QUEST AND ATTAINMENT
CHAPTER II
QUEST AND ATTAINMENT

The early novels of Naipaul, *The Mystic Masseur*, *Miguel Street* and *The Suffrage of Elvira* are novels of apprenticeship and show a preoccupation with the trauma of displacement and with the dilemma of finding a place in the New World. *The Mystic Masseur* is concerned with the survival of the individual – the post-colonial individual in the New World. Published in 1957, *The Mystic Masseur* spans a period from 1929 to 1954. The first generation of East Indians after the termination of indentureship is portrayed. The community of *The Mystic Masseur*, though distinguished by its alienation from the larger society, is open to other cultural influences. The novel is concerned with the problem of arranged marriages, the inevitability of one’s karma, or fate; tradition versus modernity; and with the act of writing as a means of appropriating one’s reality. Ganesh the protagonist of *The Mystic Masseur*, becomes a much sought after mystic whose mystic power as a pundit, lies in his ability to recreate fantasy for others. The novel explores Ganesh Ramsumair’s rise to prominence from teacher to masseur, mystic, writer and finally to the position of an MBE (Member of the British Empire). This was one of the highest honours, a colonial subject could aspire for.

It is through writing that Ganesh is able to infuse sense into his meaningless world. This writing is a direct offshoot of his voracious reading. “The earlier part of the story is occupied with Ganesh as an ambitious and independent young man, yet idealistically and poetically inclined with a driving passion for books. He asserts his independence of thought again and again, rejecting his superstitious, materialistic
and garrulous society” (Kamra 60 - 61). Ganesh shares with Biswas, in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, his profound desire to read and write. The difference in these two characters lies in their attitude to life and their approach to their shortcomings. As Landeg White observes in *V. S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction*: “Ganesh learns how to handle things, how to play off one world against the other to his own advantage” (88). But Biswas is a frustrated man, for he is caught up in the colonial predicament. Trying to build his identity on Western models after reading the books he admired, he is caught in a web of confusion, and escape seems impossible. Ganesh is a shrewd manipulator and one who knows and reads keenly the psychology of men. He is a tough survivor against the odds in his life. He lives up to the image of the East Indians in Trinidad,

> To be an Indian from Trinidad, then, is to be unlikely and exotic. It is also to be a little fraudulent. But so all immigrants become [...]. They have adopted the language of the sheltering country and their own language has become a secret gibberish. Immigrants are people on their own. They cannot be judged by the standards of their older culture. (qtd. in Myers 79)

Initially, Ganesh found writing a difficult task. He was unable to find suitable subjects. The wish to write and prove successful in this field was an obsession with him. He felt he was destined to make a mark through writing. “I could write’. And then, stupidly, almost without knowing what he was saying, ‘And one day I go write books like these. Just like these’ [... ] ‘Yes, just like these. Just like these’ ” (MM 45). This triple conviction was an assurance of Ganesh’s
determination to carry through his project, however remote it might seem. When he did write and publish a booklet, *101 Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion*, it did not sell. He faced disappointment as people did not feel the book was worth buying and reading, for “‘Trinidad full of crazy people’” (MM 17). The revised deluxe edition with a cloth cover and thicker in size did the magic for Ganesh. The book became

- the first best-seller in the history of Trinidad publishing. People were willing to pay the money for it. The simple-minded bought it as a charm; the poor because it was the least they could do for Pundit Ganesh; but most people were genuinely interested. The book was sold only at Fuente Grove and there was no need of Bisoon’s selling hand. (MM 143)

- This initial success goaded Ganesh to write more books on different topics. They increased his fame and he was recognized as a wise pundit with a flair for writing. Finally he brought out his spiritual autobiography, *The Years of Guilt*, that heightened his esteem in Central America and the Caribbean. But in the very year of its publication, the book was suppressed, and his early struggles were hidden from the eyes of the world. Writing shaped his personality and gave him a decisive identity, which paved the way for political uplift as an MBE.

In *The Mystic Masseur* Naipaul returned to his homeland, Trinidad, and to the scenes he had left behind. Trinidad was the society Naipaul grew up in and the society that he rejected. It was also the social circle that he knew best, the socie’y
which fed his imagination and which he kept turning very often in his fiction. Naipaul acknowledges his debt to Trinidad: “I have grown out of Trinidad and in a way I am grateful to Trinidad I knew as a boy for making me what I am” (qtd. in Walcott 5). He recreated this Trinidad of his childhood as meticulously as James Joyce portrayed Dublin. There is a quality of vibrant life in his picturisation of Trinidad with all its mixedness and failings, which is absent in his later works. The ties of nativity in Naipaul could never be separated. As Naipaul observes in his interview with Derek Walcott, “I do not think one can ever abandon one’s allegiance to one’s community, or at any rate to the idea of one’s community” (qtd. in Joshi 91). Naipaul’s idea of his community, constitutes, a deeply felt account of the Indian immigrant’s struggle to fit himself in a totally alien world. It was Naipaul who first became the spokesman of the Indians in Trinidad. Till then, the Indians a peripheral figure in the fiction of the region had been largely ignored. The Mystic Masseur is an allegory of the history of the Hindu community in Trinidad.

The character of Ganesh was one of the earliest to be conceived by Naipaul. When Naipaul was eleven years old, his father, Seepersad Naipaul, published a book of short stories, The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Indian Tales. Some people thought the book showed the Indian community in a poor light and abused the author Seepersad Naipaul for his damaging portrayal, but for the young Naipaul it proved very useful. He observes in the foreword to The Adventures of Gurudeva: “at the age of eleven, with the publication of my father’s book I was given the beginnings of the main character of my own first novels” (7).
The character of pundit Ganesh dominates the world of Naipaul’s early books such as Miguel Street and The Suffrage of Elvira. In these books, the Hindu community of Trinidad is focused. The haunting memory of Hindu mythical episodes and characters influences the thought and actions of his characters with Indian background. The character of Ganesh can be traced back to Hindu mythology. Ganesh is the eldest son of Shiva and Parvathi; he is a symbol of prudence and policy. He has an elephant’s head, which is an emblem of sagacity. He is invoked by the Hindus and worshipped before any religious ceremony and on auspicious occasions. The word “Ganesa” means the leader (Isa) of a company (gana) of deities. So he is foremost among the Hindu deities, holding a place of eminence. He is the remover of impediments and obstacles (Vigneswara) and the beloved spouse of siddhi (knowledge) and buddhi (understanding). True to his name, Ganesh of The Mystic Masseur is a great lover of knowledge and books. In his own words, buying books: “’Is my own vice’ [. . .] ‘Only vice. I don’t smoke. I don’t drink. But I must have my books. And, mark you, every week I going to San Fernando to buy more, you know’ ” (MM 15). Brushing aside all hurdles to write, he rises to become a celebrated author of books.

The Mystic Masseur is a Caribbean success story based on the gradual rising fortunes of pundit Ganesh. Even the narrator’s mother saw hints of the popularity Ganesh was sure to attain later in life: “’He is the sorta man who woulda be a rishi in India. The day go come when you go be proud to tell people that you did know Ganesh’ ” (MM 17). The mother’s words rang true for Ganesh, who won fame and fortune in Trinidad, a small island, which (according to Naipaul’s Foreword in The
Middle Passage) is “no bigger than Lancashire, with a population somewhat smaller than Nottingham’s”. In the course of presenting the life story of a man in the Caribbean community who kept on changing roles and met with significant success of imperial distinction, the narrator touches upon various themes of private fulfillment and public success. Ganesh experienced private contentment when he was recognized as a writer and his books were highly commended. Public success came to Ganesh as a mystic and later on when he becomes an MBE. The narrator is at times a detached observer and at other times an ironic commentator:

within two weeks all Trinidad knew about Ganesh and his Powers. The news went about on the local grape-vine, the Niggergram, an efficient, almost clairvoyant, news service. As the Niggergram noised the news abroad, the number of Ganesh’s successes were magnified, and his Powers became Olympian (MM 136-137).

Ganesh was a mediocre student who “never lost his awkwardness. He was so ashamed of his Indian name that for a while he spread a story that he was really called Gareth [. . .] his accent remained too clearly that of the Indian from the country. He never stopped being a country boy” (MM 20-21). The initiation ceremony of making him a real Brahmin mortified him and he became a laughing stock, because of his shaved head. Like Biswas of A House for Mr Biswas he was a non-conformist and a hater of orthodox religion. In this respect, Naipaul recalls his similarity of temperament in An Area of Darkness when he says: “I came of a family that abounded with pundits. But I had been born an unbeliever. I took no pleasure in religious ceremonies. They were too long, and the food came only at the end [. . .]
no one explained the prayers or the ritual” (32). In due course, Ganesh obtained the Cambridge School Certificate and surprised everyone by procuring the second grade. With the help of the headmaster he got enrolled in the Government Training College for teachers in Port of Spain. Here he felt comfortable, as many Indians were present. After training, he was sent to a school “in a rowdy district in the east end of Port of Spain” (MM 23). The motto of the school was: Form not inform where Ganesh was neither able to mould the students nor educate them in the way Miller, the headmaster, wanted. When he was rebuked by Miller, he left the school for good. This episode is recorded in The Years of Guilt:

‘My father had died that Monday morning between five minutes past ten and a quarter past ten—just about the time, in short, when I had the dispute with Miller, and was deciding to give up my teaching job. I was much struck by the coincidence, and it was only then, for the first time, I felt I had something big ahead of me’ (MM 31).

Ganesh, who was a die-hard optimist and a believer in fate proved through his writing that indeed he was cut out for something big. The writing and the popularity that followed were made a reality by his voracious reading. The boy narrator was unable to control his astonishment. “There were books, books, here, there, and everywhere; books piled crazily on the table, books rising in mounds in the corners, books covering the floor. I had never before seen so many books in one place”(MM 15). Nearly fifteen hundred books, scattered all over, indicated Ganesh’s love of reading, which served as an impetus to produce such books. Sudha Rai observes: “Ganesh’s love of books makes him an outsider to his community” (Rai,
“Homeless by Choice” 83). Ganesh’s creator, Naipaul, was an enthusiastic reader himself, as he observes in *The Enigma of Arrival*: “I loved books, I was a reader – it was my reputation at home” (109). In Ganesh’s social circle, the reading habit was looked upon with awe and admiration. Even Ramlogan, Ganesh’s father-in-law, expressed his admiration for the reading habit:

‘This reading’, sahib, is a great great thing [. . .] You take up this paper that to me just look like a dirty sheet with all sort of black mark and scrawl all over the place [. . .] before I have time to even scratch my back, man, I hear you reading from it and making a lot of sense with it. A great thing, sahib. (MM 34)

It was Mr. Stewart who first sowed the seed of a writer in Ganesh. “I know things that are worrying you, and I think one day you may find the answer. One day you may even bring it all out in a book”’ (MM 40). He encouraged him to pen down his ideas: “‘You must write your thoughts [. . .]. They may help other people’” (MM 41). As a token of his gratitude, Ganesh handsomely honoured the memory of Mr. Stewart in the dedication of his autobiography by calling him friend and counsellor of many years.

To his wife Leela’s question, whether he could write books, Ganesh answered in the affirmative, saying that in future he would bring out books like the many he had in his possession. When he went to San Fernando to print his wedding cards, he told Basdeo decidedly:

‘I writing a book.’
... ‘The day go come when I go send you a book to print.’

... But so far as this business of writing books was concerned, he seemed to have no will: it was the second time he had committed himself. It all seemed pre-ordained (MM 50).

