Chapter - III

A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

An Epic Novel
V.S. Naipaul's literary oeuvre has been received with lot of controversial critical responses. There are critics who praise the writer to the skies and there are others who pull him down to abyssmal depths. V.S. Pritchett goes to the extent of calling him “the greatest living writer in the English language”\(^1\) and Ian Buruma proclaims “he has written literature, of the very highest order.”\(^2\) To the contrary, C.D. Naraashimaiah calls his reputation ‘bizarre’ and confesses in an essay as far back as 1986 that he “was disturbed when someone spoke of the possibility of a Nobel Prize for Naipaul.”\(^3\) Since Naipaul by his irreverent attitude “has profaned the exalted vocation of the writer.”\(^4\) Somewhere in the middle, there are balanced judgements too, as William Walsh writes: “His vision is his own, unenervated by contemporary social clichés or political and continents.”\(^5\) But beyond the controversial façade of V.S. Naipaul, one finds a truly high seriousness in his writings.

Naipaul has taken up this writing profession as a calling that demands a profound contemplation, which for him is the “equivalent religion.”\(^6\) It is not a matter neither to defend the stance of the writer nor to pass any value judgment on the existing criticism, but to throw light on the novelist’s excellent ability to “turn high anxiety into high art”\(^7\) as revealed in his master piece, *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) traces the story of a man’s struggle to make something valuable out of a circumscribed and mediocre existence. It is a struggle symbolized by the hero’s efforts to own his own house, which in a way, is to own his own life. Out of this simple plot, Naipaul creates an epic novel, densely populated, rich in variety and felt life, full of humour, bubbling with vitality, and in the end powerfully tragic.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* has variously been described as a “comic epic” a “tragic epic” and a “tragi-comedy”. But it indeed is a “West Indian epic.”\(^8\) The novel shows how Naipaul has accepted the
challenge, one that he addresses to all West Indians. He seeks here
the same absolution as does Walcott. He rightly observes, "They will
absolve us, perhaps, if we begin again from what we have always
known, nothing." Naipaul probably takes up his own words that
Trinidad was "unimportant, uncreative, cynical" as a challenge and
produces this great novel, and the protagonist Mr. Biswas' task in the
novel happens to be to create something of his own, out of nothing.
And here, Naipaul comes out with the most important work of West
Indian literature which, according to Bruce King, "is a more profound
work of art than the usual fictional celebrations of national
achievement and history." The life of Biswas is the story of an Indian
immigrant's dilemma, it depicts the exile's desire to strike roots and
attain an authentic selfhood. In the process, the novel reveals the
ethnic and social history of a community. It dramatizes the tale of the
shaping of communities by the larger socio-cultural forces, even while
its accent is on a journey through the inner voids and worlds of
Biswas.

Biswas' story is both representative of the history of the
Trinidadian East Indian and a special case. The history of the
Trinidadian Asian Indian could be put together from aspects of his life
and the lives of those to whom he was related by birth and marriage.
Yet no one single character in the novel can be said to be typical of the
Trinidadian Indian. "Naipaul avoids the simplifications, falsifications
and dishonest sentimentality of protest fiction with its typical
characters and illustrative plots supposedly representative of a
community." Lives, situations and people differ. Some have luck,
others do not. Some destroy their changes, others seize the day.

Bruce King observes "The novel shows an impoverished,
disorganized Trinidad and implicitly criticizes imperialism for having
created such a mess in which those of African and Indian descent
have been brought together without the resources to live or make
better lives." Naipaul is one of the many writers from the former
colonies who have criticized colonialism and who see their lands and people as victims of the Empire. He is not a simple-minded nationalist who believes that local cultural assertion and cries of victimization will provide a solution to the problems left by history. Trinidad in A House for Mr. Biswas lacks the resources required for authentic independence. As Biswas discovers when he attempts to find employment or build his house, freedom can be dangerous, humiliating and self-defeating. Biswas' situation is that of the colony, his own attempts at independence are limited by the condition of the society into which he is born, frustrated self-assertion turns into self-destructive rage, the tempest that temporarily disorders Biswas' mind.

Naipaul's early fiction have been comedies born of irony, but A House for Mr. Biswas extends in full measure that sympathy in the rendering of the central character which contributes to the richness and universality of the novel. The novel has been interpreted from several angles. "The theme of cultural clash" is predominant for Maureen Warner-Lewis, and Francis Wyndham sees "as subtle and comprehensive an analysis of the colonial situation as anything in imaginative literature." For Gordon Rohlehr the novel "deicts a classic struggle for personality against a society that denies it." While the novel stands up to all the above readings, it can be most truly understood as an exploration of the roots and antecedents of Naipaul's own sensibility. All Biswas' cultural dilemmas, colonial embarrassments, creative desires, interrogations and rebellions, and above all, literary aspirations are interwoven into the texture of Naipaul's own quality of response.

