no more than a stage in the journey that had begun when Pundit Tulsi left India.
...Seperate from their house and lands, they would be seperate from the labourers, tenants and friends who respected them for their piety and the memory of Pundit Tulsi, their Hindu status would be worthless, and.... they would be only exotic." (HFMB, 390)

At Shorthills, a bastion of French creole society with orange trees and gri-gri palms; cocoa and coffee plants and courting couples, the Tulsis find themselves unable to function in a purposeful and ordered manner. The authority structure having crumbled, there is no one to plan and direct activities. Unable to function as a cohesive unit, rampant individualism now rules the roost. Each sub-unit of the clan strives to plunder what it can and make the most of the common property. The economic boom precipitated by the American presence triggers off the spirit of competition

that comes to characterise life at Shorthills. One of the sons-in-law sells the cedar trees on the estate, another sells oranges and lemons by the lorry-load. The saleable parts of the family's Ford V8 car are stripped and sold when the car becomes defunct. Shorthills becomes a nightmare, particularly for the children. "Daylight was nearly always gone when they returned (from school) and there was little to return to. The food grew rougher and rougher... No child knew from one night to the next where he was going to sleep;..
During the week, ...(the children).. formed a community of their own, outside family laws. No one ruled; there were only the weak and the strong. Affection between brothers and sisters was despised. No alliance was stable." (HFMB, 411-12) Cudjoe remarks, "In this world of budding bourgeois social relations, the laws of capitalism - the survival of the fittest and bourgeois individualism - begin to dominate. The older bonds of solidarity cease to exist, replaced by divisiveness, fragmentation, disloyalty and competitiveness."[16]

The Shorthills experiment is a disaster. Mr. Biswas and his family move back to the Port of Spain house; this time they must share it with 'W.C. Tuttle', the seller of cedar trees, Govind (who had beaten up Mr. Biswas years ago for insulting one of the Tulsis) and their families. Basdai, a widow, also moves in, bringing along with her an evergrowing army of "readers and learners" whom she boards and feeds.

Education has become the password to success in a fiercely competitive new world; each member of the erstwhile Hanuman House now has to fend for himself. Anand and Govind's son Vidiadhar both compete for an 'exhibition'. Healthy competition between students is perverted to an all-out battle for prestige between their parents. When Anand wins the exhibition and Vidiadhar doesn't, the hapless loser is subjected to violent abuse.

The adults meanwhile battle for material prosperity; for suits and cars and houses and furniture. Govind, now a taxi-driver, has acquired six new suits. W.C. Tuttle lends his lorry out to the Americans; he owns a gramophone, a radio, a morris suite and a four-foot high statue of a naked woman. "There was money in the island... And from this money, despite Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, despite Samuel Smiles, Mr. Biswas found himself barred." (HFMB, 438).

At the 'Sentinel' too, he is plagued by a sense of insecurity. The old, racy style of reporting has been discredited by the new management and Mr. Biswas has, at a late stage, to relearn his profession. He no longer finds pleasure in writing. To add insult to injury, he is made an investigator for the 'Deserving Destitutes Fund'. "Day after day he visited the mutilated, the defeated, the futile and the insane living in conditions not far removed from his own; in suffocating rotten wooden kennels, in sheds of box-board, canvas and tin, in dark and sweating concrete

caverns." (HFMB, 441)

The death of Bipti, his mother, is an unexpected blow. "He was oppressed by a sense of loss: not of present loss, but of something missed in the past... the sight of Shama and the children... called him away from that part of him which yet remained purely himself, that part which had for long been submerged and was now to disappear." (HFMB, 480) Trapped by a social history from which he cannot escape, he tries to reconcile his personal biography with a heritage from which he feels alienated. To do honour to his mother, he writes a "poem-in-prose" which he reads out at a literary club he has joined. The piece is a tribute to their mutual past which he had violated during Bipti's lifetime. It speaks of a journey made a long while ago. He was tired; she made him rest. He was hungry; she fed him. He had nowhere to go; she welcomed him. Externalizing and examining his past, he can now regard it without pain.

Caught in the trap of an unclaimed past and an uncertain future, Mr. Biswas begins to slip slowly into oblivion. At forty, he foresees no further professional advancement; the city has lost its romance and promise; he looks forward only to Anand's future. The return of the 'younger god' from England hastens the final split between Mr. Biswas and the Tulsis. Tempers are frayed in the unbearably overcrowded house, the 'god' rules the household and the hearts of his sisters; the brothers-in-law are redundant. Mr. Biswas is as good as thrown out of the house.

Mustering his meagre savings, he decides to buy the first house he sees, beguiled by its height and apparent solidity, its cozy furnishings and the morning-glory on the fence. Unmindful of the wobbly staircase, the defective doors and windows and the absence of drainage, he borrows heavily from his uncle Ajodha and takes possession of the house. Of course, as soon as the family moves in, its many deficiencies are discovered. Yet, they adjust, they learn to regard it as home. "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... And rapidly the memories of Hanuman House, The Chase, Green Vale, Shorthills, the Tulsi House in Port of Spain would become jumbled, blurred; events would be telescoped, many forgotten." (HFMB, 581)

It is in the house in Sikkim Street that Mr. Biswas at last learns to respect and trust Shama. She too learns a new loyalty towards her husband and children, no longer rushing off to her mother and sisters at the slightest opportunity. It is from this house that Anand and Savi branch off into fruitful careers; both go abroad for higher studies. It is to this house that Mr. Biswas returns after being hospitalised for a heart attack. "The hospital had been a void. He had stepped from that into a welcoming world, a new, ready-made world. He could not quite believe he had made that world. He could not see why he should have a place in it. And everything by which he was surrounded was

examined and rediscovered, with pleasure, surprise, disbelief. Every relationship, every possession." (HFMB, 12) It is in this house that Mr. Biswas lives out the last days of his life; sacked from his job, heavily in debt, waiting for Anand to come home and take charge. And finally, it is here that Mr. Biswas hands over his responsibilities, not to Anand, but to Savi, and enjoys the companionship and affection of his first-born.

After a lifetime of wandering, of attempting to build his own nest, he has come home, having made the future secure for his wife and children. "How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent 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 unaccomodated." (HFMB, 14)

Ironically, his final escape from Tulsi bondage finds him irretrievably mortgaged to his uncle Ajodha! Bondage to his wife's family has been exchanged for bondage to his own; he has acquired an overpriced, badly made house literally at the cost of his life. The absurd situation is worked out to the end. But he has ensured a bright future for his children; they are better equipped than he is to be Trinidadians, to operate effectively in a changed world.

In the words of Gordon Rohlehr, Biswas is "..representative enough of our local predicament: 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."[17]

The desire for order that eludes Mr. Biswas during his lifetime comes to fruition in the end. By acquiring a house, the object that symbolises stability and coherence, he rises above the waste and stagnation of his colonial predicament. In the following chapter, we shall deal with 'The Mimic Men', a novel chronicling the opposite process, namely, the descent into ever-deepening disorder and chaos. The protagonist, R.R.K. Singh is educated, erudite, aware - unlike Mr. Biswas - yet, he too is adrift, seeking to locate himself in a world transiting from colonial dependence to independence. What shape this independence assumes and how its beneficiaries function within a new order, are some of the themes that shall be dealt with.

Notes

1. Selwyn R Cudjoe - V.S. Naipaul : A Materialist Reading. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. p.51.

2. Gordon Rohlehr - The Ironic Approach - The Novels of V.S. Naipaul in Robert Hamner (Ed.) Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul London: Heinemann, 1979. p.188.

3. V.S. Naipaul - The Middle Passage. Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1988. p.88.

4. Homi Bhabha - Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism in Frank Gloversmith (Ed.) The Theory of Reading. New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1984. p.117.

5. Patrick Swinden - The English Novel of History and Society : 1940-1980. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984. p.223.

6. Gordon Rohlehr - Character and Rebellion in 'A House for Mr. Biswas' in Robert Hamner (Ed.) Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul. p.84.