Ganesh’s urge to write is a reflection of Naipaul’s own life and his aspiration to emerge as a writer. As Naipaul himself states: “I was eleven, no more, when the wish came to me to be a writer; and then very soon it was a settled ambition. The early age is unusual, but I don’t think extraordinary” (RW 3). Like Naipaul, Ganesh is eaten up with “the anxiety of the writer” (FC 20), but he did not know what subjects to work on and what themes to deal with. In The Enigma of Arrival Naipaul shows his struggle to find suitable subjects for writing, which is a “consuming process” (EA 94). The ringing intuition in Ganesh’s ears, that ultimately he would emerge a winner, is but an echo of Naipaul’s sentiments. The novelist portrays himself in the early struggles of Ganesh, who says assuredly: “‘Going to write a book [. . .]. Big book’“(MM 75) yet unable to proceed beyond, “‘thinking, thinking about it all all the time?’ ” (MM 76). The actual writing of the book proved difficult for Ganesh, who kept putting it off. Through Ganesh, Naipaul portrays how difficult it is for a writer to get started on the vocation of writing. The doubts, shortcomings, worries and emotional probing are part and parcel of every aspiring writer. The struggle to make a beginning costs a writer all his mental strength and ability to withstand hardships. Naipaul remembers his early struggle to establish himself as a writer to fulfill “that quirk of literary ambition” (EA 108). He portrays through Willie Chandran in Half a Life the trauma involved in a writing career.
Ganesh bought three hundred volumes of the Everyman Library. He made regular trips to San Fernando to purchase big books on a variety of subjects. He was genuinely impressed by the books and what he found in them. He had a burning curiosity about subjects as diverse as practical psychology; Hindu philosophy; history and literature. The act of reading opened up a new world of thought for Ganesh and increased his understanding of his own world. He equipped himself by gaining knowledge through reading, before launching on a writing career, as he says: "'A man may turn over half a library to make one book'" (MM 84). Ganesh's wife, Leela, marveled at her husband, who lay awake in bed muttering that one day he would write a book of his own and have it printed. Ganesh "kept on reading. [. . .] kept on making notes. [. . .] kept on making note-books" (MM 88).

Ganesh decided to write about the views of different authors on religion and to supply explanations. He wished to educate the people of Trinidad, who were like children and required teaching and training. He hit upon an idea of bringing out a fundamental book on Hindu religion, like a primer with questions and answers. Finally, he did write the book, working hard at it for more than five weeks, assiduously following the timetable drawn up by Beharry, his friend, philosopher and guide. Ganesh was filled with ecstasy on seeing his manuscript printed.

So the process began, the thrilling, tedious, discouraging, exhilarating process of making a book. Ganesh worked with Beharry on the proofs, and they both marveled at the way the words looked so different in print.
'They look so powerful', [...].

At last the book was completed and it was Ganesh's joy to bring home the thousand copies in a taxi. [...] 'You never know how fast the book go sell, and I don't want Trinidad bawling for the book when I ain't have any left' (MM 97).

The booklet of thirty pages, 101 Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion, failed to bring in success. Bookshops wanted fifteen-cent commission on every copy, to which Ganesh didn't agree. His frustration on watching his book fail miserably reflected the poor reception given to literature and new thought trends by Trinidadians. The people were not interested in religious books and a book of catechism was hard to sell. Poetry interested the people more than religion.

This setback in Ganesh's life throws abundant light on his character. The frustrating failure depressed him totally, but it did not make him emotionally bankrupt nor did it break his resolve to attain fame. He felt that failure was only a stepping-stone to future success. His optimism never failed him, even in the worst of circumstances. Years later, he wrote in his autobiography The Years of Guilt: "'Everything happens for the best. If, for instance, my first volume had been a success, it is likely that I would have become a mere theologian, writing endless glosses on the Hindu scriptures. As it was, I found my true path' " (MM 112).

Ganesh realized that more than content, the form and shape of the book could spell success. People should get lured by the attractive outward appearance of the book. So a revised edition was brought out, after giving it a face-lift to enhance
its value. This deluxe edition did the magic for Ganesh: it obtained instantaneous success and became a best seller in the history of Trinidad. It proved epoch-making, and people were eager to buy it. He was immensely thrilled, as his book fulfilled his ambition of emerging as a writer and tasting success. “The most satisfying thing” (MM 142) about this period of his life was that Ganesh became motivated and self-confident. He plunged headlong sure of success, on his mysticism, enhancing the circle of his clients and prospering rapidly.

Ganesh opened Ganesh Publishing Company Limited and had it registered. The insignia of the firm was an open lotus – the flower much revered by Hindus and offered to Hindu deities. He took up his pen and resumed writing once again:

Then he began to write again and found, to his delight, that the desire to write had not died, but was only submerged. He worked hard at his book, sitting up late at night after treating clients all day; and often Leela had to call him to bed (MM 158).

Ganesh’s untiring efforts bore rich dividends, and his book appeared imposing,

The book, when it came out two months later, was a surprise to Beharry. It looked like a real book. It had hard covers; the type was big and the paper thick; and the whole thing looked substantial and authoritative. [. . .] The book was called The Guide to Trinidad (MM 158-59).
The book made good reading and served as an eye-opener to the people of Trinidad. The history, geography and population of Trinidad were described with masterly finesse. It dealt with the romance of the multicultural ethos, superbly told and artfully portrayed.

In a chapter called 'The East in the West', readers were told that they would be shocked to find a mosque in Port of Spain; and even more shocked to find, in a village called Fuente Grove, a genuine Hindu temple which looked as if it had been bodily transported from India. The Fuente Grove Hindu temple was considered well worth a visit, for spiritual and artistic reasons (MM 159).

This book presaged that in the years to come, Naipaul himself would bring out *The Middle Passage*, detailing the hybridity of the races of his homeland, on a par with *The Guide to Trinidad*. Just like Ganesh’s book, Naipaul’s work established him as a writer not only of fiction but of non-fiction as well: “the book, like the fiction books that had gone before, was for me an extension of knowledge and feeling. […] Fiction, the exploration of one’s immediate circumstances, had taken me a lot of the way. Travel had taken me further” (RW 30 - 31).

The anonymity of the author tended to enhance the mysticism around Ganesh’s book. He sent free copies to export and advertising agencies in America and Canada that dealt with Trinidad. Many Americans came to Trinidad to visit Fuente Grove and ask for spiritual advice and solace. The book served as a double-edged weapon for Ganesh; it enhanced his prestige as a mystic counsellor and was
able to subdue Narayan, his opponent, and ‘The Hindu’. Ganesh is: “smart and he has to be “smart” because his society urges a man to be “smart” to become a hero. Ganesh is aware that he is a victim of his displaced society but he refuses to succumb and be victimized by it” (Ramadevi 35-36).

Ganesh’s popularity mounted higher and higher, and people came to him not because of his reputation but due to the novelty of his expressions and his capacity to captivate them. He appeared very learned before them, quoting from books in English to prove his point in Hindi. His main sermon was to root out desire, for it was the main source of misery in life. He motivated his clients, telling them that everything was an extension of themselves. Ironically, the narrator says, “People sometimes understood and when they got up they felt a little nobler” (MM 162). At this time, the books that he wrote helped in further cementing his fame, not only in the country but also in Port of Spain. He used the materials of his talks for The Road to Happiness. Other books followed like Re-incarnation, The Soul as I See It and The Necessity for Faith. These books sold moderately, but none of them had spectacular success.

The two books that made Ganesh’s name a household word in Trinidad were What God Told Me and Profitable Evacuation. The first created a furore in the public.

What God Told Me must surely rank as a classic in Trinidad literature. Its stark simplicity, almost ingenuousness, is shattering. The character of the narrator is beautifully revealed, especially in the
chapters of dialogue, where his humility and spiritual bewilderment
counterpoint the unravelling of many knotty metaphysical points.
There were also some chapters of spirited prophecy. [. . .].

The book set a fashion. Many people in many parts of Trinidad
began seeing God (MM 164).

The inspiration for Profitable Evacuation was the musical toilet-roll rack.
Published during the war, its title was misunderstood. The preface claimed the
subject as a vital one, that which had adversely affected human beings from time
immemorial. Ganesh’s overpowering desire to lure the public and his keen
commonsense are highlighted.

Ganesh’s name spelt resounding success in the elections:

GANESH is
Able
Nice
Energetic
Sincere
Holy (MM 200)

Right from the start Indarsingh, Ganesh’s classmate, knew he didn’t have a
chance against Ganesh pundit and he was contesting a losing game. For Ganesh who
became an M.L.C. (Member of the Legislative Council) it had been a steady, gradual
rise. His autobiography:
shows that he believed strongly in predestination; and the circumstances which conspired to elevate him seem indeed to be providential. If he had been born ten years earlier it is unlikely, if you take into account the Trinidad Indian’s attitude to education at that time, that his father would have sent him to the Queen’s Royal College. He might have become a pundit, and a mediocre pundit [...] (MM 205).

The Mystic Masseur, “the log cabin to White House success story” (Kamra 59) is about Ganesh, who was essentially alone but self-involved, working conscientiously towards achievement. The novel is an indication that its creator too would one day become a literary force to reckon with. Ganesh’s love for knowledge and reading (coupled with fierce ambition to write) may well be Naipaul’s own slice of life. This literary thirst for writing is a penchant of Naipaul, which is portrayed in his interview with Mel Gussow: “before I died, before I became so removed from my talent, I wanted to write a book about my father and my background, the anger and the terrible ambition, the sense of loss and defeat that made me want to be a writer” (qtd. in Joshi 30). Biswas has similarity to Ganesh in his burning desire to write.

A House for Mr Biswas has been variously described as a comic epic, a tragi-comedy and a West Indian epic. Naipaul has taken as a challenge his own words, that Trinidad is “small, remote and unimportant” (OB 24) and has produced this great novel. The West Indian critic Gordon Rohlehr regards it as “more profound than anything else Naipaul has written because, for the first time, he is able
to feel his own history not merely as a squalid farce but as an adventure in sensibility” (188). The novel depicts communities being reshaped by larger cultural and social forces due to movement from East Indian villages to Port of Spain. It records a colony’s transition from a rural to an urban, industrialized society; it is a detailed account of an East Indian family and one individual’s acculturation in Trinidad society and his acquisition of a social identity. *A House for Mr Biswas* can be categorized as a *Bildungsroman*. There is no gainsaying the fact that since its coinage in 1820 by Karl Morgenstern, this German literary genre has been adapted by variant configurations through time and space. According to Morgenstern, “it portrays the *Bildung* of a hero in its beginnings and growth to a certain state of completeness and secondly because it is by virtue of this portrayal that it furthers the reader’s *Bildung* to a much greater extent than any other kind of novel” (qtd. in Buma 104). It refers to a novel of growth, maturity and identity, in which the protagonist, after years of struggle, finds a place within the social structure of his community. *A House for Mr Biswas* focuses on the life and fortunes of the protagonist from birth till death. The novel depicts the growth of the protagonist. It deals with the coming of age of Biswas from a bungling hero to a journalist of sensational articles.

The protagonist Biswas’s task in the novel is to create something of his own out of nothing. *A House for Mr Biswas* is a more profound work of art than the usual fictional celebrations of national history and achievement. In “Human Concern in the Novels of V.S. Naipaul” Kh. Kunjo Singh observes: “One of the major themes of Naipaul’s fiction is that of the colonial foundling discovering his own artistic
potentialities. Becoming a writer for a West Indian is a treaty of sensibility with a hostile world" (247). It is a brilliant and sensitive exploration of an unremarkable man’s search for significance through writing, in what he perceives to be a nihilistic world.

