Chapter IV: The Early Phase: Mellowed Humour:

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‘‘Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No boy.
My motto is: paddle your own canoe’’

*(A House for Mr Biswas 107).*

‘‘My father had a prodigious sense of irony, a way of turning all disaster into comedy...’’ *(Naipaul 1981).*

Mr Biswas, in *A House for Mr Biswas*, is an exile in an alien society. But disregarding his societal position as a marginal man, he yearns to be something great, something more than a henpecked husband and a mere sign-writer; actually, he tries to assert the pride of a free man. William Walsh puts it thus: “The substance of the novel has to do with the transformation of Mr Biswas, a slave to place, history and biography, into a free man, the sign and realization of that emancipation being his house” *(Walsh 1973: 31-32).* Naipaul here presents a little man’s attempts to secure his own identity on an alien soil, his awkward journey from the margin to the central social position comically. At the same time the book is deeply ironical; it can be said that the book is an ironic comedy by Naipaul. Naipaul himself says that “a vision of the abyss...lies below the comedy of this book” *(Naipaul 1983: 22).* The focus of this chapter will be on Naipaul’s use of comic elements to present the story of Mr Biswas, or in other
words, in which sense this fictional work can be called an ironic comedy, will be examined here.

A House for Mr Biswas is predominantly Indian in its ambience. Almost all the characters in the novel – Bipti, Raghu, Mr Biswas, Dhari, Sitaram, Jairam, Tara, Padma, Chinta, Shama, Pankaj Rai, Shivlochan, Sushila, Sumati, Savi, Moti, Seebaram, Pratap, Prasad, Dehuti, Ajodha, Mungroo, Tulsi, Bissoonydaye, Sadhu, Lakhan, Govind, Hari, Anand and so on, are Indians. Indianness marks their dress as well as jewellery -- in life and even in death. Even the dead body lying inside a coffin is "dressed in his finest dhoti, jacket and turban" (32-33). When Tara invites Mr Biswas, on the occasion of religious festivals, Mr Biswas, wears the Hindu Brahmin’s "dhoti" (49). When Mr Biswas sees Pankaj Rai, the Arian leader, he appears "elegant in a long, black, close-fitting Indian coat" (116). While speaking of Hari, the author says that Hari, a pundit, by training and inclination, "never looked so happy as when he changed from estate clothes into a dhoti and sat...reading from some huge, ungainly Hindi book" (114). W.C. Tuttle, another of Tulsi’s son-in-laws, who regards himself as one of the last defenders of Brahmin cultures in Trinidad, appears in one of his photographs as naked "except for dhoti, sacred thread and caste-marks, head shorn except for the top knot" (460); in another photograph he is in "Indian court dress" (460) and in yet another photograph he is seen in "full pundit’s regalia, turban, dhoti, white jacket, beads..." (461). The jewellery Tara, uncle Ajodha’s wife, wears and which the author describes minutely -- arms enclosed with silver bangles from wrist to elbow, earnings, “nakphul”, solid gold yoke around neck,
thick silver bracelets on ankles – are the distinguishing marks of a prosperous, East Indian rural woman. Bhandat, whom Mr Biswas visits as the ‘Sentinel’ reporter, says that he uses “Lux Toilet shop” while the family of Mr Biswas uses “Palmolive” (450). The author in another context notices that “A large red advertisement for Bata shoes” (530) is hung below the statue of Hanuman by the Sindhis, who take over the Tulsi shop. All these details show the characters’ efforts to retain their allegiance to their past, that is, to retain their Indianness. Indianness marks the atmosphere in which Mr Biswas is born. He is named ‘Mohun’, “a Nice Hindu name”, meaning “the beloved”, the other name of Lord Krishna (43). The post-natal rituals regarding the almanac, horoscope, prophecy etc., reflect the continuation of old customs of Hinduism even in a foreign land. Mr Biswas is born at midnight, “the inauspicious hour” (16) and his grandmother sets out at once to fetch cactus which is supposed to keep out evil spirits. He is born in the wrong way and is six fingered. Consequently, the midwife says, “whatever you do, this boy will eat up his own mother and father” (16). The pundit predicts that he will be a lecher, a spendthrift and possibly a liar as well. He further adds that “He will have an unlucky sneeze” (17) but much harm will be averted if he is kept away from trees, and water in its “natural form” (17). His father is forbidden to see him for twenty one days. All these fuss about the future of the baby has been presented comically. Comic situations also arise when these characters try to adhere to the advices of the mid-wife. However, the way the characters keep clinging to their past, speaks of their pathetic attempts to create a mimic India over there.
The characters are still Indians in their habits. The narrator notices that Mr Biswas "had his bath in the yard, cut a hibiscus twig, crushed one end and cleaned his teeth with it, split the twig and scraped his tongue with halves..."(53). Thus Mr Biswas starts his pre-'puja' preparations at Jairam's place. These characters also prefer Indian food. When Hari is invited at The Chase to bless his shop, all the members of the Tulsi family gather themselves on that occasion. They prepare bin after bin of rice, bucket after bucket of lentil and vegetables, vats of tea and coffee, volumes of "chapattis" (156). In mannerism and etiquette also, these characters are typically Indian. When Bipti, his mother, comes at Shorthills to spend a fortnight with them, Mr Biswas at first becomes "extravagantly affectionate" but before long he learns to control his emotions following his wife's calmness; because "the relationship between them had been granted without their asking, and had only to be accepted" (426). To his surprise and great pleasure he finds that Shama "gave not a hint of sullenness she used with Bipti's sister Tara...she treated Bipti with all the respect of a Hindu daughter in-law. She had touched Bipti's feet with her fingers when Bipti came, and she never appeared before Bipti with her head uncovered"(426). In both the ways, in her spontaneous and heart-felt respect for Bipti, her mother-in-law, and in the very ways she expresses it, that is, emotionally as well as in manners, Shama still remains an Indian, as her husband observes with satisfaction, a "Hindu daughter-in-law"(426).