Naipaul wrote A House for Mr. Biswas, a movingly autobiographical novel at a time of doubts and disillusionments regarding the autobiographical mode. This had in fact given him his initial confidence. As he says in his Autobiography:
"The ways of my fantasy, the process of creation, remained mysterious to me. For everything that was false or didn't work and had to be discarded, I felt that I alone was responsible.... The English or French writer of my age had grown up in a world that was more or less explained. He wrote against a background of knowledge. I couldn't be a writer in the same way, because to be a colonial, as I was, was to be spared knowledge. It was to live in an intellectually restricted world; it was to accept those restrictions. And the restrictions could become attractive."\textsuperscript{18}

Turning full circle from the childhood scabs and sores, the badge of neglect and poverty which mark Biswas out for failure and an uncertain future, to the ultimate heart problem and death by heart attack; V.S. Naipaul's \textit{A House for Mr. Biswas} opens a window to chronicle the history of a society that is intrinsically and endemically sick. The study of disease and medicine, both as symptom and strategy has been an important component of colonial and post colonial critique and enquiry. Almost as if taking a cue from this fact, Naipaul, in a novel which has been widely recognized for its symbolic structure, uses the metaphor of sickness and malady both as a diagnostic and critiquing one. In fact, as a writer who avows to an 'almost fixed depression'\textsuperscript{19} himself, the figure of sickness and neurosis seems to naturally keep recurring in all his work. The sustained and well-developed figure of ailment becomes the means of tracing power struggles within a developing social culture, and for chalking out the history of a society in the midst of change in the context of the alienating forces of colonisation and the dislocating ones of diasporic movement and exile.

Mr.Biswas may be an archetypal "Everyman" but he is a modernized version, in his confrontation with the vicissitudes of life he expresses an acute awareness of the absurd. In each direction he turns he finds obstacles to his happiness, and he can discover no reasons for his predicament. Thus he conforms to Albert Camus' fundamental definition of the "absurd" which is neither a quality of
the world, nor simply an idea born in man, but a result of their being situated together. The absurd man "feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." 20

After the novels of the 1950's and 1960's, this type of literary figure is not new, Biswas partakes of this class and he owes a great deal to the nineteenth century school of social realists, whose leading characters, like Dickens and Hardy exemplify the contemporary society out of which they grow as they attempt to redeem it. Biswas simultaneously embodies the alienated modern man and the sensitive though ineffectual reformer. His desperate bid for improvement is a self-centered one. Rohlehr points out "The purity of motive and truth to instinct and necessity which marked Biswas' struggle against an apparently indestructible system make his rebellion an affirmation of universal values, transform it from being a sordid personal struggle to one undertaken on behalf of the group." 21

The organization of the Tulsi family in A House for Mr. Biswas has been critically singled out for being a 'microcosm of a slave society. Satendra Nandan makes an extended observation of this aspect:

....Hanuman House is more immediately symbolic of the slave world. Mrs. Tulsi needs workers to build her empire. She, therefore, exploits the homeless and deprived fellow Hindus. She has grasped the psychology of the slave system. Like the Caribbean society, Tulsidom is constructed of a vast number of disparate families, gratuitously brought together by the economic need of the high caste minority. To accept Hanuman House is to acquiesce to slavery. Mrs. Tulsi, the cunning colonizer, justified her exploitation with her foxy explanation that she is really doing her subjects good. Seth, in his blucher boots, is the slave master a brutal and brutalaising symbol.
Mr. Biswas' rebellion against such social and personal slavery provides the motivating thrust of the book.\textsuperscript{22}

The concluding lines of the prologue to the novel sum up, in a nutshell, what the novel is actually about:

"How terrible it would have been at this time, to be without it ... to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated."\textsuperscript{23}

The words very clearly suggest that it is a novel about the necessity to establish one's self and one's individuality in a society, which has no rule or pattern. The "House" becomes a symbol of order and identity. It affirms the importance of such values as independence, individuality, intellectual interests, creativity, and a degree of freedom from human complicity.

In a passage which appears towards the end of \textit{A House for Mr. Biswas} it is not hard to see Naipaul the man merging his identity with his narrator. It is quite apt that the central character, Mr. Biswas, whose life long ambition is the ownership of a house must find himself inescapably trapped within his newly bought house. This indicates the failure and defeat implicit in every kind of fulfillment. The "house" in the novel becomes a kind of inverted fictional embodiment of Naipaul's own personal need for change and escape. The novel further draws upon memory and shows how that memory is assimilated and absolved into art:

The mind, while it is sound, is merciful. And rapidly the memories of Hanuman House, The Chase, Green Vale, Shorthills, The Tulsi house in Port of Spain would become jumbled, blurred; events would be telescoped, many forgotten. Occasionally, a nerve of memory would be touched ..., and a fragment of forgotten experience would be dialocked, isolated, puzzling ... So later, and very slowly, in secureer times of different stresses, when the memories had lost
their power to hurt, with pain or joy, they would fall into place and give back the past.24

Such moving prose, full of the knowledge that comes to one out of suffering and the irony that is nowhere more disturbing than in the narrator’s sad and intimate tone, suggests that Naipaul has finally “eased” himself into knowledge. As he writes in his autobiography: “To write was to learn. Beginning a book, I always felt I was in possession of all the facts about myself; at the end I was always surprised the book before always turned out to have been written by a man with incomplete knowledge.”25