Francis Whyndham eulogizes the novel as being conceived and executed within the great tradition of the humanist novel. It is an intriguing, subtle and comprehensive analysis of the colonial situation in imaginative literature. This novel holds a special place among Naipaul’s works. While commenting on the writing of the novel, Naipaul said: “It was like a career [. . .] I’ve been feeling unemployed ever since” (qtd. in White, 11). This remark illuminates the significance of Naipaul’s interest in the novel and his deep involvement in his work. Kenneth Ramchand has called the work “a major twentieth century novel on the increasingly rare scale of Middlemarch, Anna Karenina or The Rainbow (qtd. in Rai, Homeless 79). The protagonist’s struggle in the novel is to define himself by his tripartite vocation – to build a house of his own, to succeed as a journalist and to prepare his son to go abroad to study for better prospects. These three themes are interlinked in the action of this comic figure as he contends with the shortcomings of his society, background and his own character. Bruce King observes, in V. S. Naipaul, “A House for Mr Biswas is, among its varied themes, about becoming a writer and how the book itself came into being” (47).

The focus of attention in A House for Mr Biswas is Mohun Biswas, an anti-hero and a blundering protagonist who seeks to establish his identity and tries to attain selfhood. Biswas’s house is acquired only at the end of the novel, after many
unsuccessful attempts at building. The house is a primary symbol and is associated with stability, permanence, economic independence, freedom and a sense of security. House building has connotations of creativity. It is synonymous with becoming a writer, like constructing a novel and becoming a novelist. Biswas created a niche for himself by the apt use of words and attempted to overcome - through writing - the sterility around him: “Many of the protagonists in Naipaul’s fiction are men of letters with the awareness that one who masters letters has learnt to master himself, his world, and his destiny” (Singh, 247).

Drawn after Naipaul’s father, Mr. Biswas symbolizes the typically lower middle-class Indian ambition to have a house of one’s own. The significance of one’s life lies in dying peacefully under one’s own roof. It is a poignant account of the protagonist’s persistent efforts to realize his dream house. Biswas is willing to compromise even on his personal concerns in order to achieve his goal: he cuts across cultural and ethnic prejudices, exhausting all possibilities and resources and experiences a sense of loss and futility. A house is not a mere enclosure of four walls, but is much more. It provides not only shelter, but becomes a seat of family culture and tradition, almost an institution. It is a building that houses emotions, passions and feelings. The intention behind Biswas’s plan to build a house is a determination, however Herculean it might seem, to achieve a considerable degree of social acceptability in his community. In fact, the envisaged house is a symbol of Biswas’s will to make a dent in his oppressive world and leave behind something of value. William Walsh’s opinion, in V.S. Naipaul, is that a house is “a shelter, a fortress, a declaration of independence, a shaping of the impersonal in the service of
the personal” (qtd. in Pandey 6). Biswas dies not as an embittered man, but as a journalist whose death is recorded for millions to read in the same Trinidad Guardian on which he worked. The other significant achievement is that he fulfills his desire to own a house, even though its glaring defects become an eyesore to him in his last days.

The staircase was dangerous; the upper floor sagged; there was no back door; most of the windows didn’t close; one door could not open; the celotex panels under the eaves had fallen out and left gaps between which bats could enter the attic. (HB 12)

These flaws did not deter Biswas from accommodating himself well to “every peculiarity and awkwardness of the house” (HB 12). Biswas thought of the house as his own, though for many years it was irretrievably mortgaged. There was nothing like owning a house though there were obvious drawbacks.

Biswas’s life was a perpetual struggle between desires and obligations, inner motivations and circumstantial necessities. The novel not only focuses on the personal life of the protagonist but also highlights the ethnic and social history of a community and the quest for a social identity. Naipaul takes the reader through the dimly lit corridors of Biswas’s life. His infancy was as agonizing as it was painful. His body was left unwashed, becoming soiled and muddy. He was born in the wrong way at midnight, an inauspicious hour, with six fingers and an unlucky sneeze. Even at birth he was said to augur misfortune and bring ill luck to the family. The pundit gave a severe warning to keep the boy away from trees and water. Malnutrition
stunted his growth and gave him “the shallowest of chests, the thinnest of limbs” and a “rising belly” (HB 22).

Biswa’s pastoral infancy is in tune with the rural setting of the novel. The novel presents an unromantic portrait of the colonial West Indies set against the story of a painfully split personality and its quest for identity. As a child Biswa’s ability to read minds and hear voices determined his existence. He grew up to be a man who discovered that it was not his mind that controlled the events of his life, it was the fragmented events of his life that shaped his mind and made him realize that he was nobody in particular, but a mere non-entity. “I am just somebody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know” (HB 279).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the migration of indentured labourers from the East Indian villages to Trinidad, was the socio-historical context in which Biswa’s life is gauged. The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 made the planters turn to India, seeking labour for the sugarcane estates. A large number of East Indians immigrated to the Caribbean as indentured workers between 1838 and 1924. Biswa’s grandfather had also gone as an indentured labourer to a Trinidad sugar estate. So Biswa and his brothers inherited the social identity of belonging to the family of indentured workers. Biswa’s brothers were sent to work on sugar estates and Biswa looked after his uncle’s shop.

His father’s accidental death while rescuing Dhari’s calf and saving his son from drowning is a big jolt to the family. It reduces him to a life of dependence. For most of his life Biswa relied on his rich aunt Tara and Ajodha for financial support.
He was sent to work in the rum shop run by Bhandat, who was the brother of Ajodha. This had been Ajodha’s first business venture, which brought him lot of wealth and provided him capital for other financial adventures. He was to be fed by Bhandat’s wife and given dresses to wear. His salary was two dollars a month. The people who frequented the shop “meant to drink themselves into insensibility” (HB 59). The place abounded with people who collapsed to the floor after heavy drinking. The din and noise of the tavern was due to:

swearing, boasting, threatening; fights, broken bottles, policemen: and steadily the coppers and the silver and the notes went into the greasy drawer below the shelves (HB 60).

After the day’s work was over the place was cleaned. The money was arranged in neat bundles and Bhandat noted down the day’s accounts. He made his calculations in whispers against the noise of the Petromax whose subdued hiss rose into a roar in the silence of the enveloping night. He distrusted Biswas because he felt that he had been sent by Tara to keep an eye on him. It did not take time for Biswas to realize that Bhandat was stealing money and “these feverish nightly calculations were meant to frustrate Tara’s weekly checks” (HB 60). He cheated the clients by not pouring out the full measure in their cups, when they were intoxicated. Biswas slept with the two sons of Bhandat on a hard, smelly coconut fibre mattress on the floor. Sometimes he went to see his mother. In the shop Bhandat was spinning more coins everyday and growing in wealth. Biswas’ hopeless and powerless position in Bhandat’s household is revealed when he was falsely accused of stealing money. Bhandat reported that the previous night he had twenty-six
dollars. But only twenty-five dollars were found indicating the loss of one dollar, which had been pocketed by Biswas. He was lashed with a belt, cut on the cheekbone and blood oozed out below his eye. "Mohan is bruised into an early recognition of his dependency, and his lifelong goal becomes an escape from a powerlessness that his subservient relationship to Bhandat exemplifies" (Weiss, On the Margins 52). The helplessness of Biswas becomes explicit when he finds fault with his mother for sending him to other people's houses, where he is humiliated and tortured. After regaining his composure, with determination born of despondency, he assures his mother, "I am going to get a job on my own. And I am going to get my own house too. I am finished with this" (HB 67). His dream of success constitutes two key elements—a job and a house. By obtaining these two objects he wished to expunge his humiliating dependence and stigmatic identity of his inherited lower class.

Biswa's search for a job landed him the job of a sign-painter. Sign-painting led him to the world of Tulsis. They represented the quintessence of traditional Hinduism. Their patriarch, Pundit Tulsi, enjoyed high status and respect from his people, for they were a "pious, conservative, landowning family" (HB 81). Biswas became a misfit in his social order, being poor and not contributing financially to the family enterprise. Biswas's contention with the Tulsis was that he was a "have-not", being landless and jobless yet trying to assert his self-pride. Timothy F. Weiss in On the Margins: The Art of Exile remarks:

The Tulsis' image of Biswas conflicts with his self-image as an important-person-to-be whose "real" life of achievements has not yet
begun. For their part, the Tulsis are infuriated by Biswas' refusal to work either in the store or on the sugarcane estate; for his part, he is wounded by the family's insensitivity to his Brahmin status and their seeming refusal to treat him as an educated, intelligent person. (52)

Biswa then became dependent on the Tulsi family in Arwacas. The unwanted and unnecessary man, Biswas became an alien inside the Tulsi family and its establishment. The Hanuman House symbolized the traditional and conventional Hindu world, abounding in all sorts of ritualistic vagaries and superstitious hypocrisy. It was an abode of shame and pretence. He was treated with indifference rather than hostility. When everyone worked with energy and joy, he remained aloof. He became so nauseated in this house that he grew languid and suffered from neurotic inertia:

The future he feared was upon him. He was falling into the void, and that terror, known only in dreams, was with him as he lay awake at nights, hearing the snores and creaks and the occasional cries of babies from the other rooms. [. . .] Food and tobacco were tasteless. He was always tired, and always restless. He went often to Hanuman House; as soon as he was there he wanted to leave. [. . .] When he closed the door of his room for the night it was like an imprisonment (HB 227-28).

The Tulsi establishment governed by the shrewd colonizer Mrs Tulsi and her bullying slave master Seth, created an oppressive ambience for Biswas. The Tulsis were materialistic and blind to individual urges and aims. They were philistines who
ignored the creative aspects of life. Biswas abhorred such an attitude and developed immense hatred for them. The “pointless and degrading” (HB 131) campaign against the Tulsi led him nowhere. At the Hanuman House he received only “aggrieved and aggressive stares” (HB 131) that dulled his spirits, making him irritable. Stranded in such a milieu,

Mr Biswas grew very still, and listened to his own breathing.

[. . .] He opened his eyes and looked up at the thatched roof. He could make out the rafters and the loose straws that hung straight down, threatening to fall into his eyes. (HB 149)

To accept the rules and conventions of the Hanuman House would be to stoop to the level of a servant and a slave. He hesitated and paused before he acquiesced to the dogged traditions of the house. He had his identity and wished to assert it. He struggled hard to release himself from the clutches of a stifling and suffocating world dominated by the Tulsi.

In his defiance and rebellion against the overwhelming odds of a tradition-bound house, Biswas suffered from deep psychic tension, for he could not openly defy the authority of the Tulsi. His whole endeavour lay in seeking and asserting his identity. But in pursuit of liberty, he was intermittently bogged down by the domineering role of the Tulsi household. His quest for identity is an indication of his rootlessness, a sense of not belonging, which enhanced his need for assurance. He was unable to find a viable strategy to cope with the destabilizing sense of the lack of an adequate identity.
Biswas took delight in imaginatively upsetting the family hierarchy. He sarcastically mocked at the family members by providing additional nicknames. Mrs Tulsi became “old cow”, “old hen”, “old she-fox” and “old queen”. Seth, the elder brother-in-law and the business manager became the “Big Boss”. Mrs Tulsi’s pampered sons, Owad and Vidiadhar, became “elder god” and “younger god” to Biswas. His mockery of the Tulsis led to his expulsion from the Hanuman House. Seth showed his disgust towards Biswas: “you refuse to help in the store, you refuse to help on the estate. All right. But then to turn around and insult us’ (HB 109).

Biswas’ conflict with the Tulsis symbolizes his need to assert his individuality: “ ‘Give up sign-Painting? And my independence? No, boy. My motto is: paddle your own canoe’” (HB 107). Biswas nourished a dream to emerge victorious and prove his worth before the Tulsis. But his desires and expectations led to his utter humiliation in the Hanuman House.