7. Albert Camus - The Myth of Sisyphus (trans. Justin O'Brien) New York: Random House, 1955. p.21.

8. Gordon Rohlehr - Character and Rebellion in 'A House for Mr. Biswas'. p.87.

9. Ibid., p.89.

10. Albert Memmi - The Colonizer and the Colonized. London: Souvenir Press, 1974. p.56.

11. V.S. Naipaul - The Middle Passage. pp.189-90.

12. David Ormerod - In a Derelict Land: The Novels of V.S. Naipaul in Critical Perspectives. p.163.

13. Ibid., p.161.

14. V.S. Naipaul - The Middle Passage. p.89.

15. V.S. Naipaul - An Area of Darkness. Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1990. p.35.

16. Selwyn Cudjoe R. - V.S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading. p.59.

17. Gordon Rohlehr - Character and Rebellion in 'A House for Mr. Biswas'. pp.102-3.

: CHAPTER TWO :

THEMES IN 'THE MIMIC MEN'

The search for identity embarked upon by Mr Biswas is carried forward by 'Ralph' Ranjit Kripal Singh, protagonist of 'The Mimic Men' (1967). Singh is an exiled and disgraced politician seeking refuge in London. 'The Mimic Men' is Singh's autobiography, his confessional. In it he reflects on what it means to be a newly-liberated colonial and more particularly, one who is instrumental in shaping the fortunes of his newly-freed nation. 'The Mimic Men' is a novel about political power in an emergent nation; it is about those who wield that power; men who strive to mimic their former masters in a frantic effort to execute the power they have inherited; it is about the temporal and fragile quality of that power in a chaotic society without rules. Ralph Singh remarks : "My career is by no means unusual. It falls into the pattern. The career of the colonial politician is short and ends brutally. We lack order. Above all, we lack power, and we do not understand that we lack power. We mistake words and the acclamation of words for power; as soon as our bluff is called we are lost. Once we are committed we fight more than political battles; we often fight quite literally for our lives. Our transitional or makeshift societies do not cushion us..... For those who lose, and nearly everyone in the end loses, there is only one course: flight. Flight to the greater

disorder, the final emptiness: London and the home counties." (MM, 8)

It is from the 'final emptiness' of a drab room in a shabby-genteel boarding house in London that Ralph Singh writes his memoirs, reflecting on an active life that seems finished at forty. Structured as a series of flashbacks, the narrative moves back and forth between London and Isabella, Singh's native land reflecting the sense of displacement that plagues Singh. Isabella is very obviously a fictional Trinidad; as such it is representative of the West Indian predicament that Naipaul gives expression to in all of his works; the sense of smallness, of being at "the rim of the world", shipwrecked islands, makeshift, settlements societies with a bloodstained past and an uncertain future. Independence has not brought a fundamentally new order in its wake, it has merely led to a loss of the old colonial order with nothing but borrowed forms and concepts to replace it. What Naipaul says about the Venezuela of the nineteenth century holds for contemporary Isabella/Trinidad: "Spain had suddenly withered away; and Venezuela, cut off from Spain, was being shivered into all its divisions and subdivisions of race and caste.... the pacific, deficient colonial society had become bloody. Spain was now seen to be more than its administrative failures. It was, however remotely, a code and a reference that the colonial society by itself was incapable of generating. Without such a reference

obedience, the association of consent, was no longer possible."[1]

Peter Nazareth describes 'The Mimic Men' as a study of corruption, both of the body politic as well as the individual human soul. He points out that at the beginning of the phase of decolonization in newly-liberated Third World countries politics were seen by writers as the means through which a new humane order could be brought into being. But soon came the shattering discovery that the new leaders were no better and often even worse than the old, leading to disillusionment and despair; an inability to see any break in the vicious circle. Naipaul's 'The Mimic Men' Achebe's 'A Man of the People', Soyinika's 'Kongi's Harvest' and Rubadiri's 'No Bride Price' were all written within a few months of each other.[2] Cudjoe refers to the movement from colonialism to post-colonialism and the resultant psychic pain documented in the narrative, as well as "the nature of consciousness that is created when the subject enters a new social realm of language and culture and the uncertainties and ambivalences surrounding this important moment of social and political transformation."[3] 'The Mimic Men' is a political novel, to the extent that as Molly Mahood suggests, all colonial novels emerge from the novelist's sense of political pressure and his perception of the western polis as the enchanted city that will free him from the drabness of his semi-urban existence.[4] The novel is an acute portrait of a highly self-conscious, aware

individual trying to locate himself in a new order, who is able to distance himself sufficiently, both physically and mentally, so that he may subject that order close and dispassionate scrutiny. Yet, Singh's fate must finally be that of all exiles. Raymond Williams describes the exile in these words: "... the exile, because of his own personal position, cannot finally believe in any social guarantee: to him, because this is the pattern of his own living, almost all association is suspect. He fears it because he does not want to be compromised... he fears it also because he can see no way of confirming, socially, his own individuality; this, after all, is the psychological condition of the self-exile."[5] Ralph Singh's exile begins with the very fact of his being a 'shipwrecked' Isabellan, without roots, a lost past and forgotten heritage. It is this feeling of being unanchored and adrift that implants in him the desire to flee Isabella, to move from smallness and insignificance to the wide world 'out there.'

The Compulsion for Flight

Ralph Singh was born to an impoverished school-teacher and a daughter of wealthy Coca-Cola bottling barons. He strongly identified with his maternal family, revelling in their fame and wealth much to the disgust of his father. His father never could stomach the fact that his in-laws, once poor shopkeepers, had far outstripped him, a learned Brahmin in wealth and social status.

Childhood, for Ralph is a period of "incompetence, bewilderment, solitude and shameful fantasies... I longed for nothing so much as to walk in the clear air of adulthood and responsibility, where everything was comprehensible and I myself was as open as a book." (MM, 90) His schooldays at the Isabella Imperial epitomise the fantasy-world in which he and his friends live. "We had converted our island into one big secret. Anything that touched on everyday life excited laughter when it was mentioned in a classroom: the name of a shop, the name of a street, the name of street-corner foods. The laughter denied our knowledge of these things to which we were to return. We denied the landscape and the people we could see out of the open doors and windows, we who took apples to the teacher and wrote essays about visits to temperate farms." (MM, 95) Such schizophrenic living blurs the line between reality and unreality. Reliving his schooldays from his London retreat, Singh distinctly remembers taking an apple to the teacher. Now this is highly unlikely, since there are no apples in Isabella. It could well have been an orange. Yet, the apple remains stubbornly imprinted on his memories. Indigenous history and culture are relegated to the background at the Isabella Imperial; Ralph Singh is made aware of the island's insignificance. Denying their environment and experience, Ralph and his friends create their own fantasy-worlds. Hok, the nervous, sensitive 'Confucius' reads about ancient China; his mystique is

rudely shattered one day when he is forced to acknowledge his Negro mother on the street; a complete "betrayal into ordinariness." Ralph's secret reading is about Rajputs and Aryans, Central Asian nomads ranging over tall, snowcapped mountains and endless plains. "And I would dream that all over the Central Asian plains the horsemen looked for their leader. Then a wise man came to them and said, 'you are looking in the wrong place. The true leader of you lies far away, shipwrecked on an island the like of which you cannot visualise.' Beaches and coconut trees, mountains and snow: I set the pictures next to one another." (MM, 98) Ralph Singh's hunger for the nurturing reassurance of a history, a great tradition parallels Naipaul's own need to 'find a centre.' The need for and quest of a heritage is a recurrent motif in Naipaul's fiction. Ralph Singh's fantasies reflect the power of myth in settlement societies; myth is rich, it is subject to various interpretations; it makes real the idea of tradition and civilization in makeshift camplike societies like Singh's Isabella.

He feels entrapped, endangered in this "obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous." (MM, 118) He decides to escape to the "true, pure world", London, the western polis where he thinks great things happen. "We, here on our island, handling books printed in this world, and using its goods, had been abandoned and forgotten. We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one

unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new." (MM, 146)

Singh's escape from Isabella is paralleled by that of his father, who assuming the title 'Gurudeva' leads a group of striking dockworkers to a retreat in the hills. His protest, his statement against life's drudgery too assumes a pseudo-religious form. Assuming the robes of a Hindu mendicant, he expounds "a mixture of acceptance and revolt, despair and action, a mixture of the mad and the logical." (MM, 129) The event that comes to be forever associated with the Gurudeva's eventually abortive uprising, is the ceremonial disembowelling of a race-horse belonging to one of Isabella's old French creole families. "Asvamedha: to myself alone I spoke the word. It filled me with unexpected awe and horror. An ancient sacrifice, in my imagination, a thing of beauty... now rendered obscene.
...The horse-sacrifice, the Aryan ritual of victory and overlordship, a statement of power so daring it was risked only by the truly brave....
...How had my father arrived at it?... was it an attempt at the awesome sacrifice, the challenge to Nemesis, performed by a shipwrecked man on a desert island?... Chieftancy among mountains and snow had been my innermost fantasy. Now, deeply, I felt betrayed and ridiculed... I wished to fly, to begin afresh, lucidly." (MM, 140-2) Isabella, for Ralph Singh has become forever tainted, the site where fantasy has assumed disgusting, repulsive shape. Myth

becomes sordid reality; Singh feels exposed and vulnerable. His Aryan heritage has shown itself to be barbaric; he can only hope for redemption in the 'civilizing' arms of the West.