In the novel, the protagonist Mr. Biswas, is neither self-deceptive and opportunistic like Ganesh nor the hero of a displaced society. He is its victim dying at the age of forty-six. But by the end of the novel, it appears as if “a whole history has passed before our eyes.”26 Naipaul achieves this impression of the passage of decades of time through references to world wars, coming of motor cars, cinemas and most importantly, the effects of economic changes. He chronicles every historical event with a great attentiveness to minute detail and with the accuracy of a historian. The accuracy with which Naipaul follows the history of the East Indians in Trinidad can be seen by reading Calcutta to Caroni.27

The narrative unfolds the gradual Indian accommodation to what was originally a foreign land. The process involves a great deal of sacrifice, a sacrificing of traditions and self-respect leading to an acculturisation and mimicry. First of all the people have to be dispossessed of what is naturally and originally theirs. As a consequence, there is a gradual decay of the Hindu spirit in the New World which could be evidenced in the marriages of the Tulsi sons to Presbyterian Indians. And when the process of assimilation began, contact with other races like the Chinese and Africans increased. According to Bruce King, “if the novel traces the progress of a transitional generation of East Indians from isolated rural poverty to

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the first stages of assimilation within a westernized urban society, its celebration is strongly tempered by an awareness of the hardness of the struggle and of its lasting effect." In that sense the sufferings of Biswas in a harsh society on the verge of progress assume importance.

Naipaul touches upon the subject of the psychology and traditional practices of the East Indians. The novel deals with the theme of the general history of three generations of East Indians and their struggles to survive and be accommodated in Trinidad. Mr. Biswas' aim or life's goal in this world is to die as an accommodated individual after claiming his share of land on this earth, which if viewed from a modern man's perspective, becomes or appears to be a universal problem, the problem of everyman in the modern world.

The 'Hanuman House' and its prestige remains intact until the death of Pt. Tulsi. Cultural and religious deterioration ensues into the house later on and gradually worsens with every new arrival on the one hand, and fascination with the outside world on the other. Mr. Biswas gets trapped into the racket of this house by marrying the youngest of the Tulsi daughters, Shama. Mr. Biswas is unlike the other in-laws who are concerned with filling their bellies only and hiding their heads under a roof. But he is rather too obsessed with his identity and revolts against the 'Tulsidom' only to be befooled and exposed. Mrs. Tulsi knows the psychology of slaves and knows well how to tackle her dependents, and resembles colonial masters in her fickleness and subtlety. The marriages of the Tulsi daughters are planned to promote her business because Mrs. Tulsi needs labourers to work on the estate. This shows the disintegration of the traditional Indian values because she ought to have provided her daughters arranged marriages. This ceremony so sacred according to Hindu religion has been reduced to business and bargain and it seems to be the root cause of the dissipation of Hinduism under the onslaught of
extremely material western culture. Bruce MacDonald has noted the geographical barriers as the root cause of diluted Hinduism:

“The thinking of his society had already moved towards the West and away from India. Hinduism has not completely broken down, but it is succumbing to the 'seepage' from the surrounding society.”

Walsh has candidly summed up the nature of this family:

“Tulsi family condensed into itself the character of the larger world outside .... Its system was to provide subsistence and cover in return for total devotion and the abdication of self.”

Warner Lewis' observation characterizes the family:

As head of the class in Trinidad, he (Pt.Tulsi) provides, after the style of the princely great houses of India, a sanctuary for succeeding generations of the family. It is perhaps the fault of nature and of circumstances that a cultural anomaly arises out of this, for it is the Tulsi sons and wives who should have populated the house, but Pt. Tulsi and his wife apparently have more daughters than sons and the daughters are either older or less educated than the sons, they got married earlier. “Furthermore, nearly all the Tulsi daughters seem to have married men in need of Tulsi money and prestige, who were glad for a space at Hanuman House.”

The “House” becomes the dominating metaphor in the novel. And Naipaul hardly misses any of the vagaries and innuendoes which cling to the heraldry of housing. Politics gives the House of Representatives and Bishops and theology gives the houses of bread (Bethlehem) and Pauline metaphors of somatic sanctity. Astrology gives the Zodiacal houses, books bring one to publication houses, fornication houses, and literature to a House of Atreus or a House of Fame. Nautical usage tells of light houses or concepts of anchorage. All these are strategies of necessity and accommodation. A House for Mr. Biswas, housed between its prologue and epilogue contains the
subtitles, "Pastoral", The Chase", "Green Vale", "Amazing Scenes", "Among the Readers", and "Learners", "The Void", "The Revolution" and finally "The House". The repetition of the world "own" in the following passage is suggestive of its importance and indispensability in him at this point of life:

"He thought of the house as his own, though for years it had been irretrievably mortgaged. And during these months of illness and despair, he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it: to walk in through his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family to wander freely from room to room and about his yard.... As a boy he had moved from one house of strangers to another.... And now at the end he found himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion on the earth. That he should have been responsible for this seemed to him, in these last months, stupendous."