His double life – a life of what he was and a life of what he would like to be – highlights the contrast between reality and illusion. Biswas tried to escape from the harrowing world of the Tulsis by taking recourse to the romances of Hall Caine, Marie Corelli and Samuel Smiles. They introduced him to exotic worlds of beauty: “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; […]” (HB 78).

These romantic tales were a perfect foil to his trite life, which served to contrast his dull and dreary routine in Hanuman House. Happiness was totally ruled
out as "there could be no romance at Hanuman House" (HB 93). He came to the
Tulsis' household out of necessity, but he existed as an exile in this place. He lacked
genuine involvement with the Tulsis and his ensuing estrangement with them.
pained him. Biswas' profession and a house of his own symbolize his desire to
establish his identity. For a good portion of his life he kept shunting from house to
house and never felt at home in any. He never derived satisfaction out of his work or
in any group within Trinidad society. He felt self-alienated and depressed. He
loathed becoming an agricultural labourer like his ancestors. He longed to escape
from the servitude of an agricultural labourer, who belonged to the lowest rung of
the socio-economic ladder. Throughout his life he remained sensitive to his class
designation, which was closely linked to his dream of a house of his own.

In Tara's house he was respected as a Brahmin and pampered; yet as
soon as the ceremony was over and he had taken his gift of money
and cloth and left, he became once more only a labourer's child –
father's occupation: labourer was the entry in the birth certificate F.
Z. Ghany had sent – living with a penniless mother in one room of a
mud hut (HB 49).

The ill-furnished room to which Biswas returned symbolized his dependency
and rootlessness. When Biswass became a journalist, he not only acquired
professional identity but also found an outlet for his creativity. Through the writing
process he took control over his world, seeing and defining it in his own eccentric
way. His social identity and dignity as a meritorious individual was established.
The novel is about Mohan Biswas who became a popular feature writer for the Trinidad Sentinel. He wrote articles about strange subjects like mosquito-killers, mental-home warders and night-soil removers. The substance of the novel is the transformation of Mr Biswas, a slave of place, history and biography, into a free man. This transformation in Biswas was brought about by his writing process, when he joined the staff of the Trinidad Sentinel. It was his role as a journalist, which helped him achieve authentic selfhood. He became not only a free man, breaking all shackles of his dependence upon the Tulsi household, but got his due recognition, though somewhat late in life. Biswas embarked on a writing career, to create a self, through the means of writing and proved his mettle before the oppressive force of Tulsidom. As Rob Nixon observes:

Many readers would concur that Biswas, a tragicomic novel of epic scope delivered at age twenty-nine, remains his most remarkable work. Nothing since has equaled the inventiveness and emotional generosity of that homage to his father’s misfortunes in the straitened circumstances of colonial Trinidad (3).

A boy destined for the grass-gang, who “would never become a driver or weigher because he wouldn’t be able to read” (HB 23) Biswas as an orphan was patronized by his rich aunt Tara. He was estranged from his mother, Bipti, and his brothers. He became the recipient of an English education, the result of the colonial times. The death of his father initiated the break from the old order. Coupled with this, reading and writing severed him from the old order of things, making him
indeed, “a wanderer with no place he could his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis” (HB 40).

Biswas’ existence in this world was taken notice of, after the death of his father, and he was issued a birth certificate. An invented birth date on paper, which declared the fact of his birth, reduced his previous life in the world into a dull and lifeless vacuum. This paved the way for his entry into a changed, new order of things. “In this way official notice was taken of Mr Biswas’s existence, and he entered the new world” (HB 44). In his new school world, the concept that he didn’t agree with was “Ought oughs are ought” (HB 44) – that nothing comes out of nothing. This equation became, for Biswas, the essence of his existence – the void at the centre turning all subsequent activity into nought. The novel is about the process of how Biswas, within his limited circumstances, wins over nought to achieve success through writing.

This new meaningless world created a diversion for Biswas, which remained with him throughout his life and made him use writing, as an expression of the self. Instead of comprehending the meaning of the words he was learning, he got fascinated with the form and shape of letters. He formed the word “CANCELLED” which he wrote across his answers in an exam, by blocking the letters, shadowing them and trying to be an artist. By providing them with adequate colour and form, he unwittingly belied its meaning. He was ordered to write “I AM AN ASS on the blackboard. Mr Biswas outlined stylish, contemptuous letters, and the class tittered approvingly” (HB 47). The form appealed to him more, than the content. He was yet to understand the depth and meaning of words.
The written words carried the power to establish reality, to order it, and to influence it. His birth certificate stated that he was a labourer’s son, which stuck to him throughout his life. The novelist holds that Biswas was unable to overcome this indelible mark of his humiliating parentage. Only towards the end, he succeeded as a journalist and showed the world that even the son of a labourer could master the use of the written word and utilize it to advantage.

Biswa moved from one dwelling to another and engaged on a journey of self-knowledge and ultimately self-realization. He began to settle down and felt at home in English culture, a product of colonization. He read to his uncle Ajodha from Bell’s Standard Elocutionist, with its poem “Bingen on the Rhine”. He probed through the Book of Comprehensive Knowledge, novels, romances and the writings of Marcus Aurelius, which helped to anchor his petulant spirit. He developed a liking for Samuel Smiles:

He had bought one of his books in the belief that it was a novel, and had become an addict. Samuel Smiles was as romantic and satisfying as any novelist, and Mr Biswas saw himself in many Samuel Smiles heroes: he was young, he was poor, and he fancied he was struggling. [. . .] The heroes had rigid ambitions and lived in countries where ambitions could be pursued and had a meaning. He had no ambition, and in this hot land, apart from opening a shop or buying a motorbus, what could he do? What could he invent? (HB 78 - 79).
Biswas' love for writing words was displayed after his stint in the rum shop. He became a writer, not of articles or stories, but of signs to be hung before shops. This introduced him into the mysterious, magical world of words and he launched on a creative relationship with words. "He thought R and S the most beautiful of Roman letters; no letter could express so many moods as R, without losing its beauty; and what could compare with the swing and rhythm of S?" (HB 76). Writing signs was additionally attractive to Biswas for it carried eye-catching slogans, yet another relation of writing to truth and history. All signs were slogans intended to lure the customers; they contained the essence of the message. All through his life, Biswas was captivated with high-sounding captions whose self-confidence and absolutism held sway over him. Nevertheless, his favourite caption was "Amazing scenes were witnessed" (HB 319).

Biswas' desire for romance, induced by reading Western novels, led him to apply the lessons of writing to reality. He handed over a love note "I love you and want to talk to you" (HB 85) to Shama, one of the daughters of the Tulsi clan, residing in Hanuman House. The impact of his writing had a contrary effect.

The note was crumpled and slightly dirty and looked ineffectual. [. . .] She looked away and smiled. It was not a smile of complicity or pleasure; it was a smile that told Mr Biswas he had made a fool of himself. He felt exceedingly foolish, and wondered whether he shouldn't take back his note and abandon Shama at once (HB 83).
As a writer of a love note he failed miserably. The intention of the love note was to ascend romantic heights, but it proved to be vice-versa. The power of his writing was immense; it got him entangled in "the engulfing world of the Tulsis" (HB 40). The power of writing was such that, he was unable to retract and the events culminated in a hasty marriage with Shama. Like his birth certificate, the written words assumed an authoritative role almost like a decree. They shaped and moulded his married life. Throughout life, he oscillated between the control the words had on him and his desperate attempt, to use it to advantage and achieve selfhood.

Biswa entered the tradition-ridden Hanuman House to become a non-entity. His self-assertiveness and individuality was drowned in the sea of conformity to the rigid codes of the house. He was unable to passively obey the orders of others and retaliated with words. He gradually developed the use of the English language, which he felt would give meaning to reality. "Mr Biswas nearly always spoke English at Hanuman House, even when the other person spoke Hindi; it had become one of his principles." (HB 118-19).

In sign-painting his obsession was with the outer form of words. Then he began to explore and got interested in the meaning of words. An Aryan preacher, Pankaj Rai, initiated Biswas into the wonderful, magical world of words. It was his first step in the process of using words creatively. Misir who was Mr Biswas' journalist friend, called Pankaj Rai a purist. "Mr Biswas had not asked what a purist was, but the word, pronounced with reverence by Misir, appealed strongly to him, suggesting not only purity and fastidiousness, but also elegance and breeding" (HB 116). Biswas added on the word 'purist' to his stock of vocabulary, thereby
enriching it. The speech of Pankaj Rai “was a revelation to Mr Biswas that words and phrases which by themselves were commonplace could be welded into sentences of such balance and beauty” (HB 116). Pankaj Rai autographed his book, writing Biswas’ name as well and calling him a dear friend. To this Biswas added: “‘Presented to Mohun Biswas by his dear friend Pankaj Rai, BALLB.’” (HB 117) Thus Biswas learnt to use words to give reality and create an identity for himself. He also took refuge behind words and used it to colour the real world. The autograph episode highlighted Biswas’ recognition of the significance of writing and its power to influence reality.

During his period at the Chase, Biswas realized the power as well as the helplessness of writing. He tried to make it do what he wanted and usually failed in the attempt. Biswas’ shop carried the sign

‘THE BONNE ESPERANCE GROCERY

M. Biswas Prop

Goods at City Prices’. (HB 151)

But these words became meaningless, for the villagers continued to call “the shop the Tulsi Shop” (HB 151). At the Chase, Biswas’ first-born was named Savi, much against his will. The name he had chosen fell miserably before the awesome force of the Tulsis. Savi’s birth certificate stated: “Occupation of father. Labourer: Labourer!”(HB 163) which was a replica of his own certificate: “father’s occupation: labourer was the entry in the birth certificate F.Z.Ghany had sent [. . .]” (HB 49). It reinforced the power the words had on him and the shameful stigma, which was invincible:
throughout life his position was like that. As one of the Tulsi sons-in-law and as a journalist he found himself among people with money and sometimes with graces; with them his manner was unforcedly easy and he could summon up luxurious instincts; but always, at the end, he returned to his crowded, shabby room (HB 49).

Misir, a journalist friend, wrote short stories. They were tragic tales about the mockery fate made of man and of luck’s elusiveness. The tragic side of life is stressed in the stories and how man is irretrievably caught in the web of life’s miseries. In one of his stories, the hero made a wrong decision at a crucial moment of his life when luck was about to favour him, proving that men were mere pawns on the chessboard of life. Man proves ineffective against the onslaught of life’s troubles.

Misir justified his writing trend thus: “But life is [. . .] not a fairy-story. No once-upon-a-time-there-was-a-rajah nonsense” (HB 167). People should know about the reality of life. They should realize the hardships of life. A strange prophesy of Biswas’ life at the Chase and the course of his future life and its shortcomings were hinted through Misir’s yarn-spinning. Misir’s writing had the power to foretell the future. Biswas’ attempt to write stories did not meet with success:

He read innumerable novels, particularly those in the Reader’s Library; and he even tried to write, encouraged by the appearance in a Port of Spain magazine of a puzzling story by Misir. [. . .] But Mr Biswas could never devise a story, and he lacked Misir’s tragic
vision; whatever his mood and however painful his subject, he become irreverent and facetious as soon as he began to write, and all he could manage were distorted and scurrilous descriptions of Moti, Mungroo, Seebaran, Seth and Mrs. Tulsi (HB 183).