London, the centre of the 'real world' fails to stimulate Singh. "Here was the city, the world. I waited for the flowering to come to me ... I would play with famous names as I walked empty streets and stood on bridges. But the magic of names soon faded. Here was the river, here the bridge, there that famous building. But the god was veiled ... in this solid city life was two-dimensional." (MM, 19) Alone in the city with on one to link up his present with his past, Singh is free to experiment with personas, to present himself in whatever way he choses. He cultivates the image of a dandy, an extravagant colonial. he becomes an inveterate womaniser picking up foreign women whose language he cannot understand so as to avoid the complications of involvement. He keeps a sexual diary; an auto-erotic exercise through which he tries to retain a grip on his identity. In the absence of the "certainties" of Isabellan life, he is lost, adrift, a mere "cell of perception" in the vastness and and impersonality of London. Life is reduced to a series of compartmentalised encounters, unrelated to each other. He experiences acute panic. "Not the panic of being lost or lonely; the panic of ceasing to feel myself as a whole person. The threat of other people's lives, the remembered private landscapes, the relationships,

the order which was not mine... How could I fashion order out of all these unrelated adventures and encounters, myself never the same, never even the thread on which these things were hung?" (MM, 27-8) His restlessness drives him from one boarding house to another, from one warm body to another. The body's pleasures too acquire a perverse dimension. He is driven to perform the sexual act not necessarily because of desire or arousal but more to retain his link on reality, to prove to himself his own maleness. This leads to feelings of disgust and self-disgust. "Intimacy: the word holds the horror. I would have stayed forever at a woman's breasts, if they were full and had a hint of weight that required support. But there was the skin, there was the smell of skin. There were bumps and scratches, there were a dozen little things that could positively enrage me. I was capable of the act required, but frequently it was in the way that I was capable of getting drunk or eating two dinners. Intimacy: it was violation and self-violation." (MM, 25) He tours the continent and exhausts his savings. The green fields and Alpine slopes of his childhood imaginings reveal themselves to be meaningless landscapes bereft of any emotional value, much as the streets and squares of London proved to be no more than empty names. "I abolished landscapes from my mind. Provence on a sunny morning.... the brown plateau of Northern Spain in a sun storm.... I abolished all landscapes to which I could not attach myself and longed only for those

I had known. I thought of escape, and it was escape to what I had so recently escaped from." (MM, 31)

He returns to Isabella complete with a wife, Sandra; a British woman as rootless and restless as he. She lusts for romance and glamour, she wishes to escape from what threatens to be a life of hardwork and insignificance in Britain. She is compelled to leave University, her career prospects include nothing more exciting than secretarial work; so she proposes marriage to Singh and is accepted. Singh and Sandra become members of a trend set in Isabella; he deals in real estate and rapidly becomes a millionaire. But the marriage begins to flounder. "What makes a marriage? What makes a house with two people empty? Surely we were compatible, even complementary. Yet it was this very compatibility that drew her away from me. She had begun to get some of my geographical sense, that feeling of having been flung off the world... She spoke increasingly of her childhood... One morning... she told me she had awakened in the night with a feeling of fear, a simple fear of place, of the absent world... I felt we had come together for self-defence." (MM, 68-9) Their relationship has exhausted its possibilities; life is reduced to the daily and frantic search for new sensations, new lovers, new restaurants; there is no scope for personal growth in a society like Isabella. Recognising this, Sandra leaves. For her, as for Ralph Singh, Isabella is no more than a camp-site where one's tent is temporarily pitched; unlike

Singh, she is free to leave; she has something to go back to.

Colonial Politics

The start of Singh's political career coincides with the end of his marriage. Like much else in his life, politics are a game, a heightening of the senses, ventured into without any particular sense of purpose or committment. His views concerning politicians are telling: "Politicians are people who truly make something out of nothing. They have few concrete gifts to offer. They are not engineers or artists or makers, they are manipulators .... Having no gifts to offer, they seldom know what they seek.
... the true politician finds his skill and completeness only in success. His gifts suddenly come to him. He who in other days was mean, intemperate and infirm now reveals unsuspected qualities of generosity, moderation and swift brutality. Power alone proves the politician." (MM, 37)

It is as an associate of the black leader Browne (an old school-mate) that Singh becomes a force to reckon with in Isabellan politics. As a representative of the sizeable Asian community, as a successful and articulate member of the middle class, as the son of Gurudeva, leader of oppressed masses, Singh is credible, he represent the aspirations of the island. The independence movement spearheaded by Singh and Browne "enthroned indignity and distress". However, they go no further. Singh is

intoxicated by the awareness of the control he exercises on the emotions of the masses; yet, he questions the utility of precisely this power when Independence becomes a reality and rhetoric has to be converted into results. "It was part of our innocence that at the beginning we should have considered applause and the smell of sweat as the only source of power. It took us no time to see that we depended on what was no more than a mob, and that our hold on the mob was the insecure one of words... I saw that in our situation the mob, without skills, was unproductive, offered nothing, and was in the end without power." (MM, 204) And then comes the terrifying realisation that although rhetoric, inspired by the smell of the sweat of a mob, has succeeded in wiping out an existing system, the new one that emerges to replace it is probably even more corrupt. The new men in power are described by Singh as "men without talent or achievement... unproductive, uncreative men who pushed themselves into prominence by an excess of that bitterness which every untalented clerk secretes ..." (MM, 191) In a fragmented, inorganic society like Isabella, "no power was real which did not come from the outside." (MM, 206)

It is the this "outside" that exercises its insiduous influence on all affairs Isabellan; the sugar estates are under foreign ownership, the bauxite mines are controlled by multinational firms, what passes in the name of industry is the packaging of foreign-made goods. One of the planks on

which Browne and Singh came to power is the nationalization of the sugar estates. This issue proves to be Singh's nemesis. His visit to London to negotiate the nationalization of the Stockwell estates is a diplomatic disaster. To add insult to injury, he proceeds to have an affair with Stella, Stockwell's daughter. It is a sexual sell-out to the 'enemy'. The Stockwell episode marks the end of Singh's political career. News of his doings in London outrage his countrymen. He is denounced, disgraced and exiled. London and oblivion await him; he has gone the way of many others. As he puts it: "The colonial politician is an easy object of satire. It is that his situation satirizes itself, ... takes satire to a point where it touches pathos if not tragedy... He must go back on his words.... he must betray himself and in the end he has no cause save his own survival." (MM, 209)

Singh's reflections mirror Naipaul's deep mistrust of the politics of newly-liberated nations, particularly those of the Caribbean. These nations are directionless, chaotic; given their history they cannot be otherwise. Naipaul's assessment of the Jamaica of the 1960's sums up his appreciation of the problems of West Indian society. "Every day I saw the same things - unemployment, ugliness, overpopulation, race - and everyday I heard the same circular arguments. The young intellectuals, whose gifts had been developed to enrich a developing, stable society, talked and talked and became frenzied in their frustration -

they were looking for an enemy and there was none. The pressures .... were not simply the pressures of race or those of poverty.
They were the accumulated pressures of the slave society, the colonial society, the underdeveloped, overpopulated agricultural country; and they were beyond the control of any one 'leader'. The situation required not a leader but a society which understood itself and had purpose and direction. It was only generating selfishness, cynicism and a self destructive rage."[6] His brutal description of the fraudulence of political emancipation and the mimicry and chicanery that masquerade as radical politics has provoked the ire of many critics. Peter Nazareth remarks that a reading of 'The Mimic Men' gives rise to the question whether Naipaul has such a narrow vision of life that he can only see the worst in humanity or whether the West Indian society he writes about is so degraded that nothing can be expected of it.[7] Naipaul is concerned with the fragmented, inorganic nature of the societies he writes about: societies peopled by various racial and ethnic groups whose interests seem mutually exclusive; forging a common thread of unity is a very difficult proposition. Borrowed Western notions of freedom, democracy, socialism etc. must then become realised in a distorted form, reflecting the distortions in the social fabric. In his work on the Trinidadian independence movement, Ivar Oxaal describes the ethnic biases of the island's major political parties, the P.N.M. (lead by Dr.