The whole idea of the lifeless vacuum, placelessness and menace is counterbalanced by the leading metaphor of the house. Manjit Inder Singh observes "The concept of a house been traditionally understood as a place of peace and freedom, a fortress against the machinations, onslaughts and evils of the external world." It also symbolizes order against the ever present chaos outside. Mr. Biswas' quest is both spiritual and aesthetic, to declare his freedom in the face of the crippling sense of loss and destitution, inherited from his family background of slavery and oppression. It is also a slave's symbol of identity, a place which gives him peace and an air of respectability. It suggests the colonial Black experience, it assumes much wider connotations, for Mr. Biswas' quest is closer to Willy Loaman's in Death of a Salesman and Stan Parker's in The Tree of Man or Saul Bellaw's in Seize the Day. In this sense, the metaphor of existence which is probed, transcends to larger strands of experience in both the Black and the White contexts.
The venture into journalism comes for Biswas at a time when his self has taken a lot of beating from all quarters. Hemmed in from all directions, moving from job to job and one kind of habitation to another, he has been reduced to being a passive victim of circumstances. His relationships with others are becoming intolerable, more so with his wife. A stage comes when he is on the verge of disintegrating altogether. Objects lose their neutrality for him and become a source of menace. People and figures frighten him. His personality undergoes disorientation. His lucidity keeps decreasing day by day. A kind of darkness envelops him. His ‘self’ faces total dissolution.

Most of Naipaul’s protagonists come nearer to the sociologist’s view of the self rather than the philosopher’s. ‘Self’ in this sense is an entity that arises and develops in the process of an individual’s social experiences and activities. Port of Spain helps Biswas to evolve as a social self on terms which are not very far from those on which he wants to relate to others. “The terror of disintegration bothers Biswas so much around this time. He is dispelled greatly by the unending succession of the city’s moods, its complexity of classes, places, institutions.” The wet cinema posters, the crowded pavements and the continuous traffic all help much in his recovery as he comes to be part of a sea of humanity that manages to ward off disintegration in the face of menaces and disasters both personal and financial. Port of Spain helps Biswas to bring about a re-centring of the displaced impulse and the restructuring of his self in the context of the racial and urban pressures of Trinidadian society as a whole.

A.C. Derrick concludes that “the recurring images of darkness, decay and death make ...... failure appear throughout as the inevitable outcome of Biswas’ struggle.” No doubt there is darkness, decay and death looming large in the novel, but even though they often terrify him, “they also challenge Biswas to bring order and light to the void.” The darkness of the Tulsi kitchen, the darkness that
engulfs him on the night of the storm "when the lightning went out the room was part of the black void", (292) the darkness of his own mind on the night, "a darkness which seemed to come from within, as though the ..... flesh.....had become diseased and its corruption was rising" (587-88), all represent both his own nothingness and the nothingness that surrounds him. Death comes to Biswas in the end. Further, despite his frailty, "death was forever held in check" (206) by him; as it was by the vegetation with which he is associated.

During his phase as sub-overseer on the Tulsi sugar estate at Green vale, Mohan Biswas refines, lovingly, upon the house he will build. The meticulous and complete detail he enters into in imagination speaks not only of the order he wishes to create, but equally of the shabby and imperfect modes of existence he has been living through. Biswas wants a real house made with real materials where there will be space to move back and forth. The measure of his personality is in his conception that "the house would stand on tall concrete pillars so that he would get two floors instead of one and the way would be left open for future development."38

Biswa believes in a life of possibility, and while the house is a shelter, an independent dwelling, it represents "his personality symbolized, the private individuality which he must both build and maintain against the rest of the world."39 It is an expression more of which Biswas hopes to achieve from that base, than what he has actually achieved. While the house is the one finished article he wants to make in an otherwise fragmented and disturbed life, the house itself, it is clear, is visualized as the ground for the making of the creative life.

The novel explores the consciousness of the people who constitute a destitute culture and "carry about them the mark, in their attitudes and sensibilities and convictions, of the slave, of the slave the unnecessary man."40 Mr. Biswas is an 'unnecessary man'
par excellence, and is pitted against the Tulsi family and its establishment. The Hanuman House symbolizes the conventional Hindu world abounding in rituals, vagaries, superstitions and hypocrisies. The Hanuman House teems with almost innumerable slaves subjected to inhuman bondage. The condition of these old men squatting on sacks on the ground and "pulling at clay cheelums that glowed red and smelled of ganja and burnt sacking" (p.82) is really pathetic. Although it was not cold, "many had scarves over their heads and around their necks" (p.89) which made them look foreign.