In the second part of the novel Biswas fullfils his ambition. He wrote pleasingly and his life was got anchorage through writing. He attained the much-desired selfhood, by emerging as a journalist and later on by owning a house of his own, in spite of its glaring inadequacies. He came to Port of Spain virtually hauled into the bus by the conductor who offered him no alternate choice. He landed at Port of Spain purely by accident and sought his fortune. He even meddled and toyed with the idea of taking up sign-painting again. Looking for a job, he stumbled into the office of the Sentinel “for which Misir, the Aryan, was a cent-a-line country correspondent” (HB 319).

All the stories that Biswas got by heart from the newspapers in the barrack room returned to him with astonishing agility with longer and longer versions. He was obsessed with the lines from the newspapers:

Amazing scenes were witnessed in St Vincent Street yesterday when Biswas, 31, unemployed, of no fixed address, assaulted a receptionist at the offices of the TRINIDAD SENTINEL. People ducked behind desks as Biswas, father of four, walked into the building with guns blazing, shot the editor and four reporters dead, and then set fire to the building. (HB 319)
Biswa’s latent emotions towards society got transformed into a typical Western style gun-holding hero who was totally in control of the situation. He got vicarious pleasure through his imaginative faculty. The irony lay in the fact that Biswas was quite contrary to the image he conjured up of himself.

Biswa was ushered into the presence of the editor, who enquired about his previous experience. Biswa said his reading had been vast and varied from Hall Caine, Marie Corelli to Marcus Aurelius. The editor was struck by the audacity of Biswas, who had never written before, but aspired to become a reporter. He did not wish to reveal that all his life he had been a rolling stone moving from estate driver, overseer, shopkeeper to the unemployed category at present, so he blurted out: “Sign-painter” (HB 321). He was offered a job with paint and brush and negative signs were painted by Biswas: “No Admittance to Wheeled Vehicles, No Entry, Watch Out for Vans and No Hands Wanted”. Biswas’s ambition to write was totally shattered. These signs were a symbol of the negation his life had been until then. Fortunately, the editor (noting his steadfast will to write) offered a month’s trial, without pay. “A chance encounter had led him to sign-writing. Sign-writing had taken him to Hanuman House and the Tulsi. Sign-writing found him a place on the Sentinel. And neither for the Tulsi Store signs nor for those at the Sentinel was he paid” (HB 323).

Biswa was led into the wonder world of writing through the art of reporting. He plunged into it wholeheartedly with soaring enthusiasm:
His reading had given him an extravagant vocabulary [. . .] It was not long before he developed a feeling for the shape and scandalizing qualities of every story. To this he added something of his own. [. . .]

For the facetiousness that came to him as soon as he put pen to paper, and the fantasy he had hitherto dissipated in quarrels with Shama and in invective against the Tulsis, were just the things Mr. Burnett wanted (HB 323).

Biswa thanked his lucky stars that he had gained entry into the *Sentinel* and not the *Guardian* or the Gazette where flights of imagination were taboo. In the kind of journalism advocated by Mr. Burnett, reality was a springboard for the imagination to build upon. In the beginning, he made use of the stories to release his barely conceived frustration and helplessness. Mr. Burnett wished to surprise and startle the readers into new regions of thought. Biswas was compelled to present sensational scary bits of news to get job assurance. “Mr. Burnett, his boss, senses his talents and employs him accordingly in writing sensational news. He finds ample scope for his sense of adventure and romance in his literary writing [. . .]” (Kamra 95). He gave Biswas a piece of his mind about the art of writing. When he examined Biswas’s article about a fire accident, he suggested synonyms: “‘Considerably” is a big word meaning “very”, which is a pointless word any way. And look. “Several” has seven letters. “Many” has only four and oddly enough has exactly the same meaning” (HB 324). He appreciated Biswas’s headlines for the Bonny Baby Competition, revealing his love for grotesque description:

“WHITE BABY FOUND ON RUBBISH DUMP
In Brown Paper Parcel

*Did Not Win Bonny Baby Competition*. (HB 325)

Journalism kept Biswas busy all day, only to wait eagerly the next morning when his news flashed in black and white, would be read by many.

The job was urgent: the paper had to be printed every evening; by early morning it had to be in every part of the island. This was not the false urgency of writing signs for shops at Christmas or looking after crops. And even after a dozen years Mr Biswas never lost the thrill, which he then felt for the first time, at seeing what he had written the day before appear in print, in the newspaper delivered free (HB 325).

Biswas became the talk of the town by his chilling story:

"DADDY COMES HOME IN A COFFIN
U.S. Explorer's Last Journey
ON ICE"

by M. Biswas. (HB 327)

The circulation of the *Sentinel* increased manifold. This news item, like the other features that Biswas wrote, related to his own life. The news item was about a lonely hero, a wanderer and an explorer of life, who came home at last, but in a coffin. Defeat and death in the Amazon, with its connotation of primitive jungles and warring matriarchal societies, is a reflection of Biswas' own life: his lifelong, consistent struggle against the impact of Hanuman House, dominated by Mrs. Tulsi, is portrayed.
Biswa toured the island as Scarlet Pimpernel, roamed the countryside just like the great explorer of his article trying to seize all possible sensational news. The readers were supposed to recognize him and come up to claim the prize: “‘You are the Scarlet Pimpernel and I claim the Sentinel prize!’” (HB 328). The borrowed personality was a daring, swashbuckling English hero of the French Revolution unlike Biswas. It was ironical that in the photograph that appeared daily, he was seen frowning and partly menacing. He was goaded to write fantastic stories about his exploits to cover up the dismal failure of this project, in which the prizes went unclaimed. Reality and writing merged, his life became the story. But his story improved and manipulated reality by giving people an opportunity to claim the prize.

Journalism was the beginning of the only existence Biswas consciously recognized and became interested in. It is only in Part Two of the novel, when Biswas was on the verge of becoming a journalist, that he emerged from a world where his very existence had no meaning. “For him writing becomes a mode of self-realization and quest-fulfillment” (Chattopadhyay 218).

Biswa’s vocation as a reporter provided him with intellectual fulfillment. It was where his latent capacity of expression came to the forefront. “As a reporter-journalist, Biswas not only acquires a professional identity but also finds an outlet for his creativity. Through writing, he takes hold of his world, seeing and defining it in his own eccentric way” (Swain 19). Writing procured him recognition in the world of the Tulsis and in the outside world. It also gave him moral satisfaction that
at last he had proved his mettle, justified his forte and kept his promise of paddling his own canoe. It was an attempt to write his own life. He took recourse to writing, as the last option of his unsuccessful life. He used writing to order reality, to create an existence out of his chaotic, bleak life. Biswas’ writing flair was a cultural acquisition of the English language and English culture. It was, first and foremost, a life created through writing, a life-as-writer that made his life meaningful.

Biswas’ success as a reporter heightened his image in Arwacas, as his name duly found a place in the Sentinel. His grand entry into Hanuman House “was as magnificent as he had wished. He was still climbing up the steps from the courtyard when he was greeted by shouts, scampering and laughter” (HB 329). Children nudged up to him to claim the Sentinel prize and he dropped Sentinel dollar tokens into anxious hands. Shama received him well, showing his fourth child proudly. The reconciliation with the Tulsi household was complete, and Biswas revelled in his newfound glory. Mrs. Tulsi asked Biswas to move his family to Port of Spain and stay with her. The reconciliation proved to be the climax of his good fortune, for he turned from “a visitor into a dweller” (HB 333) moving into an elegant house, the most imposing in the street: “Could this luck have been more complete?” (HB 333).

Biswas gained confidence in this new order, yet there were shortcomings. He constantly searched for new ways of expression. He learnt shorthand and became a voracious reader of books on journalism. He read about people aspiring to become writers. He bought Short Stories: How to Write Them and How to Write a Book by Cecil Hunt. He applied to the Ideal School of Journalism and got his lessons on journalism. The first lesson threw sufficient light on the subject of writing.
Even people with outstanding writing ability say they cannot find subjects. But in reality nothing is easier. You are sitting at your desk (Mr. Biswas read this in bed). You look through your window. [. . . ]

There is an article at that window. The various types of window, the history of the window, windows famous in history, houses without windows. And the story of glass itself can be fascinating. Already, then, you have subjects for two articles.[. . .] The weather is always a subject of conversation and there is no reason why you cannot make it the subject of a lively article (HB 342).

Encouraged by these hints, he wrote on the seasons, quoting John Keats. But these articles were rejected by the newspapers. Recognizing the grotesqueness of his attempt to be inspired by English countryside, poetry and customs, Biswas set out to write fiction. In journalism, a writer is a manipulator of reality, one who moulded fact and fantasy to create something interesting and readable. Journalism provided a place of habitation for Biswas – a house in which he lived mentally and physically as well. Even though a house of his own evaded him for a long time, journalism proved to be an intellectually satisfying abode for him. Fiction writing was like building blocks of a life representing truth and meaning. The title of his story was “Escape”. “At the age of thirty-three, when he was already the father of four children [. . . ]”(HB 344) was an obsession with him, as earlier the headline: “Amazing scenes”(HB 319) was. No matter, how hard he tried, he could never progress beyond a few pages of fiction. The hero was a man like himself, trapped into marriage, yearning for the love of a young, barren girl who was just the opposite
of Shama: “He began these stories with joy; they left him dissatisfied and feeling unclean” (HB 345).

In journalism, it was possible for Biswas to use writing and language of an acquired culture to create a fabricated reality. He could become an historian and be part and parcel of that history. But he found it difficult to make use of the same culture to write his personal history, his truth about his past. To get beyond the English culture and reveal the Hindu background was difficult for Biswas and for Naipaul himself. Writing was a means of getting out of the void. It was a powerful medium winning over reality. At the same time, it was a barrier against the void and was to be penetrated to reveal the hidden truths.

The period of journalism constituted the crown of Biswas's achievements where a living place was provided, relative peace restored, freedom of creation granted and reality forged with fantasy. After reaching the pinnacle of success in the profession of writing, he spent the rest of his life trying to live up to the role assigned.

Under Mr. Burnett, Biswas discovered the intoxication of words to create a bizarre world, rather than to represent reality. The creation of a world of writing based on facts was a symbolic house for Biswas. But a gaping void was present nevertheless. At least, the merging of fact and fantasy in journalism was a shelter in this void. With the departure of Mr. Burnett, the style of reporting altered to that of documentation, a different relation to history and reality. The tall order: “DON'T BE BRIGHT, JUST GET IT RIGHT [. . .]” (HB 369) deflated Biswas wholly, sucking
away the sap of his writing ability. "The policies of the new management, curbing the style of its reporters, [. . .] reduce Biswas to a mechanical existence" (Kamra 95). He had a wistful longing for the old regime:

In the days of Mr Burnett once he had got a slant and an opening sentence, everything followed. Sentence generated sentence, paragraph led to paragraph, and his articles had a flow and a unity. Now, writing words [. . .] he was cramped, [. . .]. He had to note down ideas and juggle them into place. [. . .] The results were laboured, dead, incapable of giving pleasure except to the people written about (HB 375).