Eric Williams) and the D.L.P. (lead by Dr. Rudranath Capildeo, who, incidentally, is Naipaul's maternal uncle). "With one 'doctor' leading the predominantly Creole party and another 'doctor' rallying East Indian support for the politicians who chiefly represented that ethnic minority, the Trinidad two-party system emerged in a form which strongly tended to parallel the island's ethnic structure. Vertical ethnic and status-group consciousness and conflict took precedence over horizontal class conflict of the type which had characterized the ideology of Cipriani, Butler and the earlier socialist radicals."[8]

A fragmented society, says Naipaul, will remain a dependent one, requiring foreign approval like life-blood. What Naipaul says of India applies to the West Indies as well: "India is fragmented; it is part of her dependence. This is not the fragmentation of region, religion or caste. It is the fragmentation of a country held together by no intellectual current, no developing inner life of its own. It is the fragmentation of a country without even an idea of a graded but linked society....

So Indians,.... have continually to look outside India for approval. Fragmentation and dependence are complete. Local judgment is valueless. It is even as if, without the foreign chit, Indians can have no confirmation of their own reality.?"[9]

A reading of 'The Mimic Men' is incomplete without a reading of 'The Loss of El Dorado' (1969), a work of history in which Naipaul seeks to reconstruct the evolution of the colonial subject and attempts to understand how mimicry was founded and embedded in the colonial psyche. 'The Mimic Men' examines what it means to be a colonial; 'The Loss of El Dorado' examines how the colonial was constituted in the first place. The search for the fabled land of El Dorado, repository of unbelievable riches, embarked upon by the Spanish Conquistadore Antonio de Berrio and continued by Walter Ralegh, ends in disaster. Trinidad, the base camp from which the search is launched, becomes by the end of the sixteenth century a remote, obscure little outpost of the Spanish Empire, "a cynical extension of the developing old world, its commercial underside. No one would look at Trinidad and Guiana again with the eye of Ralegh...."[10] By the end of the eighteenth century, French slave suppliers had become the aristocracy of the land; it was at this very time that the Negroes of Haiti revolted. Naipaul depicts their rebellion as mimicry. "Negroes were the tricolour cockade and sang the 'Marseillaise'. It was part of the French absurdity : the slave revolt was not wholly a slave revolt, the race war was not wholly a race war. All the local hatreds were entangled with the revolutionary politics of France. Paris supplied each side with the same simple vocabulary of revolution, words that were like part of the drama and the promise : even the pretty climatic names -

germinal, brumaire - of a new calendar of the North."[11] Mimicry had become ingrained in the Negro psyche. Naipaul sketches the impact of foreign rule in the cultural, psychological and intellectual history of the island. Colonialism sapped the island of its vitality and indigenous genius. It was not just the Negroes and Caribs that were the victims. The arrival in 1838 of the East Indians continued the pattern of "human dereliction". The ghost province of the Spanish empire became a kind of human rubbish dump, a place at "the rim of the world"; a society where mimicry was a way of life.

The Search for Identity

'The Mimic Men' is about much more than colonial politics. As earlier noted, it is about the search for identity. Like Mr Biswas, Ralph Singh too tries to locate himself in the world. But there is an important difference, as Cudjoe notes. "Ralph Singh's fragmentation and loss contrast with Mr. Biswas's strivings to establish himself within the colonial society; formal independence, as it were, demands a new positionality of the subject within the society. In this sense, 'A House for Mr Biswas' and 'The Mimic Men' examine the subject at different points in their social evolution. Whereas Mr Biswas starts out from Parrot Trace and strives continually to locate himself in his colonial world, Ralph Singh stays in London and from there reflects upon what it means to be a subject in a

postcolonial world."[12] Trapped as he is by poverty and lack of opportunity, Mr Biswas is not politically articulate. Ralph Singh, on the other hand, who is born and brought up in a city and has studied abroad, is probably everything that Mr Biswas would want Anand to be. Both men write: Mr Biswas in an attempt to escape into the comfortable world of fantasy (his unfinished story is entitled 'Escape'); Ralph Singh to keep himself from being lost in unreality. Be it his sexual diary or his political memoirs, for Ralph Singh writing is a highly self-conscious, therapeutic exercise. Through his writing he hopes to make sense of his past, to infuse order into his existence. "It was my hope to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfillment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors, it was my hope to give partial expression to the restlessness this upheaval has brought about." (MM, 32)

It is significant that Singh's search for self-knowledge is conducted in London; it is also in London that he finally 'betrays' his native land and its new found independence. Lady Stella who seduces him, gives him a copy of the Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book which contains the following lines:

But when they are clean
And fit to be seen
She'd dress like a lady
And dance on the green.

The childish rhyme contains a warning: Singh must behave himself, remain subservient. Breaking off all links with the Mother Country proves to be too painful to undertake; Singh succumbs to his 'masters'. And finally, just prior to the exile that consigns him to oblivion, Singh has a searing sexual encounter with a grotesquely ugly prostitute. "I never touched; my hands still lay at my side. Yet I was already turning in on myself; judgement was disappearing. ....Judgement disappeared, I was all painful sensation. Flesh, flesh: but my awareness of it was being weakened.... The self dropped away, layer by layer; what remained dwindled to a cell of perception, indifferent to pleasure or pain:.... fine perception reacting minutely only to time, which was also the universe." (MM, 236-7)

This stripping away of his ego, this annihilation of his self hastens his retreat into 'sanyas'. He has done it all; he has been a student, a householder, has made money, enjoyed power. Every one of his actions has ended in negation : marriage in divorce, wealth in poverty, power in exile and obscurity. In the very act of patterning his life he has plunged into chaos and disorder. He is reduced to leading a monastic existence in a dreary room; his chief

entertainment is watching 'Garbage' (one of the inmates at the boarding-house) methodically polishing off his dinner.

Singh's tortured, unresolved relationship with his homeland obviously reflects Naipaul's ambiguous love-hate relationship with Trinidad. It is perhaps the lot of Naipaul's rootless, unanchored protagonists to perpetually wander; perhaps exile lies at the heart of modern man's experience.

Notes

1. V.S. Naipaul - The Loss of EL Dorado. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970. p.332

2. cf. Peter Nazareth - "The Mimic Men" as a Study of Corruption in Robert Hammer (Ed.) - Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul. London: Heinemann, 1979. pp.137-8.

3. Selwyn Cudjoe - V.S. Naipaul : A Materialist Reading. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. p.108.

4. cf. M.M. Mahood - 'Novelists of the Colonial Experience' in the Colonial Encounter. London: Rex Collings, 1977.

5. Raymond Williams - 'George Orwell' in Culture and Society: 1780-1950. New York: Columbia University Press, 1958. p.291.

6. V.S. Naipaul - The Middle Passage. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988. p.247.

7. cf. Nazareth - "The Mimic Men" as a Study of Corruption. p.143.

8. Ivar Oxaal I. - Black Intellectuals Come to Power. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., 1982. pp.155-6.

9. Naipaul - The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976. pp.101-3.

10. Naipaul - The Loss of EL Dorado. p.86.

11. Ibid., p.114.

12. Cudjoe - V.S. Naipaul - A Materialist Reading. p.99.

: CHAPTER THREE :

THEMES IN 'GUERRILLAS'

The bleak vision of 'The Mimic Men' carries forward into 'Guerrillas' (1975). The novel is a fictionalized recreation of the Michael X murder case which came to light in 1972, for which Michael X was subsequently hanged. In fact, Naipaul did write a non-fictional piece 'The Black Power Killings in Trinidad' analysing the Michael X phenomenon. Another article entitled 'Power' examines the Black Power movement of the late 1960's and early 1970's. These two articles spell out some of the concerns that emerge in fictionalized form in Guerrillas.

Ralph Singh's Isabella is newly independent; its leaders are coming to terms with the realities of governance; they are weighed down by the baggage of a colonial past that cannot be wished away. The unnamed island of 'Guerrillas' could well be Isabella now in an advanced state of ararchy. Government is a shadowy enterprise, never explicitly referred to throughout the length and breadth of the book; ministers are transient figures who come and go unannounced, their proximity to the airstrip facilitates escape in times of crisis. Guerrillas are rumoured to be at large, but it is only the gangs whose existence is hinted at. It is almost as if the politics of the island are too obscure to merit description or perhaps that the concept of order itself is meaningless in this society.