The Tulsi establishment is governed by the cunning colonizer Mrs. Tulsi and her terrorizing slave master Seth, both of whom are insensitive to the creative aspects of the Hindu culture as also of the individual urges and aspirations. The hypocrisy and mercenary outlook of the Tulsi's antagonize Mr. Biswas, for to accept the Hanuman House and its rule would be to have the soul of a servant and to acquiesce to slavery. He struggles hard to free himself from the suffocating, disintegrating, tradition-ridden world, though his fight looks like an ordinary man's obscure struggle against overwhelming odds. He revolts against the whole system, though he cannot defy authority openly. Throughout his life he tries to seek and assert his own independent identity. Asked by Tulsi's son-in-law Govind to give up sign painting, Mr. Biswas replies: "Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No, boy my motto is: paddle your own canoe."(107) sign-painting may be a futile-looking act of no importance, but to Mr. Biswas it is a way of preserving his independence and identity. This very urge finds its complete manifestation in his keenness to acquire a house of his own.

Mr. Biswas' persistent desire to understand life and to assert his identity in a chaotic world was thwarted. Persons like him could not be allowed the luxury of stability and identity. It may be noted that he himself is not unaware of his ambivalent position. He tells his son: "I am just somebody. Nobody at all, I am just a man you know". Even
for Mr. Biswas' children the house was to provide an ordered world, which was never granted to their father: "Soon it seemed to the children that they had never lived anywhere but in the tall square house in Sikkim Street. From now on their lives will be ordered, their memories coherent. The mind, while it is sound, is merciful..... Events will be telescoped and forgotten" (381). It was hoped that in this changed environment the children would get an opportunity to discover themselves culturally and spiritually.

Certain universal implications can be detected in Biswas's personal struggle: Gordon Rohlehr expresses his opinion that "Biswas is everyman, wavering between identity and nonentity, and claiming his acquaintance with the rest of them...... If Biswas represents all the things, I feel he does, it is because he is fully presented as a person whose very quirk and idiosyncracy we know, in a world whose every sight, sound and smell is recorded with fidelity and precision".41 There is no doubt in saying that whatever Biswas achieves he does so by defying the fate thrust on him in the guise of Tulsi's. The Tulsi's who are keen on absorbing him and are ready to encourage him to surrender his identity, in a way challenge Biswas to make something of himself so that he can oppose them. In fact, his first real sense of himself arises from the need to oppose the Tulsis.

Though at times he is tempted by the false sense of security offered by the Tulsis, he successfully overcomes this apathy and creates reality out of his nothingness. It is in this act of creating something out of nothing that Biswas comes to grips with the concerns of a West Indian writer. In all, the story of Biswas is an exploration of the complex fate of a displaced person who finally emerges as a symbolic individual who achieves at once identity and self-differentiation and represents the interacting forces of family, self and society in the West Indian situation.42 As William Walsh puts it, "The substance of the novel has to do with the transformation of Mr.
Biswa, a slave to place, history and biography into a freeman, the sign and realization of that emancipation being his house.\textsuperscript{43}

Naipaul illustrates the rebellion of a weak, mediocre man. "Rebellion in Biswas is defined by his state as a cultural, psychological and social orphan."\textsuperscript{44} That is why very often his revolt contains a childlike rage and grief at violated innocence. Just like a child he wants to prove that his suffering is the result of the fault of someone else. It is this childlike attribute or assumption which enables him to justify some of the harsh, inhuman and unpleasant aspects of his revolt. Biswas begins to work in the rumshop of Ajodha, which is run by his brother Bhandat. Bhandat insults Biswas in front of the customers. Biswas, sensing humiliation at Bhandat's vows, decides not to stay there any longer.

"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. He waved his aching arm about the mud walls and the low, sooty thatch."\textsuperscript{45}

Biswa's entry into the Tulsi family is an important stage in the assertion of his selfhood. It is a typical joint family which functions on the same principles as those of the British Empire in the West Indies, or for that matter, any colonial establishment. It provides subsistence and shelter in return for total submission or abdication of self. Maureen Warner Lewis recalls, "No wonder then that Mr. Biswas felt 'trapped' when he fell into the clutches of Tulсидom, for Naipaul depicts Hanuman House as a symbol of traditionalism, rigidity, cultural infallibility (to its inmates), ritual, duty, hierarchy, and communal life."\textsuperscript{46} It is a system which suppresses jealousy, individuality, and inferiority or superiority complexes. But an awareness of hierarchal distinction is an intrinsic part of the establishment with Mrs. Tulsi holding an honorary presidential position in domestic affairs and Seth playing the role of her man of business.
In *A House for Mr. Biswas* freedom is a mixed blessing. Both individual and political freedom require the material, emotional and intellectual resources to avoid continuing dependency and the childish self-destructive outbursts that result when desires cannot be fulfilled. Biswas was always free to leave the Tulisia, to have a home, to establish his family, but he lacked the material resources, while his failures were personal they also resulted from a society unable to provide opportunities for education, employment, savings, investment or rewards.

Biswas' struggle to assert himself in this mediocre world is not without touches of heroism. Indeed he is at times, petty, cowardly, and contemptible, and part of the triumph of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is that Naipaul has been able to present a hero "in all his littleness, and still preserves a sense of the man's inner dignity."47 It is in this sense that he comes very close to representing the fate of an average man with mediocre abilities but a strong will to preserve his identity, however comic or absurd it may be. He thus becomes an everyman describing the modern man's fate in a rootless society. Biswas, at times, appears to be quite inhuman and contemptible, in such instances as his kicking of Shama in the stomach while she is pregnant and in his preference for loneliness.