Biswas was expected to report only plain facts, without ornamentation. In desperation he told Shama, “‘Write?’ ” [. . .] ‘I don’t call that writing. Is more like filling up a form’ “(HB 370). The unembellished facts had no interest for Biswas: ‘Report not distort [. . .] Rules for Reporters. Rules!’ ” (HB 371) he shouted scornfully. For him truth or writing was synonymous with creation. While writing, he drew from his own life. For the changed order, he did not write scandalous interviews with one-eyed men, he wrote serious surveys of the contribution made by the Institute of the Blind. It was his duty to praise, not to distort and ignore certain details. This factual journalism turned out to be in no way better or truthful than his earlier sensational articles. By snapping his imagination and avoiding creativity, this new type of journalism, after Mr. Burnett’s departure, dwindled down to mere documentation of facts.
Journalism became a double-edged sword. It widened the void between his life in this new order and his life in reality, and it ended up as the story of his own life. The *Sentinel* started the Deserving Destitutes Fund and Biswas was appointed investigator. His work involved reading the application of destitutes, finding how deserving or desperate they were and writing harrowing accounts of their miserable plight. Actually, Biswas wrote his life and lived his own stories. "The *Sentinel* could not have chosen a better way of terrifying Mr Biswas, of reviving his dread of the sack, illness or sudden disaster" (HB 441), which were part and parcel of his life. The horrifying plight of the destitutes echoed his own life and pointed to later events when Biswas was compelled to move, though temporarily, into a Tulsi tenement, for the big house was required for Mrs. Tulsi’s son.

The widening gap between Biswas’ writing and his inner reality is shown when Biswas is invited to join a literary group. He felt that he had not written anything, and he had nothing to offer. However, the death of his mother offered a chance for Biswas to produce two written pieces, one on the doctor and the other in remembrance of his mother. Biswas was infuriated when the doctor who signed Bipti’s death certificate showed disrespect to her. He felt utterly humiliated, for the doctor’s disrespect was not only human but also ethnic. It also revealed his guilty feelings towards his mother, whom he had never loved or cared for. Biswas composed a letter of eight pages in which he asserted his Hindi background and universal humanism while denigrating the doctor’s acquired Christianity. He quoted from Shakespeare, the Bible and the Gita, and showed the letter to his son for approval. “He read out to Anand the drafts he had made and asked for comments.
The drafts were hysterical and libellous. But in his new mood, and after many re-writings, the letter developed into a broad philosophical essay on the nature of man” (HB 483).

The death of Bipti made Biswas realize that he had failed in his duties as a son. He felt exposed, vulnerable and tormented with guilt:

To do honour he had no gifts. He had no words to say what he wanted to say, the poet’s words, which held more than the sum of their meanings. But awake one night, [. . .] he got out of bed, worked his way to the light switch, turned it on, got paper and pencil, and began to write. He addressed his mother. He did not think of rhythm; he used no cheating abstract words. He wrote of [. . .] the indentations of the fork prongs. He wrote of a journey he had made a long time before. He was tired; she made him rest. He was hungry; she gave him food. He had nowhere to go; she welcomed him. The writing excited, relieved him [. . .]. (HB 484).

This prose-poem helped him regain his peace, composure and the legitimate place, he yearned for. He presented a slice of his soul to the literary group and was choked with emotion, “The poem written, his self consciousness violated, he was whole again” (HB 484). Through the medium of a poem he restored the honour of his mother, his community and his own honour. The real situation was altered. “The disappointment, his surliness, all the unpleasantness was ignored, and the circumstances improved to allegory: the journey, the welcome, the food, the
shelter”. (HB 57). The past was idealized and celebrated, while the truth was sidelined. The truth of memory worked to create not fact, but fiction. Language itself distorted and deferred. To achieve his selfhood a myth of the past was essential, not the past itself.

Biswa's last job was his stint as a community welfare officer. Here there is a touch of irony considering his own situation, where his welfare was at stake. This vocation brought sudden prosperity along with the acquisition of a car. His job was conducting a survey of an area assigned to him and analyzing the results. His writing involved the use of language to interpret reality, trying to impose order and logic on it. Biswa came into contact with the external forces that blend history, politics and social categories; he was unable to make effective use of language: “here he floundered. He had investigated two hundred house-holds [. . .]. He was dealing with a society that had no rules and patterns, and classifications were a chaotic business” (HB 509 - 10). Words of the report had no power to order the reality they dealt with and were meaningless as far as Biswa’s relationship with language was concerned. They tended to remove him further from himself and exposed the horrors of reality. When conditions deteriorated, he again came back into the fold of the Sentinel. “The newspaper atmosphere never failed to excite him, and the welcome he received stilled his fears: he was regarded as one who had escaped and made good” (HB 511). But the keen enthusiasm went out of his writing and it was replaced by his fervent longing for his son and daughter:

Beyond the Sentinel there was nothing. [. . .] he had at first found the newspaper office stimulating, with its urgency, the daily miracle of
seeing what he had written in the afternoon transformed into solid print read by thousands the next morning, his enthusiasm, unsupported by ambition, faded. His work became painstaking and laboured: the zest went out of his articles as it had gone out of himself. [...] so the years had passed; and now there was nothing to wait for (HB 586).

Biswas missed his children a great deal and wished them nearer as his sole support. As he neared his end, he thought with a guilty conscience about one of the grotesque stories he had written in the beginning, that of a dead explorer. He even fixed a caption for his own death, intended later to appear in the Sentinel, “ROVING REPORTER PASSES ON”, but the actual headline given by the Sentinel was “JOURNALIST DIES SUDDENLY” (HB 589). In spite of leading a chequered career of no significance, at last due to his writing, he does not die a non entity. His death is recorded for millions to read. His seemingly unsuccessful life assumes meaning and identity in the eyes of the world. How unfortunate it would have been “to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated” (HB14). His life was recognized due to his writing as a journalist. Kh. Kunjo Singh observes: “Mohun Biswas succeeds finally in claiming a portion of this earth as his own by acquiring a command of the English language, the key to influence and status in the colonial world” (247).

The character of Biswas is a fictional rendering of the life of Naipaul’s father, Seepersad Naipaul whose entire life was one of arduous struggle filled with disillusionment. “For Seepersad Naipaul (Pa), the life of the mind -- the writer’s life
- was everything: to record the ways of men and women, with a shrewd, comical and kindly eye, and to do that from within his own originality, was to live nobly” (Aitken ix). He began working for the *Trinidad Guardian* in 1929 but left in 1934 when the editor, who had encouraged his writing, was dismissed. In 1937, he returned to the *Trinidad Guardian* where he remained until 1944. Between 1944 and 1949, he worked as a welfare officer for the government. In 1950, he returned to the *Trinidad Guardian*, where he remained until he was made to retire in 1953, three months before his death. He was possessed by a fiery ambition to be a writer, but the ambition merely sputtered and never caught fire. Naipaul observes:

the desire to be a writer came to my father in the late 1920s. He did become a writer, though not in the way he wanted. He 'did good work; his stories gave our community a past that would otherwise have been lost. But there was a mismatch between the ambition, coming from outside, from another culture, and our community, which had no living literary tradition; and my father’s hard-won stories have found very few readers among the people they were about (RW 63 - 64).

An avid reader of Charles Dickens, Seepersad Naipaul published a novella about Indian life which he thought would be welcomed in Trinidad. The failure of the book did not deter him from subscribing to periodicals and magazines in England and America. But the demands of his family (coupled with his aspirations) led to a nervous breakdown. He wanted his son to prove his mettle in the field of
writing, in which he had made only an inconsequential beginning. Thenceforth, he tried to live his literary life through the achievements of his prodigious son.

I feel so damned cocksure that I can produce a novel within six months — if only I had nothing else to do. This is impossible. But I want to give you just this chance. When your university studies are over, if you get a good job, all well and good; if you do not, you have not got to worry one little bit. You will come home — and do what I am longing to do now; just write; and read [...]. This is where I want to be of use to you. I want you to have that chance which I never had; somebody to support me and mine while I write (qtd. in Phillips 7-8).

In a similar vein, realizing the literary potentialities of his father, Naipaul wrote a compelling letter urging Biswas to write before it was too late. The pathetic sense of urgency revealed in his letters speaks volumes about his veneration for his father. At the end of his first year at Oxford, he wrote in block letters to his father, his admiration for him turning to sheer desperation:

YOU HAVE ENOUGH MATERIAL FOR A HUNDRED STORIES.
FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE START WRITING THEM. YOU CAN WRITE AND YOU KNOW IT. STOP MAKING EXCUSES. ONCE YOU START WRITING YOU WILL FIND IDEAS FLOODING UPON YOU [...] BUT I WANT TO HEAR THAT YOU ARE WRITING. I WANT TO HEAR THAT YOU ARE WRITING
VERY VERY MUCH. [. . .] You are the best writer in the West Indies, but one can only judge writers by their work (qtd. in Phillips 8).

This friendly remonstrance and advice on the art of writing was reciprocal between Naipaul and his father. Each encouraged the other in literary pursuit. Writing meant much to both of them. It promised dignity, renown and a life of achievement. For them, writing was one of the exalted vocations of man. As Pankaj Mishra observes in his review of Letters Between a Father and Son:

Writing – to which Seepersad was drawn initially by his Brahmanical upbringing – became everything to him even in his unpromising circumstances: it was a promise of individual dignity and nobility, a “refusal to be extinguished”, it also offered an end to the life of constant financial anxieties and deprivations. The wish to be a writer was inherited almost instinctively by Seepersad’s son Vidia; and it was for both, father and young son, a “wish to seek at some future time for justice” (“House” 14-15).

A House for Mr Biswas is a memorial to his father, who passed on the literary legacy to his son. As Naipaul states, “In a way I had always looked upon my life as a continuation of his – a continuation which, I hoped, would also be a fulfillment” (305). His father encouraged him and he was determined that his eldest son should succeed as a writer. On 22 September 1950, in his letter to Vido (Naipaul), his father wrote: “I have no doubt whatever that you will be a great
writer; but do not spoil yourself: [ . . . ] You keep your centre. You are on the way to being an intellectual” (qtd. in Phillips 7).

Naipaul has fulfilled the words of his father’s prophecy. In A House for Mr Biswas, Anand is the fictional counterpart of V.S. From the beginning, Anand shows maturity and an inclination towards writing. The novel is a celebration of the heroic life that set Naipaul free to emerge and develop as a writer and pursue a literary career that his father was unable to. As Naipaul says: “He passed on the writing ambition to me; and I, growing up in another age, have managed to see that ambition through almost to the end” (RW 64).

Naipaul is one of the most significant voices in modern literature. He has examined the post-colonial world in many of his novels. He chronicles the binary tensions of metropolis and margin, colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed in quest of his own meaningful reality. He has created in the process the world of peripheral, amorphous social groups living in a society without heroes. In keeping with its title, The Mimic Men is an overt statement of the post-colonial situation. The novel deals with the subject of West Indian politics. The story is about the theme of colonial mimicry, the charade of purpose and meaning. The structure of the novel is complex. The narrator-protagonist, Ralph Kripal Singh, breaks up chronology to piece together the jagged edges of his past life in an attempt to infuse order into his autobiography.

The novel examines notions of decolonization, freedom, achievement and the fact that individuals are limited by the history of a society. Along with The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira it concerns itself with the political reality of
Trinidad after independence. Naipaul's focus shifts from his original intention to probe the causes of the instability of newly independent nations to his own past. He is led to the awareness that the process of writing the book itself has become his way of life and his achievement. The protagonist Ralph Singh by writing his memories tries to impose order on his life: "So writing, for all its initial distortion, clarifies, and even becomes a process of life" (TMM 251). He reconstructs his identity and gets rid of the crippling sense of dislocation and displacement. He is a man with a disillusioned childhood, frustrated youth, broken marriage and disturbed political career behind him, as he sits writing his memoirs in a room in a suburban London hotel. His passion for order and his interest in history impels him to write his personal history. He seeks coherence in the apparent chaos of his life. Through the writing process, the novel achieves a depth, resonance and an almost geometric lucidity in its portrayal of the disorder of post-colonial society. It records the narrator's exploration of his own personal distress in its many dimensions and its incorporation into a narrative. In the course of his exploration, through writing, the grim realities of the Third World come to the surface. Ralph Singh orders the events of his chequered life by writing his memoir:

It never occurred to me that the writing of this book might have become an end in itself, that the recording of a life might become an extension of that life. It never occurred to me [...] that the contrast between my unchanging room and the slow progression of what was being created there would have given me such satisfaction (TMM 244).
Singh gets solace and consolation through his writing. Writing about his past life leads Singh to rediscover truths about himself and his life. He feels the writing of the book has a benign influence on him. It provides him with a new perception of things. He is enabled to view his varied life from different angles, infusing more meaning to his past life and about himself. Writing becomes a rewarding and enriching experience for him. The novel recounts not the process of development of the narrator, but his rationalization of the life he had lived. The ruminative form of narration gives ample scope to Singh to include a variety of themes – the drawbacks of the colonial educational system, the trauma of the past of the slave, the isolation in a big city, the foolishness of chasing ideal landscapes, racial wounds, the futility of seeking power in politics and far-reaching effects of childhood experiences.