Karl Miller points out that Naipaul "...surrounds the politics of his imaginary country with darkness, distinguishes between its politics and what might be seen as the antics of bystanders, and concentrates on these bystanders."[1]

Guerrillas concentrates on the antics of the U.K. manufactured 'Black Power' leader Haji James Ahmed (formerly Jimmy Leung), Peter Roche, the western welfare worker and his lover Jane. The relationship that develops between Jimmy Jane and Roche is the fulcrum around which the novel centres, bringing out the complex issues of power and subservience, dependence and exploitation.

Jimmy Ahmed, propounding Black Power and communal agriculture epitomizes all that Naipaul finds absurd in the Black Power movement. Before moving on, it would be in order to highlight Naipaul's views on the so-called revolutionary politics and polemic of that turbulent period. In his article 'Power ?' Naipaul likens Black power to the creation of a secure world of fantasy like that undertaken by enslaved Negroes; like Carnival, Black Power is "a version of the lunacy that kept the slave alive. It is the original dream of black power, style and prettiness; and it always feeds on a private vision of the real world."[2] Like Carnival, Black Power too has elements of fantasy and play-acting, offering something to everyone. "Black Power as rage, drama and style, as revolutionary jargon, offers

something to everybody : to the unemployed, the idealistic, the drop-out, the Communist, the politically frustrated, the anarchist, the angry student returning home from humiliations abroad, the racialist, the old-fashioned black preacher who has for years said at street corners that after Israel it was to be the turn of Africa."[3]

In its motherland, the U.S.A., Black Power operated within a specific context of oppression; racial segregation, poverty, disease, illiteracy and deviancy exploding the myth of an egalitarian, democratic society. Its adoption in the West Indies is a form of protest against the history of slavery and colonial neglect, a trap into which these islands have been forever cornered. For, at the end of the day, "the small islands of the Caribbean will remain islands, impoverished and unskilled, ringed as now by a cordon sanitaire, their people not needed anywhere. They may get less innocent or less corrupt politicians, they will not get less helpless ones. The island blacks will continue to be dependent on the books, films and goods of others; in this important way they will continue to be the half-made societies of a dependent people, the Third World's third world, they will forever consume; they will never create. They are without material resources; they will never develop the higher skills. Identity depends in the end on achievement; and achievement here cannot but be small. Again and again the protest leader will appear and the millennium will seem about to come.[4]

This extract reechoes the sentiments first voiced in 'The Middle Passage' when Naipaul asked: "How can the history of this West Indian futility be written ? .... History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies."[5]

Black Power then, can be anything but 'liberating' in the West Indian context; it is, according to Naipaul a primitivist retreat, couched in "a mystical sense of race, a millenarian expectation of imminent redemption."[6]

The career of the London manufactured half-white 'revolutionary', Michael de Freitas alias Michael 'X' alias Michael Abdul Malik demonstrated, according to Naipaul, the fraudulence of the West Indian version of Black Power as well as the liberal middle-class Western support it attracted. Naipaul assets that to these people, Black Power was just another diversion; "an exotic but safe brothel". The murder of three people associated with Michael X, including Gale Benson, the perfect example of the great uneducated variety of the middle-class dropout, resulted in the trial and ultimate execution of Michael 'X'. The Michael 'X' affair prompted Naipaul to be comment: "It proves how much Black Power - away from its United States source - is jargon, how much sentimental hoax. In a place like Trinidad, racial redemption is as irrelevant for the Negro as for everybody else. It obscures the problems of a small independent country with a lopsided economy .... It

perpetuates the negative, colonial politics of protest. It is, in the end, a deep corruption : a wish to be granted a dispensation from the pains of development, an almost religious conviction that oppression can be turned into an asset, race into money. While the dream of redemption lasts, Negroes will continue to exist only that someone might be their leader. Redemption requires a redeemer; and a redeemer, in these circumstances, cannot but end like the Emperor Jones : contemptuous of the people he leads, and no less a victim, seeking an illusory personal emancipation."[7]

Writing in 1980 about the mass suicide in Guyana committed by disciples of Jim Jones' People's Temple, Shiva Naipaul describes the cultural and intellectual regression that set in as the English speaking Caribbean islands sought to remake themselves in the Third World image.

Naipaul cites the case of a leading Port of Spain barrister who 'africanised' his name because he had started "thinking African'. Naipaul remarks : "Everywhere in the region, society was in disarray and men seemed to be decaying. Third worldhood had bred regression and that regression was ending in personal and political catastrophe ..... Often, our madness finds its support and confirmation abroad among the self-avowed, metropolitan friends of the oppressed....

..... Those who ought to know better nourish our crazy dreams of resurrection and redemption; those safely beyond the borders of our madness underwrite our lunacies."[8]

In the mid-fifties Eric Williams' cry "Massa day done", was intended to awaken in Trinidadians a sense of national pride and identity. The excesses of the Black Power movement and the unrealistic reaching back to a tribal African past have vulgarised the notion of identity, reducing it to mere primitivist, escapism and play-acting. V.S. Naipaul and Shiva Naipaul both seem to suggest that in the Caribbean, "Massa day" is far from done. Far from liberating these new nations from a slave and colonial past, escapist ideologies further enmesh them in web of dependence.

: **'Guerrillas'** :

The narrative of Guerrillas is made up of a series of seemingly unconnected incidents; a visit here, a meeting there; the comings and goings of the characters gradually building upto the violent climax the reader has come to expect. The narrative ranges in and around three distinct geographic zones. These are the fashionable Ridge area, populated by the well-to-do and expatriates like Jane and Roche; Thrushcross Grange, Jimmy's fiefdom and thirdly, the heart of the city, where the gangs flourish, a zone whose loyalties and laws are beyond the understanding and control of self-styled revolutionaries and welfare workers alike. The island is reeling under the impact of a drought; the polluted, overheated environment, the smoking hills and charred garbage, the profusion of carrion-eating corbeaux convey a sense of decay and warn of the potential

conflagration that lurks beneath the surface. The island is a tinder box liable at any moment to go up in flames.

It is against this volatile backdrop that the human drama involving Jane, Roche and Jimmy is being played out. The following pages will focus primarily on the relationships between this trio. The strands of the plot are woven in simultaneously. The Jimmy-Jane-Roche connection is that of the designer revolutionary and those who have helped manufacture him. Roche, in his capacity as welfare worker 'supervises' the Thrushcross Grange experiment on behalf of his employer. Sablich's, the imperialist firm (formerly a slave trader) which is sponsoring Jimmy's revolutionary activity as a publicity stunt. Jane, the bored white woman with liberal pretensions, patronizes Jimmy sexually, he attempts to use her enact his own deep-seated fantasies.

The sign boards outside Thrushcross Grange depict "the name, the distance in miles, a clenched fist emblematically rendered, the slogan 'For the land and the revolution', and in a strip at the bottom the name of the firm that had put the board up. The boards were all new. The local bottlers of Coca-Cola had put one up; so had Amal (the American bauxite company), a number of airlines, and many stores in the city." (G, 9-10) Naipaul has exposed Jimmy at the very outset, bringing out the absurdity of Coca-Cola sponsored communal agriculture. Jimmy's revolutionary potential has evidently been sanitised, he is paid to be a good boy,

reduced to a one-dimensional portrait of what a multinational company would like a Black revolutionary to be; a cardboard cut-out manufactured in the West, good newspaper copy, attractive but impotent. The "communique" issued by Thrushcross Grange, presided over by its make-believe Heathcliff is revealing. It begins promisingly : "All revolutions begin with the land. Men are born on the earth, every man has his one spot, it is his birthright, and men must claim their portion of the earth in brotherhood and harmony. In this spirit we came an intrepid band to virgin forest, it is the lifestyle and philosophy of Thrushcross Grange (G,27).