As Kenneth Ramchand points out, "one may suspect that the world of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is modeled upon a society from which the author has himself wished to escape. But if Mr. Biswas finds his world a deterrent to ambition, as well as engulfing and repulsive, the faith in life with which his author endows him is greater than the fictional character's impulse to escape."48 Naipaul makes this story of a man from the cradle to the grave a memorable epic by giving it a tragic fullness through an authentic and realistic presentation. Apart from this, the chief strength of the novel ensues from its success in persuading us that a connection has been made between Biswas' past and the three-dimensional reality of his rural Hindu boyhood.
The novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* most delicately highlights the metaphor of colonial experience, the way man is pressurized by complex forces that make it impossible for his escape from the past which is *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Erik Erikson in his well-known field of psycho-history has maintained that society and history are potent forces in individual development. In his book *Young Man Luther*, he stated that psycho-analysis could lead to the understanding of the way in which the historical moment and a human life might mesh to affect an entire society. In a sense, Naipaul’s subtle portrayal of the impact of the historical moment accounts for Mr. Biswas’s mental and spiritual colonization and the will to launch a rebellion. The organising theme of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the idea of slavery. Mr. Biswas belongs to a generation of men, who unlike their ancestors, have escaped the actual slavery, but carry the burden in the psychic sense, in their attitudes and sensibilities. The slave is historically also the unnecessary man.

Apart from being a humanistic novel and the chronicle of the immigrant Indian life in Trinidad, it is also the metaphorical microcosm of colonial set-up in which the human effort is to reject its dominance. Mr. Biswas’s personal battle with the stronghold of the Tulsi household, a symbol of the colonial, Manichaean world, is a quest for existential freedom and the struggle for personality. The clash between individuality and creation, and the stifling, cramped externality of the universe is loaded with colonial overtones. The theme is explored with a multiplicity of connotations, images and ideas. Whereas Ganesah or the inhabitants of *Miguel Street* live in their self-willed inertia and creative castration, Mr. Biswas is the unaccommodated man representing the outcast’s symbolic quest for a place in the hostile universe. Kenneth Ramchand has observed in this context:

“Comic detachment is the key-note of a narrative that refers to its hero, even as a baby, as ‘Mr. Biswas, yet, as the child of indentured

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labourers born unnecessary and unaccommodated, Biswas was the first of his family to break with the feudal capitalist hierarchy and forge an individual identity. The house pathetically deprived and imitative as an image of fulfillment from the point of view, is at the same time the culmination from slavery and from the tyranny of an extended family."

Mr. Biswas' achievement does not lie as much in his resilience and the quality to suffer dehumanization, as to make sense out of the metaphysical chaos of the world. As Landeg White, a well-known critic has pointed out, the author is successful in enabling the hero "to balance his personal inadequacies against the contradictions of existence".50

A House for Mr. Biswas is equally a novel about the social history of Trinidad and socio-cultural change which was taking place around the Second World War. As a number of critics like William Walsh, Kenneth Ramchand, Robert D.Hamner and Gordon Rohlher have noticed, the rebellion of Mr. Biswas can be understood in cultural, psychological and economic terms. His symbolic position as a historical and cultural orphan is evident. He is an uprooted man, his assertions of the self, day-dreaming, evasion of responsibility are the results of the plurality of his nowhereness. Though not actual Dickensian orphan child, he is able to transfer and absorb his anxiety and personal turmoil in the act of reading. The novel is also about the need in the Trinidad society for the Indians to come to a meaningful compromise with the Creole world. Likewise, the Hanuman House, with its colonial fortress like walls and the air of impregnation suggests the psychology of slavery. This is accompanied by the emotional blackmail in which Mrs. Tulsi, the arch Colonizer, indulges. On the face of it, her exploitation, like the traditional White colonizer's attitude, is one of generosity whereby she protects her subjects. Seth, the second-in-command, like the Overseer In the Castle of My Skin is the allegorical representation of the ruthless colonial power.
In the old plantation system in the Caribbean, a large, unskilled force was brought in. The uneducated workers were given a semblance of egalitarianism, a concession to the underprivileged lot. But whenever anyone lifted his head above the rest, it was considered an onslaught on the accepted system of economic exploitation. Mr. Biswas' rebellion can be seen as a paradigm of the perennial West Indian struggle for a more balanced and viable social set-up.