Singh, a disgraced government minister of Indian ancestry from the fictional Caribbean island of Isabella undertakes the task of writing his memoirs. The first part is devoted to the narrator’s years in London, contrasting his new impressions of this city with those that he had formed shortly after the war. He describes his student days; his marriage to an English girl Sandra; his return to Isabella; his success in the world of business and politics; and the dissolution of his marriage. In the second part, the narrator moves further back in time to his childhood days, leading up to his departure for London. The third part deals with the narrator’s brief political career following the break-up of his marriage and then goes back to the present in London, including an abortive love affair with Stella.

The novel begins with the narrator’s early visit to London and his stay in a boarding house in the Kensington High Street area. Liene, the Maltese housekeeper,
lived in the basement with her illegitimate child. The owner Shylock’s death reminded him of his own death. He wished to leave behind relics which would be honoured. The narrator switches into the present and explores the nature of his autobiographical work. His work served as an exposition of the malaise of his times, which was illuminated by personal experience. He wrote with composure about his political career that was a part of his past. He did not wish to return to his political life in Isabella. The colonial events moved fast and the overthrow of political leaders was quick. The people who supplemented him were about to be supplanted. The career of a colonial politician was short. The losers in the political game had one option; it was flight to the greater disorder of London.

The period between his preparation for life and his withdrawal from politics is termed by Singh the “period in parenthesis” (TMM 32). In this active period of his life “marriage was an episode” (TMM 41). Sandra was charming enough to attract him, though not an enchanting beauty. He was drawn to her for several reasons. He was overwhelmed by “a quality of graining in the skin; it was [. . .] a sign of a subtle sensuality. There was firmness and precision in her movements, and always a slight bite to her speech” (TMM 43). She was English, and communication with her was a delight. She had the arrogance of sophistication. Her loneliness was her strength, being rejected by her family and having no community or group. She was firmly resolved “to fight her way up” (TMM 44). The magnitude of her social ambition particularly attracted him as he too had similar ideas. Her rapaciousness, eccentricities and “a consuming self-love” (TMM 45) fascinated him. He felt she could be his guide through life’s uncertainties with her resourcefulness. “To me,
drifting about the big city that had reduced me to futility, she was all that was positive" (TMM 45). He married her at the Willesden Registry Office, in an effort to give a fillip to his sagging career. He surrendered himself totally to her, and to the ensuing events of his life, placidly. In a jubilant mood of celebration and self-assurance, he went to Isabella to set right the jagged pieces of his life through the bond of marriage: "The dark romance of a mixed marriage!" (TMM 50).

Singh's dreams and hopes were totally shattered on his arrival in Isabella with Sandra. His mother disapproved of his marriage to a foreign girl. It was a big blow to her hopes of getting him married according to her wishes. Singh was rejected by the Isabella society for flouting conventions. This left him isolated and shipwrecked. The resultant hostility on all sides drove him to desperation.

The frustrated Singh diverted his energies towards rebuilding his financial resources. He had inherited a 120 acre block of wasteland from his grandfather. He divided the land into one hundred and fifty half-acre plots, built roads, provided all amenities, and offered them for sale. The township was named "Kripalville", after his father, which ironically got "corrupted to Crippleville" (TMM 59). Within a year one hundred plots were sold: "So success led to success; and it seemed that I could just go on. It was unsettling, this rightness, this sureness over what always later turned out to have been a knife's edge" (TMM 60-61). It brought him status and recognition in the rich, elite society of Isabella. His growing prosperity in no way eased the psychological tensions developing between Sandra and himself. She lost her interest in the island. She was no longer amused and entertained by the thrill the island had promised. She confined herself to the house, avoiding the company of
friends she had sought earlier. The developing disparity between them appalled him, and his attitude towards her changed, “The very things I had once admired in her—confidence, ambition, rightness—were what I now pitied her for; I felt we had come together for self-defence” (TMM 69). This relationship, which had held so much promise, now faltered and turned out to be something unreal, artificial and unenduring, which could not stand the test of time. The disrupting environment on the island and the masks that people sported, made it uncongenial for any lasting human relationships to flourish. Even the Roman house under construction in Crippleville could in no way cement their cracking marital life. The house-warming ceremony, which followed its completion, proved an apt symbol for the impending disaster of Singh’s conjugal life. The climax of the ceremony was a ball from the swimming pool, which went flying, breaking plates, glasses and hitting a window. This incident is an indication of the chaotic and destructive leanings of the people of Isabella. Singh, unable to withstand the destruction of the house with its accompanying sense of loss and anguish, fled to the ruins of a famous old slave plantation: “The pain remained, unreleased, the nameless pain from which one feels there can be no way out, and one knows that despair is absolute” (TMM 75). The house turned out to be a place from which both Sandra and Singh needed escape and it paved the way for the final separation. He was merely “waiting for her to leave. The time for quarrels [. . .] was past” (TMM 77).

- Part Two of the novel is a recreation of Singh’s childhood experiences and his adolescent life. As the memories get filtered through the analytic mind of the adult Singh, this part becomes interestingly readable and enlightening. Naipaul gives the readers a glimpse of the maladies and evils, which would loom large over his
post-colonial subjects. The title of the novel assumes significance. The tendency of the children to mimic and their eagerness to disown and escape from their present reality are tellingly portrayed. They live masked and unreal lives by concealing their real names. They live with false identities and their life becomes inane.

Singh’s father was a poor school teacher. His refreshing presence in the novel along with his oddities and freakish nature is commendable for his lack of imitation of the West. Singh’s mother’s family was prosperous, being the owners of the Bella Bella Bottling Works and the local bottlers of the reputed Coca-Cola: “They were among the richest in the island and belonged to that small group known as ‘Isabella millionaires’” (TMM 83). Singh was very proud and never wavered in claiming relationship with his mother’s family. He was aware that his privileged position in Isabella society was a result of his association with Coca-Cola. As a boy, he felt a sense of security and fearlessness when he stayed in his grandfather’s house. When he stayed in his father’s house, he was engulfed with fear and desolation.

Singh’s father hated his in-laws for their condescending attitude. He was a promising man in the Education Department. At the time of his marriage, his wife’s family was not rich. But circumstances underwent tremendous change and they grew prosperous. It was “a slow humiliation for my father to find that he, who had married the shopkeeper’s daughter, was forced over the years into the position of the underpaid schoolteacher with whom the family of the rich industrialist had imprudently formed a marriage alliance” (TMM 89). His mother struck a balance between her family’s disapproval of her husband and her loyalty to her husband who
was at loggerheads with his in-laws' newfangled prosperity. Singh observes that he: “was made aware of the oddity of the arrangement whereby two human beings, who were in no way related, paired off” (TMM 90). He hated Coca-Cola and took a vow never to touch it. He created a furore by breaking ninety-six bottles of Coca-Cola “four full cases, breaking one bottle after another, methodically, as though he had been paid to do it; [. . .] (TMM 104). There was no love lost between Singh’s father and Cecil, his brother-in-law. The missionaries liked Singh’s father and patronized him. A missionary lady recorded his early life in her diary. Singh’s father was the proud owner of an Austin in which his family went on their “first and last Sunday family outing” (TMM 123) after an emotionally charged formal speech.

- Singh’s father became a Gurudeva, a preacher and mentor, to a group of frenzied disciples, including the slaves, the dockworkers and the volunteers. Donning the Hindu mendicant’s robes, he launched a movement, which spread like wild fire: “it was a type of Hinduism that he expounded, a mixture of acceptance and revolt, despair and action, a mixture of the mad and the logical (TMM 128 - 29).

. Gurudeva’s movement enhanced his family’s respect, which later Singh exploited, for building up his political career. The movement soon turned out into a rebellion. His father became a distant figure. He created sensation through Asvamedha:

The horse-sacrifice, the Aryan ritual of victory and overlordship, a statement of power so daring it was risked only by the truly brave; purified by the tender Asoka; revived by those who came after; and
performed, memorably, by the grandson of the general of the last Maurya to celebrate the expulsion of the Greeks from *Aryavarta*, the Aryan land (TMM 142).

It seemed to be a mighty sacrifice performed by a shipwrecked man on a desolate island. The racehorse Tamango, belonging to Deschampsneufs, was killed in an outrageous and obscene manner. This was attributed to Gurudeva and his men. This incident initiated Gurudeva’s withdrawal into oblivion.

Singh’s recollection of his school days is an indictment on Third World society. The children attempted to deny their own world. They imitated what they thought was real: “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” (TMM 146). The children hid their true identities. To compete with Deschampsneufs, who had a long name, Singh gave himself a new name, just to sound extraordinary. Singh’s real name was Ranjit KripalSingh. He broke KripalSingh into two and added Ralph and signed his name as R. R. K. Singh. Thus he became Ralph Singh at school. His attempt at self-baptism shows his struggle to assume a new personality by changing his identity. The children had their own secret dreams and lived in fantastic worlds. They shaped and built their own fantasies as a way out of the sense of futility. As Singh was a Rajput, he dreamt of Rajputs, Aryans, Knights, horsemen and wanderers:
I lived a secret life in a world of endless plains, tall bare mountains, white with snow at their peaks, among nomads on horseback, daily pitching my tent beside cold green mountain torrents that raged over grey rock, waking in the mornings to mist and rain and dangerous weather. I was a Singh. And I would dream that all over the Central Asian plains the horsemen looked for their leader (TMM 98).

All the children belonged to the world of mimicry; Cecil; the aristocratic pretender, Deschampsneufs; the Confucian deity Hok; the blacks, Evans and Browne. The scars of racial wounds are evinced when Hok refused to recognize his mother and ignored her because she was a Negro, whereas he was of mixed blood and did not look like a Negro. Singh was tormented by his negative sense of place in the island. The image of the shipwrecked individual harassingly haunts him and he tries hard to wriggle out of this disorder. The opportunity to leave the island came to Singh when he secured a seat in a London school. With deep longing Singh came to London: “the great city, seeking order, seeking the flowering, the extension of myself that ought to have come in a city of such miraculous light, I had tried to hasten a process which had seemed elusive (TMM 26). The second part concludes with the news received from Singh’s sister about his father’s death.

Part Three deals with Singh’s political life in a hollow society like Isabella after the break up of his marriage with Sandra. When Sandra left Singh, Browne refilled her place. He succeeded in carving out the political future for Singh, and the Roman House became a hotbed of hectic political activity. The island politician is “a born leader of men who finds himself in politics as a matter of chance rather than
choice” (Kamra 75). Singh’s entry into politics proved to be an antidote to a broken marriage. Singh gained political power by putting an end to the old order. He elicited support from all races and classes. People were hungry for sensation. By talking about socialism and the dignity of the common man, his party got mass support. These ideological panaceas helped to soothe public distress temporarily. The kind of security politics offered was only ephemeral and non-existent. After assuming power Singh realized how power and poverty were interlinked in colonial societies. He learnt about the reality of his island’s independence. He felt freedom led to terrible responsibility. He suffered from delusion, thinking that the smell of the sweat of the masses is a more real source of power than the money of foreign investors. This led him to fantasize his role as a leader-cum-liberator of the masses and to seek virtue in the poverty of the people. By this, he was reducing them again to the level of slaves, which they were formerly.