But soon its tone becomes petulant, it becomes confused, ungrammatical, it speaks of broken promises, broken machines, the absence of water, electricity and transport. This experiment in communal agriculture, financed by a big firm is intended to neutralise Jimmy. Yet, he sees things in an entirely different light. As he explains to Roche : "They thought they were trapping me. Now they see they've trapped themselves. Eh, massa ? They've got to support me, massa. Sablich's and everyone else. They've got to make me bigger. Because, if I fail .... hmmm. I'm the only man that stands between them and revolution, and they know it now, massa. That's why I'm the only man they're afraid of." (G, 27) Jimmy, disowned by the west is, as Roche puts it, absurd in nearly every way. But in London, he had been a glamorous figure; the 'hakwai' Chinese boy born in

the backroom of a Chinese grocery; 'kept' by a rich British woman who made of him a minor celebrity. Meredith, the black journalist-cum-politician reminiscing about his student days in London, when the Jimmy legend was being created, remarks that to most black children, being born in a grocery was, if anything, a sign of prosperity; after all, a shop couldn't ever 'go bust'; the rich, white woman who was 'managing' Jimmy was, as Meredith put it, "very, very happy with her little Pekinese black ... (who) walked up and down yapping away." (G, 141) Jimmy, he recalled, was a great favourite with women journalists, who became "all cunt" when writing about him. Ironically, his sojourn in England ended with deportation on charges of rape and criminal assault.

Of course, this was conspiracy in Jimmy's view; he felt he had been made into a 'playboy' (he meant plaything) by the west. In Britain, the subtle gradations of colour that counted in the West Indies were lost sight of; Jimmy, son of Mr. Leung, Chinese grocer, member of a relatively prosperous community which, to Creole society was still an unknown quantity. ("you know people over here. They believe that everyone in China is either like Charlie Chan or Fu-Meanchu (G, 14D)) had emerged as a Negro leader, spokesman for an oppressed Black population. He seems authentic enough in the West, back home he is incongruous. His commune is a meeting ground for delinquents and dropouts, "boys spawned by the city, casually conceived, and, after the backyard drama and ritual of their birth gradually abandoned, attaching

themselves as they grew up to certain groups and through the groups to certain houses that offered occasional shelter or food." (G, 34). One of them, the Medusa pig-tailed Bryant, particularly adored Jimmy, who reciprocated by making love to him occasionally. It was in the arms of this ugly, damaged creature that Jimmy found solace, for Bryant "expressed all that (Jimmy) saw of himself in certain moods." (G, 43). To escape from the absurdity of his situation, Jimmy resorts to fantasy; he is reported to be writing a novel, his correspondence with his western friends was extensive. Yet, "words, which sometimes did so much for him, now did not restore him to himself. He was a lost man

him as a great folk hero, irresistably attractive to white women. "I dream about this man but I don't know how we will meet again. I know he will never forgive a second intrusion and I have no desire to aggravate his impatience. He is an enemy to all privilege and I am middle class born and bred and I know that in spite of his great civility and urbane charm he must hate people like me. I only have to look in his eyes to understand the meaning of hate." (G, 40).

His letters vividly express his sense of frustration and betrayal. "Perhaps after all Roy the world is only made for the people who will never possess anything. The people who will win are the people who have won already and they're not taking chances now, like the liberals. You know better than I how they let me down when the crisis came, you would

think that after making me their playboy and getting me deported from England they would leave me alone. But they do not. Even here they are coming after me, well I ask you. These liberals, who come flashing their milk white thighs and think they are contributing to the cause." (G, 42).

Yet, he is attracted to one such liberal with milk-white thighs; he wants to impress her; he invites her for lunch at one of the fancy hotels. Later takes her to his house at Thrushcross Grange; the inevitable sexual encounter follows; she is more than willing, but unaroused; to her, sex is just one more bodily motion to be gone through, as the quality of kiss reveals. "She fixed her mouth on his, her lips opened wide. He was taken by surprise and couldn't react immediately; .... her tobacco-tasting tongue and her lips ... did what they thought they had to do ... the action of her mouth because insipid to him and meaningless ..." (G, 77). She undresses swiftly, methodically, indifferent to his presence; after the highly unsatisfactory performance of the act she covers herself with the bedspread, "with her instinct to conceal herself after an act of casual sex, to reduce the man to a stranger again ..." (G, 80) Jimmy has been unable to possess her, he has begun to hate her. One of his most potent fantasies concerns an incident which occurred when he was at school. A gang of black boys had lured a white girl to the beach and raped her. She collapsed bleeding against the car fender; one of the boys, panic stricken, tried to revive her by trying, using his cupped

hands alone, to bring water from a creek. In Jimmy's fictional odyssey, the incident takes the following shape : "....I suppose that even now when he's talking to me he can see the terror in my light-coloured eyes, because when I'm with her I feel like a mesmerized rabbit, I just want to give up and when I revive he will bring water in his own cupped hands and I will drink water from his tender hands and I will not be afraid of him any more." (G, 64). Far from living out his fantasy with Jane, he has been reduced to a mere performer, one of many; Jane is unassailable.

Naipaul subjects Jane's character to ruthless scrutiny; she is adrift and yet firmly rooted in a world of middle-class certainties. "She was without consistency or even coherence. She knew only what she was and what she had been born to; to this knowledge she was tethered; it was her stability, enabling her to adventure in security. Adventuring, she was indifferent, perhaps blind, to the contradiction between what she said and what she was so secure of being; and this indifference or blindness, this absence of the sense of the absurd, was part of her unassailability." (G, 25) Roche, her lover, likens her to a sea-anemone; rooted and secure, yet flailing her tentacles, uncaring of what she attracted. Her politics are liberal, she passes definitive views on the world without caring what response they evoke; she was attracted to Roche in London because she saw him as 'doer', a pleasant change from the journalists, lawyers and politicians she knew and slept

with, who carped and complained and no longer believed what they said. Roche, on the other hand, "talked little; he had no system to expound; but simply by being what he was he enlarged her vision of the world. He seemed to make accessible that remote world, of real events and real action, whose existence she had half divined; and through him she felt she was being given a new idea of human possibility." (G, 49) He had suffered torture in South Africa; his book was well received, he was going off to a Caribbean island to help change the world.

Jane would join him in his mission. It came as a nasty shock to her to learn that his was not a household name, that less than a handful of people on the island had read his book, and that most of them regarded his role as welfare worker with an amusement bordering on contempt. The island, she realised, was "a place at the end of the world, ... a place that had exhausted its possibilities. She wondered at the simplicity that had led her in London, to believe that the future of the world was being shaped in places like this, by people like these". (G, 50). The Ridge, where Jane and Roche live, surrounded by the rich and privileged, seems a self-contained world, but one which if encroached upon by the seething, secretive parallel society of the surrounding hills and city can crumble to pieces. Jane discovers one day, that a small hut in her garden is occupied by a wild man of the hills; he leaves in fright, leaving behind "a vague warm smell of old clothes, dead

animals, grease and marijuana." (G, 85) One of the pillars of the Ridge community, Harry de Tunja, is making plans to leave the country; this piece of information throws is friends and neighbours into a subdued panic; the Ridge is, it seems, on the verge of being attacked by the outside world that has been shut out too long, the world of the fanatic Adela, the world of the 'gangs', the rumoured guerrillas, it is also threatened by the growing fear and insecurity of its inhabitants.

Harry de Tunja, terrified by the growing atmosphere of fanaticism in the island realises that "this place is full of mad people .... I always knew those fellers were mad like hell. And, you know, once you realise you have madmen running about the place, you start seeing them everywhere. Its a damn frightening thing." (G, 138) The millennium seems to be at hand. Jane's maid Adela participates in mysterious political-religious gatherings, is openly hostile to her employers and cloyingly respectful to Meredith, the black politician. The slogans of the day are 'Basic Black', 'Don't Vote', 'Birth Control is a Plot Against the Negro Race' and most potent of them all, 'After Israel, Africa. Beneath the incessant beat of transistor reggae, something far more sinister is brewing in the city; the threat of imminent conflagration and chaos. But not even this shakes Jane, she of the unassailable certitude, the "dragon-lady", as Roche describes her, "infinitely casual, infinitely, unconsciously calculating." (G, 22) She is preparing to walk out of a

situation that has grown too hot to handle. "Jane thought how lucky she was to be able to decide to leave. Not many people had that freedom; to decide, and then to do. It was part of her luck; in moments like this she always consoled herself with thoughts of her luck. She was privileged : it was the big idea, the one that overrode all the scattered, unrelated ideas, deposited in her soul as she had adventured in life, the debris of a dozen system she had picked up from a dozen men. She would leave; she would make use of that return air-ticket the immigration officers hadn't bothered to ask for the day she had arrived." (G, 55)

But she has left her departure too late : events in the island are rapidly getting out of hand. The assassination of Stephen, a one-time Granger and black gang leader has precipitated an ugly situation; riots break out; the government is on the defensive; several ministers have already made a getaway complete with crates full of Wedgwood crockery. A state of emergency is declared; Jimmy finally makes his bid for leadership by leading processions of enraged city-folk, but his efforts prove unsuccessful; the uprising is beyond his power to control. As Harry put it, "Jimmy was always washed up here. I don't know who told him otherwise. I don't know what they told him in London. But at a time like this he is just another Chinaman". (G, 191) And then, just as suddenly as it began, the uprising ends : the American helicopters hovering about the island to guard their bauxite interests convey their message loud and clear.