From one angle, Mr. Biswas' essential condition as the anxious, uprooted man has to be understood in terms of the cultural, social and psychological situation, he is marked as a second generation Hindu in Trinidad of 1930s. Ironically, he marries into the Tulsi family, which gives him protection and a job which he could hardly get elsewhere. Yet he rebels against the Tulsis, forgetting it all. The Tulsis run a sort of mimic world of colonialism and the important thing is that the Hanuman House too is run on the traditional Hindu familial lines and protocols. On the surface, the Tulsis have made an admirable reconstruction of the clan in strange and hostile conditions. It has its own schemes, leaders, duties, law and order, religious rituals and provides jobs and help to men of their community on merits. In one sense, Mr. Biswas' rebellion becomes meaningless since he has no alternative in the colonial Trinidad outside the Indian protective system. Time and again he returns to the Tulsis, only to reject their help again. But seen closely, the Hanuman House is not a coherent or benevolent reconstruction of the traditional Hindu joint family.

It is more a slave society where Mrs. Tulsi and Seth need workers to boost their sagging influence and economy. They exploit the homelessness and poverty of men like Biswas and other fellow Hindus and only play a mock-clan system to keep outsiders under illusion. Virtually like the West Indies, the Hanuman House is an amalgam of disparate elements brought under one roof by economic needs. The acceptance of Hanuman House and its dubious claims is
an acquiescence of one's slavery. The irony lies in the Indians' carrying on the older system within themselves while they resent White colonialism. This is also the power of Naipaul's satire, Mr. Biswas is repeatedly accused of not being grateful to the Tulsis despite the fact, as Mrs. Tulsi says, "coming to us with no more clothes you could hang up on a nail". Further, the Tulsis refer to Biswas as a "Creole" – the worst insult for an Indian in the Trinidad of those days.

Mr. Biswas is given the impression that he is one of the Tulsis, yet he is insulted and told that he entered the clan of his own free will. This is again an ingredient of the colonial system in which the fundamental idea was that the slaves must be made to understand the benevolence and legitimacy of the colonizers. As Albert Memmi has observed:

"In order for the colonizer to be the complete master, it is not enough for him to be so in actual fact, but he must believe in its legitimacy. In order for that legitimacy to be complete it is not enough for the colonized to be a slave, he must also accept this role."{51}

Almost every aspect of the Tulsi household system bears the mark of oppression. For instance, individualism is crushed at the slightest knowledge. Even children are severely beaten up on that score. There is a ritual beating in the book, both of the wives and children, surprisingly to have a greater affection in life. However, as it turns out, this is another aspect of the colonial system's defence mechanism to neutralize any alteration in one's given status or place within it. The society is in this sense "pre-individualistic", as Ralph Ellison termed it in Shaw and Act in relation to the adjustability problems of the American Southern Negroes. Mr. Biswas' greatest sin and crime is to have tried to act as an individual. His malice, rebellion or the rhetoric of protest eventually becomes paralysed and he retreats into his insulated weariness and shame like the physically lacerated slave.
Finally the Tulsi autocracy crumbles in the face of larger social complexities which paves the way for a general rebellion. His struggle against the apparently indestructible system of brutality and humiliation affirms the universal nature of values he fights for by remaining within the system. This problem of losing identity and cultural moorings has been faced by all racial groups in Trinidad, while later, education assumed greater importance for personal success in a highly materialistic and competitive world.

The conclusions of Biswas' life, like the rest of it, is unspectacular. His view of the world as it is reflected in the way he lived is faulty and short sighted. But Rohlehr shows, his struggle is not without its touches of heroism. "Indeed Biswas is at times petty, cowardly, and contemptible, and part of the book's triumph is that Naipaul has been able to present a hero in all his littleness, and still preserve a sense of the man's inner dignity."

Anthony Boxhill compares Wells' History of Mr. Polly to Naipaul's novel closely resembles A House for Mr. Biswas, in both its subject and its tone. Naipaul has acknowledged his admiration for and delight in the 'universality' of Well's comedy. A History of Mr. Polly portrays with affectionate mockery the life of a statistically insignificant man. Wells writes with a feeling of Mr.Polly's romanticism and for his disaffection from his dingy circumstances. He hungers for "bright and delightful experiences, for the gracious aspect of things, for beauty." The novel's comedy operates in part at Mr.Polly's expense, his dreams are not without absurdity. There are numerous parallels between the works.

Naipaul has used all his powers to create images of reality of colonial experience out of the featureless men and women. This is his major contribution to our understanding of the predicament of the modern man. A House for Mr.Biswas marks a crucial phase in
Naipaul's literary career. It deals with a type of individual who becomes a figure with a universality of appeal transcending the merely locative impulse behind his experiences. Naipaul also plants in Biswas an "unquenchable hope" that makes him enduring: "He had begun to wait, not only for love, but for the world to yield its sweetness and romance. He deferred all his pleasure in life until that day" (80) Naipaul shows in this novel the way in which an individual not a talented or worldly-wise one, but a mediocre individual can master the risks and dangers of cultural dereliction, a dereliction ensuing from the inconsistencies in space, time, and self, factors of geography, history and personality.