Singh realized his helpless condition when he could not solve problems without the assistance of the centre, which was the source of finance. Politics, which threw open challenges, proved to be a trap for the colonial politician. Third World countries could not function independently without relying on the bigger powers. Singh highlights not only the corrupt island politicians but also the despondency of a sincere politician in the newly independent country. He became the scapegoat in various affairs of the government and was finally disgraced. Singh observes: “I was at the centre of events which I could not control” (TMM 219). So escape and flight became the only possible solution to this drama of futile activity bordering on humiliation. Singh’s self-chosen exile as a recluse in London paves the way for the
flowering of his writing prowess. He resorts to narration as a means of reflecting over his past in order to start a new life afresh. “Ralph Singh has the courage to peel off the various layers of masks to submit himself to his own scrutiny” (Ramadevi 82).

Naipaul has presented Singh as more evolved than Ganesh of *The Mystic Masseur* and Harbans of *The Suffrage of Elvira*. He is endowed with natural ability, high sensibility, unrelenting pursuit of truth about himself and guided by conscious self-reflection. His political life is the furthest extreme of objective life, after which only inward movement and introspection is possible:

> The same pursuit of truth of the self which made him the dandy and which pushed him into politics [...] carries him to the other extreme of complete self-negation. The act of writing is a recovery of balance. Trinidad, always the antagonist, the measure of his failure in life, becomes the measure of his success as an individual and as a writer (Kamra 77).

The characters who form the inhabitants of the island of Isabella are stunted in growth with wounds they are barely aware of. The physical aspect of the island is reflected in the behaviour of the individual characters of the novel. They are consumed by a compulsion to suppress the reality of their situation and transcend. These characters suffer from a radical incompleteness and what is outside them appears as salvation and annihilation. Browne, who becomes the head of the new regime following independence, is filled with self-hatred and shame due to his abject
family. Eden is described as someone whose "deepest wish was for the Negro race to be abolished; his intermediate dream was of a remote land where he, the solitary Negro among an alien pretty people, ruled as a sort of sexual king" (TMM 151). Deschampsneufs, the descendent of French aristocrats who owned slaves on the island, specialized in playing on racial and social antagonisms. Singh longed to escape from the island, which did not appear to be his, to a northern temperate climate associated with his Aryan ancestors and with the concrete world of London. Singh was totally crushed by his father's short-lived promise of distinction followed by obscurity and humiliation. The narrator longed for someone in whom he could lose himself and who could provide the stability he lacked. He needed protection from a world that appeared threatening and corrupting. At the same time he feared intimacy after seeing the distress and humiliation of Browne and Eden.

The characters in this novel lack a sense of inner substance. They look to outsiders who they think have special power to validate them. The theme of mimicry and acting roles runs through the novel. During Singh's student days in London, he considers Lieni, his housekeeper, as a guide who creates for him the character of the rich colonial. Later, he allows Browne to maintain the role of the picturesque Asiatic and involve him in politics. In his relationship with Browne, each provides the other with an image that is flattering. Singh observes:

He needed alien witness to prove his reality. For me a similar proof was offered by his literalness, which was like generosity. For him I had been, ever since Isabella Imperial, a total person. He remembered
phrases, ideas, incidents. They formed a whole. He presented me with a picture of myself which it reassured me to study (TMM 188).

The past has been cut off for these mimic men. They are like water hyacinths, separated from their moorings and seem to be adrift. Singh writes his memoir or auto-critique precisely to face his own situation and overcome the fear of a peripheral existence.

Singh emerges in the image of the writer as performer, who struggles in life as an artist to create something, to discover some meaning in the muddled life he has led. The act of writing his autobiography turns out to be a refreshing discovery of himself. It proves to be a process of recovery, a retrieval of a blighted individual as a free individual with a clear and purged consciousness. This political autobiography transcends the level of a mundane, confessional report to an existential allegory of the modern man.

The Mimic Men recalls many aspects of Shakespeare’s The Tempest. Like Shakespeare’s play, it also powerfully evokes the shipwreck motif, which is crucial to the story. Singh models his own performances on the characters of The Tempest and acts out nearly all the roles – the carnal role of Caliban, the romantic hero’s role in Ferdinand, the political role of Alonso, and most of all, that of the artist-magician Prospero. Like Prospero, Singh delivers an epilogue, declaring illusion at an end, and by so doing, calls attention to the spectacle, that he has not only devised but also performed. Singh observes: “I have cleared the decks, as it were, and prepared myself for fresh action” (TMM 251).
The narrator acquires a new awareness of his surroundings in the process of writing his memories. Mundane prosaic things take on a substantiality and concreteness that they never had before. An old, battered writing-table, the wallpaper and the view from his window assume significance in his eyes. He develops the gift of keen observation. The writing process brings about a sense of harmony between the inside and the outside, between the pace of creation and the pace of life around him.

The narrator's changed relation to his circumstances brings about a transformation of his sense of time. His years in Isabella were dominated by empty, circular time filled with imitation, fantasy and repetition. But in London, he experiences a pleasing sense of time, which is full of introspection and creativity.

A key image that dominates both the beginning and the end of The Mimic Men is of Singh seated at his table in front of a window looking out upon the streets of London. The window serves a twin purpose in the novel: it emphasizes the significance of isolation as a pre-requisite for a writer's performance in the act of writing and it constitutes a symbolic proscenium through which Singh enters into the theatrical space of his past life. The table is transformed into a stage on which he displays his past. Singh the writer exhibits several facets of his personality – Singh the student, Singh the lover, Singh the son, Singh the politician, and Singh the refugee immigrant.

The suburban hotel in London offers a stable environment, an external order and security, which ignite the writing skills of Singh to express his life through
writing. This outward serenity is crucial to reveal his inward restlessness and disorder. It acts as a perfect foil setting off his chaotic past. Through his writing he is enabled to integrate his past. By recreating his life, Singh imposes an order on it and becomes a whole man. At the end of the book he is far from mimicry as it is possible for a man to be. The establishing of a distance between himself and his agonizing past is the first step in constructing an identity. In the hotel, the real world of stability, security and order accosts him, making him realize that the past was mere fantasy.

In the ideal setting of the hotel, the narrator appropriates his past by summoning up the associations related to deeply charged memories and images. He recalls his past events and records and illuminates them in the act of writing. "Ralph Singh tries to order his own disjointed and fragmented experience through the writing of this autobiography. Writing becomes identity and rescues him from sterility" (Chattopoadhyay 219). His narrative does not follow a purely external, chronological sequence. This he feels would have perpetuated his disturbance. Singh begins in "medias res" moving backward and forward in time, circling back on itself and linking significant events separated through time. Through this process he goes beyond the tautological pointing up of conflicts and situations in their isolation. By drawing up parallels, he is able to discern patterns, relationships and associations. He links up isolated moments and apparently unrelated events. This enables Singh to grasp the different facets of his fragmented life. He presents the seeming discontinuities in its totality. The rearrangement of the actual sequence of occurrence, coupled with the narrator's frequent reference to the present in which he
is writing, tends to emphasize the persistence of the past in the present. He successfully interplays the past with the present in search of meaningful patterns. He presents different times, places and situations. He tries to put the parts together to complete the puzzle and rewrite his life. He constantly shuttles between the various periods of his life in an attempt to relive his past, record the events and unburden his emotions to get relief.

- The writing of his story becomes the very means to endure the terror, abandonment and loneliness of his situation. Singh's involvement in politics was the period in which he "was most active and might have given the observer the impression of a man fulfilling his destiny [. . .]" (TMM 32). It becomes intelligible as part of a larger pattern. By pointing out the distressing features of his life, the narrator achieves a vision of the history of the times that generated this crisis:

It was the shock of the first historian's vision, a religious moment if you will, humbling, a vision of a disorder that was beyond any one man to control yet which, I felt, if I could pin down, might bring me calm. It is the vision that is with me now. This man, this room, this city; this story, this language, this form. It is a moment that dies, but a moment my ideal narrative would extend (TMM 81).

- The act of writing becomes an experience bridging the historical gap between his Aryan ancestors and the East Indian – West Indian sensibility. The immigrants are gripped by the anguish of alienation, homelessness and the crisis of identity. These expatriates seek their final resting place in the world of matter,
reason and imagination. Naipaul suggests that writing is a consuming passion that has become a way of life and an achievement for the protagonist. Like Biswas, Singh’s crucial involvement in writing, gives meaning to his life, sharpens his perspective of men and matters making him an evolved individual. Rama Nair observes:

Through the ordering of their experiences as a reporter and as a writer, respectively, both Mr. Biswas and Ralph Singh come closer to life, and writing becomes not just a symbol of identity. It becomes the identity itself. This creative act enables them to come to terms with the reality of their own socio-cultural situation (179).

In an interview in 1971 with Andrian Rowe Evans, Naipaul expressed the view that as a man grew older, his writing became profound. Likewise, Singh’s writing gains maturity by setting his memories in order. He not only learns more about writing, but also about himself. His past falls into proper order and shape as he reviews his life in London. Singh’s retirement is forced, bestowing premature wisdom so that he views life in a stable and detached manner. The writing process turns out to be self-projection through self-distancing. In far away London, the events of Isabella are recorded. The novel turns contemplative as it is written by the protagonist during his middle age. Withdrawal from life allows him to combat disorder through writing: “it was my hope to give partial expression to the restlessness which this great upheaval has brought about” (TMM 32).
Singh's abundant freedom in London enables him to muse upon his childhood experiences dispassionately and analytically with middle age sensibility. This approach succeeds in making the second part interestingly readable. In this novel, Naipaul achieves non-attachment or total detachment, which Matthew Arnold felt was the most essential quality that a writer should possess, especially a writer who is a critic of societies and cultures like Naipaul. The third part of the novel evolves as a document on Third World politics and the chaotic island society that had recently gained independence: “To be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder” (TMM 118). The Mimic Men is the fashioning of an order out of the various adventures and encounters in past life and of achieving success through literary pursuit. Singh does exactly what Naipaul observes about his own writing (in a lecture delivered in 1975) mentioned in East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity:

I begin with myself: this man, this language, this island, this background, this school, this time. I begin from all that and I try to investigate it, I try to understand it. I try to arrive at some degree of self-knowledge, and it is the kind of knowledge that cannot deny any aspect of the truth (qtd. in Feder 6).

In the process of “writing-up of experience” (TMM 26) Singh expresses a non-existent aspect of himself. It is a non-verbal action, where his thinking faculty is put to full play. He discovers himself and attains a personality that had evaded him earlier. During his first visit to London he had come to the great city in search of
order; he had tried to give himself a personality and hasten a process, which had seemed elusive; but during his second visit to London, through the writing of his memoir, he attains selfhood and an identity of his own. Singh's story traces the transition from innocence to experience and his passage from external chaos to personal harmony. Through analysis and interpretation of his own experiences, he assures his certainty in the uncertainty of the future, in the contemporary colonial society. His writing proves to be a release from the negating cycle of events in his life. *The Mimic Men* portrays the social conditions of not only the West Indies but also reflects the entire Third World. The unique feature of the novel is that it adopts a modern literary convention of writing a book within a book.