Order of sorts is restored, Jane is once more free; she can exercise her option to leave. But she cannot resist the impulse to meet Jimmy before she leaves. This impulse is to prove her undoing; confident as ever of her ability to retrieve herself from all unpleasant situations, she manages to retain her poise after Jimmy forcibly sodomises her, and dismisses her as "rotten meat". But that isn't all he has planned for her; he offers her to Bryant as a blood-sacrifice; together, they maim and kill her. He has avenged himself on her and her kind, but it is an empty victory. "He saw a day of sun at the beach, sea and sky bright beyond the coconut grove, the girl bleeding on the fender of the motor car, accepting water from his cupped hands, and love coming to her frightened eyes. But the eyes below him were closed. They knew nothing; they acknowledged nothing; they had taken away everything with them. he entered a void; he disappeared in that void." (G, 243)

The relationship between Jimmy and Jane reinforces Jimmy's belief that the west has made him a 'playboy' (plaything); to be used and discarded at will. He is unable to strike back at the order that has reduced him to this level, but he can and does strike back at Jane; first by sodomising and raping her, and when she shows signs of recovering from this violation, the ultimate annihilation, snuffing out her life. Right through the novel, though, Naipaul brings home Jane's violation of her own self; she

seems to blunder through life and relationships seeking something new, discarding what she has tired of, her body and its needs seemingly functioning quite independently of her spirit.

The end of Jimmy's political career means that Roche's mission has ended; Roche, who Jane had thought of as a 'doer' is in the end proved to be yet another mindless idealist who, in fulfilling his urge to do good works, overlooks the dictates of reason and common sense. Grilled by Meredith during the course of a radio interview, Roche is forced to concede that the idea of an agricultural commune is anti-historical, doomed to failure right from its inception. Yet, he plays along hoping against hope that things will turn out right. It is this astonishing passivity that once helped him endure torture and imprisonment in South Africa. But at the end of the day, Roche is free to fly back to a metropolitan existence; Jimmy, the discarded plaything, is left high and dry.

American restored order has put paid to the uprising which is eventually proved to be just another exercise in play-acting. As Harry puts its, "those guys down there don't know what they're doing. All this talk of independence, but they don't really believe that times have changed. They still feel they're just taking a chance, and that when the show is over, somebody is going to go down there and start dishing out licks. And they half want it to be over, you know. They would go crazy if somebody tell them that this

time nobody might be going down to dish out licks and pick up the pieces." (G, 189) This brings us back to Ralph Singh's assertion that no power is real that does not come from the outside. Naipaul's mimic men of the New World have failed to realise the promise of independence and the possibilities offered by the new social order. They are condemned to remain entrapped to exist as a "small part of somebody else's overview".[9]

'Guerrillas' and Naipaul's other pronouncements concerning black power and identity reveal that his totalistic myth is constructed in terms of a colonial universe. He has rejected India, he is unable to identify with the aspirations of the blacks : indeed, portraying Michael X/Jimmy Ahmed as a representative revolutionary itself speaks volumes about his perception of the Black power myth as a regressive, fraudulent farce. Seeking, as he does, an outside counterpoint, the 'real' world and institutions of the west, his perception of the Caribbean as a society made up of mimic men remains unshaken.

Notes

1. Karl Miller - Authors. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1990. p.62.

2. V.S. Naipaul - The Overcrowded Barracoon. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1976. p. 268.

3. Ibid., p. 290.

4. Ibid., pp. 271-2.

5. Naipaul - The Middle Passage. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1988. pp. 28-9.

6. Naipaul - The Return of Eva Peron with The Killings in Trinidad. New York : Alfred Knopf, 1980. p. 39.

7. Ibid., p.70.

8. Shiva Naipaul - Black and White. London : Hamish Hamilton, 1980. pp.16-17.

9. V.S. Naipaul - Finding the Centre. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1988. p.51.

: CONCLUSION :

The Caribbean experience in the three works of fiction explored in this dissertation is one of smallness, insignificance, mimicry; the West Indies, says Naipaul are the third world's third world. Naipaul roots the malaise of the Caribbean present in the experience of slavery and colonialism. Even whilst writing about the Indian enclave within the racial and cultural melenge that are the West Indies, his novels portray the "West-Indianness" of the East Indian community; the immigrant experience is seen by Naipaul as one more link in the chain that fetters the West Indian, yet another contribution to the creation of the "human dereliction" of these "shipwrecked" islands. The illusion of continuity created by the East Indian community, its seeming unassailability, is shown to crumble to pieces in 'A House for Mr. Biswas'. Naipaul's work, according to Kenneth Ramchand, takes the "common-history" view of West Indian Society. Referring to 'Biswas', Ramchand remarks that the novel proves "how possible it is to write with great particularity about a specific group in West Indian society without writing for that group, and without writing so exclusively about the group that the West-Indianness of their experience is denied."[1]

In 'The Pleasures of Exile' (1960), George Lamming describes the West Indian novel as "a way of investigating and projecting the inner experiences of the West Indian community."[2] Attempts at a political confederation failed in

1962. Despite the island nationalisms that arose (Guyana, Barbados, Trinidad and Jamaica became independent nations), certain common features in the literatures of the various new nations persisted, contributing to a certain unity in literary expression. George Lamming's novel, 'In the Castle of my Skin' is, according to Ramchand, the first West Indian novel. It is about growing up as well as the changes that take place in a society, as the order in a fictional village is subverted and betrayed by its own people. Lamming's village is "representative of a West Indian society whose institutions, values and mental attitudes reflect and perpetuate the consequences of slavery, the plantation system and colonial rule."[3]

In this novel are to be found most of the themes that crop up in the poetry of Edward Braithwaite, Martin Carter and Derek Walcott, and in the novels of Samuel Selvon and V.S. Reid. Walcott's long poem 'Laventville' chronicles more than just a wretched socio-economic condition; it also addresses itself to the psychology of servility and mimicry that Naipaul deals with at such length. The attitudes of Blacks at a christening ceremony is expressed thus :

... the black fawning verger
his bow tie akimbo, grinning, the
clown-gloved fashionable wear of those
I deeply loved
once, made me look on with hopelessness
and rage

at their new, apish habits, their excess
and fear, the possessed, the self-possessed.

Walcott brings home the cultural destitution of the region in the following lines:

Some deep amnesiac blow. We left
somewhere a life we never found,
customs and gods that are not born again,
Some crib, some grill of light
clanged shut on us in bondage, and withheld
us from that world below us and beyond,
and in its swaddling cerements weire still bound.[4]

Naipaul seems to share the notion that these 'customs and gods' cannot be born again, unlike Edward Braithwaite, for example, who also satirizes the imitative culture of the West Indian middle class, yet invokes African culture and religion as a viable alternative. His poetic trilogy 'Rights of Passage' (1960); 'Masks' (1968) and 'Islands' (1969), seems to suggest that a greater knowledge of African history and culture will help remove the self-contempt of the Negro and help to fashion a unique Black identity, drawing upon long-forgotten roots. In this context, it must be noted that the literary movement referred to as 'Negritude' had come into its own in the 1930's and 1940's. The term was coined by Aime Cesaire, who first used it in his 'Notebook of a Return to the Native Land'. The term 'negritude' as Cesaire

used it is essentially Caribbean; it invokes the hybridness, the creoleness of the West Indian experience; it speaks of a divided, worried consciousness. Leopold Senghor's brand of negritude, on the other hand, elaborates a backward-looking idealism, a search for a broad black identity based on the notion that the black character is fundamentally different from the white; "a falsely naturalized, consistent African mentality that tends to reinscribe the categories of a romantic, sometimes racialist European ethnography."[5]