Many reviewers have identified Biswas' life with the life of Naipaul's father, and Naipaul's own childhood days. Others have considered Ralph Singh to be Naipaul's alter ego. But Naipaul, in this novel, vividly recreates his own experiences in the fictional world of art. If art is imitative of reality, then this novel need not be merely considered as onslaughts on colonialism. It can also offer a positive approach. With an awareness of, and an open acknowledgement of the existent evils, art can reveal the path to order as it did in the case of Mr. Biswas. Fiction gives one aspect of reality, while philosophy provides another. But both are necessary for a unified sensibility. By creating an alternative language of discourse, even if it is diffuse and ambivalent, Mr. Biswas provides an 'ethically sensitive' response to the existing political and social theories. "The culture of colonialism suppresses dissent, but the inner resistance of the protagonist is worked out within the psychological limits set by the former."57

Landeg White draws attention to the father-son relationship in real life that provides the background for the novel stressing the importance of the fictional frame work provided by Anand's point of view: "What Naipaul has done ... has been to abstract from his father's life not a sequence of events but a quality of experience which he has shaped in such a way as to project his own vision of its significance."58
The narrative voice of Anand serves to turn the merely historical factor into something endowed with mythical value. The biography of Biswas is transformed into an implicit autobiography of Anand for whom his father's life becomes a fable of self-recognition. Anand, just before departing from the story, says:

"So later, and very slowly, in secure times of different stresses, when the memories had lost the power to hurt with pain or joy, they would fall into place and give back the past."\(^{50}\)

The lines serve to comment on the meaning and significance of his father's attempts to carve out a place for himself in the modern rootless world and create for his children opportunities for a more creative and meaningful future. So the point of view of Anand comes in handy for Naipaul in distilling history into a usable past so that the personal dimension is transcended and a work of art of universal significance is created.

Naipaul has described his relationship with his father as,

"The big relationship in my life, and what is odd about it is that I always felt protective towards my father. I never felt that he was the man protecting me, I always felt quite the other way around: that it was up to me to look after him."\(^{60}\)

"My father was extremely important in my childhood: nearly everything that I am I am because of this great link I felt with him, and a lot of my work – especially my early work – I meant to be dedicated to him."\(^{61}\)

"The writing that has mattered most to me is that of my father, which has never been published. It taught me to look at things that had never been written about before and seemed dull in life, yet when transformed to paper became very surprising. A great deal of my vision of Trinidad has come straight from my father."\(^{63}\)

Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes that the novel is all about "the unaccommodated man's repeated attempts to find a stable location in a ramshackle and random world ..."\(^{63}\). Mr. Biswas' quest
for a permanent location is evident right from the start. He craves for a large, strong, and well-built house, which would withstand any natural calamity and provide safety and security to the inmates even in times of distress. He wants "a real house, made with real materials." Having this kind of lofty picture of a house in the mind, Mr. Biswas takes ample care to avoid any of his school mates see where he lives.

Commenting on the writing of A House for Mr. Biswas, Naipaul said "It was like a career ... I have been feeling unemployed ever since." The comment shows not only the importance and proximity to Naipaul's interests of this novel, but also the deep engagement of the author with his work which have led critics like Kenneth Ramchand to describe it as "a major twentieth century novel on the increasingly rare scale of MiddleMarch, Ann Karenina or The Rainbow." The novel has won praise for its universality without raising a storm of controversy about its colonial or anti-colonial stand, as Naipaul's other works have done. It deserves close scrutiny for, it chronicles near-autobiographically, the origins and development of Naipaul's Hindu sensibility and through a rendering of the 'adventures' of his father as Biswas - demonstrates the inadequacy of the halfway-house which gains. Both chronologically and thematically, the novel occupies that middle ground in the treatment of exile, the works prior to it dealing with the causes for such exile in the protagonist's society, and the works following it pursuing and relentlessly probing the effects, in wider and wider ripples until it encompasses almost every nationality in the world.

The best summing up of Naipaul's extraordinary achievement in his handling of the theme of selfhood in A House for Mr. Biswas comes from William Walsh, a perceptive critic of Naipaul's work:

"The members of the community in A House for Mr. Biswas..... Carry about them in their attitude and posture, in their management of life and
feeling the indelible mark of the slave, who is supremely the unnecessary man. All are impelled by the desire to demonstrate, to themselves even more than to others, their human necessity. In the earlier novels they did this by bruising themselves absurdly and ineffectively against an indifferent universe. Mr. Biswas constructs the proof of his necessity in both a comic and a most moving way. Saturated as he is with the ethos of the given place, maltreated by its peculiar deficiencies and cruelties, he is nevertheless realized with such complete conviction, so living a reality, that he becomes a model of man just as the history and situation which formed him seem to be a metaphor of the process which constitutes any man.\textsuperscript{68}

Mr. Biswas search for identity is not natural and instinctive but is inspired by forces of ritual, myth and custom. His struggle to attain an identity is not that of a man constitutionally recalcitrant, and rebellious. Detestable yet dignified, weak but independent, Mohun Biswas is an ordinary man with extraordinary interests and visions. Naipaul has made a virtue of Biswas' rootlessness by making it a positive and constructive concept, which finds its objective correlative in the image of the house which ironically becomes in this novel, a symbol of a cage, a trap. Like Rudyard Kipling's Kim, Mohun Biswas has lost his own country and has not acquired any other and hence his search for identity.
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