Braithwaite sees the West Indies as an area of plural cultures, corresponding more or less to racial groups. Recognizing and revitalising suppressed Negro culture is one way out of mimicry of European culture, and in nations like Jamaica and Barbados, where the descendants of Africans are in the majority by far, 'Africanization' is a feasible proposition. The problem arises in Trinidad and Guyana, where East Indians comprise half the population, where the theory of Black-White cultural pluralism succeeds in deepening the already existing divisions and antagonisms between Creoles and Asiatics. It is in this context that the common-history view of Caribbean society earlier described is relevant; harking back to a mythical past is not likely to solve the agonizingly contemporary problems that face the West Indies in an era of neo-colonialism. 'The Mimic Men' and 'Guerrillas' bring this point home repeatedly; Jimmy Ahmed's 'return to the land' is financed by multi-national firms; revolution is play; order is real only when it is

imposed from the outside. The Hindu world, which could have provided Naipaul much-needed security and a sense of belongingness is also proved to be illusory; his visits to India in 1962 and then in 1975 reveal it to be a "wounded civilization", its corruption rooted in the futile yearning for the past resulting in the inability to chalk out a code for the future. Naipaul argues that India's inability to develop an alternative vision of herself after forty years of formal independence demonstrates its historical deficiency, "..a thousand years of defeat and withdrawal ... an older, deeper Indian violence ... (which) remained untouched by foreign rule and had survived Gandhi. It had become part of the Hindu social order, and there was a stage at which it became invisible, disappearing in the general distress."[6]

Seeking a centre, a tradition, a civilization in which he can locate himself, Naipaul "arrives" in the West. His most recent novel work, 'The Enigma of Arrival' (1987) written after the double trauma of the death of his sister Sati in 1984 and his brother Shiva in 1985 is an attempt to address both his past as well as his future. The book is autobiography disguised as fiction, chronicling his "second childhood of seeing and learning, my second life so far away from my first."[7] The harmony between Jack and his garden reveals to Naipaul the sense of order that has been so conspicuous by its absence in his earlier life. In an interview with Melvyn Bragg in London Naipaul says : "I saw

his (Jack's) life as genuine, rooted, fitting; man fitting the landscape. It did not occur to me when I first went walking that Jack's style of life might have been a matter of choice, a conscious act; that out of the little piece of earth which had come to him with his farm-worker's cottage he had created a special land for himself, a garden where he was more than content to live out his life and where, as in a version of a book of hours he celebrated the seasons. That instinct to plant, to see crops grow, might have seemed eternal, something to which the human heart would want to return. But in the plantation colony from which I came, a colony created for agriculture, for the great flat fields of sugar-cane, in that colony, created by the power and wealth of industrial England, that instinct had been eradicated."[8]

The mundane, day to day events of Wiltshire existence assume a beauty, a dignity born of continuity; Mr. Biswas and Ralph Singh's fantasies of cool, ordered landscapes, of rolling pastures and picture-postcard farm-houses are realised, Naipaul is a member of the "real world" that he and his protagonists had sought so assiduously. 'The Enigma of Arrival' reiterates Naipaul's belief in the existence of a universal, world civilisation, a Western one.

According to him; "The 'Third World' notion is itself a cliche. I feel there's a great universal civilization at the moment which people would say is western. But this has been fed by innumerable sources. It's a very eclectic

civilization and it is conquering the world because it is so attractive, so liberating to people.
... The mistake of Western vanity is to think that the universal civilization that exists now is a purer racial one. It's not the preserve of one race, one country, but has been fed by many."[9]

In Cudjoe's opinion, Naipaul's affirmation of the universal civilization of the Western world is made possible by denying the validity and authenticity of the culture of the other, of the non-white peoples of the world. The other's culture must always be "naturalized, neutralized, neuterized and described in such a way that it can be easily managed, conscripted, and consumed by the dominant culture."[10] John Updike remarks : "For the fallacy of the primitive paradise, it seems to me, Mr. Naipaul wants to exchange that of the metropolitan paradise."[11] Such pronouncements overlook Naipaul's acute awareness of the history and politics of the Caribbean; the context within which his protagonists operate is limited by political, social, cultural and economic uncertainties; the permanent sense of insecurity this engenders is sought to be remedied by seeking a wider, more fulfilling context.

Naipaul seeks this wider context in the 'universal civilization' of the west. THis is not to suggest that there are no other ways out of a limiting context. In his work 'The Intimate Enemy', Ashis Nandy discusses the manner in

which colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies, releasing forces which alter the cultural priorities of the colonised, and also some of the resistances to it in the Indian context. What colonialism succeeded in doing was positing a cultural dichotomy : West versus Non-West, each the antithesis of the other. .."Colonialism tried to supplant the Indian consciousness to erect an Indian self-image which, in its opposition to the West, would remain in essence a Western construction.

....India is not non-west; it is India. Outside the small section of Indians who were once exposed to the full thrust of colonialism and are now heirs to the colonial memory, the ordinary Indian has no reason to see himself as a counterplayer or an antithesis of the Western man. The imposed burden to be perfectly non-Western only constricts his, the everyday Indian's cultural self, just as the older burden of being perfectly western once narrowed - and still sometimes narrows - his choices in the matter of his and his society's future."[12]

Comparing the responses of Kipling and Gandhi to British colonialism in India Nandy remarks that for Kipling, colonialism had a moral justification. Gandhi however took the ball into Kipling's own court by evaluating colonialism in terms of Christain values and judging it to be evil. He found the British sadly wanting in ethics and morality, thus "splitting open the private wound of every Kipling and quasi-Kipling to whom rulership was a means of hiding one's

moral self in the name of the higher morality of history, in turn seen as an embodiment of human rationality.
...Gandhi attacked both the cognitive and moral frames of this insecure, fragile sense of chosenness." He affirmed a distinctly autonomous, Indian world-view. "Instead of meeting the Western criterion of a true antagonist, he endorsed the non-modern Indain reading of the modern west as one of the many possible life-styles which had, unfortunately for both the West and India, become cancerous by virtue of its disproportionate power and spread."[13] Gandhi located the anti-colonial struggle in terms of a decidedly Indian frame of reference; he refused to use the weapons of colonialism to beat it at its own game; he fought not in terms of the colonizer's categories and world-view but a native one. His reaction to the limiting, dehumanising context of colonialism was to seek recourse in his Indianness.

Naipaul holds that the colonial experience is responsible for the destruction of Caribbean native genius. Yet, it is undeniable that he looks at the history of his land and its people in terms of a distinctly western frame of reference; the West Indies, he says, are a cultural wasteland because nothing was ever created there. Perhaps, in the end it is the fact of the immigrant experience that makes all the difference; the cultural certainties that a Gandhi could draw upon do not operate in the Caribbean context. As has repeatedly been highlighted in this study,

it is the unfulfilled search for roots that colours Naipaul's judgement; the feeling that he has been divested of a history and a tradition that forces him to look upon the Caribbean with such despair.

Sashi Kamra comments : "The mood that haunts (Naipaul's) novels is that of existential despair. It is similar to existential absurdity : of anguish at living in an unrelated meaningless world : in a void." [14] The colonial immigrant experience with its attendant absurdity and alienation; the confrontation between the first and third worlds in the colonial and post colonial situations; the struggle to find order and meaning in a chaotic world; the quest for identity and self-knowledge are recurrent themes in Naipaul's fiction.

This dissertation is but a small attempt at grappling with these themes, in order to arrive at an understanding of one way of perceiving Caribbean reality.

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1. Kenneth Ramchand - The West Indies in Bruce King (Ed.) - Literatures of the World in English. London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974. p. 206.

2. George Lamming - The Pleasures of Exile. London : Michael Joseph, 1960. p. 43.

3. Ramchand - The West Indies. p. 193.

4. Quoted from ibid., p. 195.

5. James Clifford - The Predicament of Culture. Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard University Press, 1988. p. 178.

6. V.S. Naipaul - India : A Wounded Civilization. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1977. pp. 40-42.

7. Naipaul - The Enigma of Arrival. New York : Alfred Knopf, 1987. p. 87.

8. Quoted from Selwyn Cudjoe - V.S. Naipaul : A Materialist Reading. Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. p. 212.

9. The Master of the Novel, Newsweek, August 18, 1980.

10. Cudjoe - p. 222.

11. John Updike - Fool's Gold in Robert Hamner (Ed.) - Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul. London : Heineman, 1979. p. 158.

12. Ashis Nandy - The Intimate Enemy : Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism. Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1983. pp. 72-3.

13. Ibid., pp. 100-102.

14. Shashi Kamra - The Novels of V.S. Naipaul. New Delhi : Prestige Books, 1990. p. 31.

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