Moreover, when it comes to the observance of Hindu rituals, the novel offers profuse examples. At Mr Biswas' birth, the pundit predicts that he will cause much harm to
the family but to mitigate much of the evil, the pundit advises Bipti “you must fill this brass plate with coconut oil – which, by the way, you must make yourself from coconuts you have collected with your own hands – and in the reflection on this oil the father must see his son’s face” (17). The absurd extravagance is comic and pathetic at the same time as these people frantically try to retain the half-remembered norms and rituals and in the process unwittingly produces a parody of the original. Naipaul uses comic elements, particularly his sense of humour to deal with the pain of what is lost. Like birth rituals, Hindu funeral rites are also strictly maintained. Following Raghu’s death, the author describes, “Bipti was bathed. Her hair, still wet, was neatly parted and the parting filled with red henna. Then the henna was scooped out and the parting filled with charcoal dust. She was now a widow forever” (32). At the death of Sharma, one of the Tulsi son-in-laws, the author describes, the “village had assembled to see the Hindu rites. Hari, in white jacket and beads, whined over the grave and sprinkled water over it with a mango leaf...Sharma’s widow shrieked, fainted, revive and tries to fling herself into the grave, and while watching this demonstration of grief with interest, the villagers whisper about ‘suttee’” (414). The widow here is mimicking the original ritual and Naipaul uses exaggeration to present the mimicry comically. It appears that Hindu concepts and ideas are not forgotten by the villagers who have been living in the new country, probably for generations now. The characters, like orthodox Hindus, are not ready to step into a new house, if a pundit has not yet blessed the site. When Shama insists, Mr Biswas invites Hari, to bless the
site at Green Vale, where he has already started the construction of his house. Here, the author gives an elaborate description of the house-blessing ceremony. Hari, in “dhoti” now, with a brass jar, some mango leaves and other equipments, reaches the site where a hole has been dug for the purpose. Hari whines out the prayers. “...whining, he sprinkled water into the hole with a mango leaf and dropped a penny and some other things wrapped in another mango leaf” (256). When Mr. Maclean, the chief constructor, who watches the whole ceremony reverentially, his hat off, finds that the ceremony is over and nothing seems to follow, he asks Mr Biswas, “No sharing out of any thing – food and thing – as other Indians does do?” (257). However, he believes Mr Biswas when the latter says that it is normally done when the house gets finished and a pillar is put into the consecrated hole. The way Biswas befools Mr. Maclean is amusing. But actually Biswas has to lie because he cannot afford to arrange those things. One remembers the words of Tara who in relation to her jewellery significantly says that it costs much to be old-fashioned. Beginning from Shekhar and Owad, the two Tulsi sons, up to Anand and Vidiadhar, some rituals are strictly maintained at the Tulsi family, on the eve of examinations. “On the Sunday before examination week he (Shekhar) was bathed by Mrs. Tulsi in water consecrated by Hari; the soles of his feet were soaked in lavender water; he was made to drink a glass of Guinness stout; and he left Hanuman House, a figure of awe, laden with crucifix, sacred thread and beads, a mysterious sachet, a number of curious armlets, consecrated coins, and a lime in each trouser pocket” (125). That Shekhar is made to wear a
crucifix also, is interesting to note. It reveals the fact that the process of transculturation has been already on the way, and the orthodox purism of the older days is receding. Later in the novel, we find Chinta arranging a "puja" preceding the examination of his son. On the morning of his examination, "Vidiadhar bathed in consecrated water, put on a dhoti and faced the Pundit across a sacrificial fire. He listened to the Pundit's prayers, burned some ghee and chipped coconut and brown sugar, and the readers and learners rang bells and struck gongs" (471). It is told that Anand also cannot escape such rituals. Shama "sprinkled his shirt with lavender water" (471) and does such other little things for him. Then there is the Brahminical initiation ceremony which attracts Anand greatly. We are informed that all of his male cousins have undergone the initiation ceremony and that they "had had their heads shaved, they were invested with the sacred thread, told the secret verses, given little bundles and sent off to Benares to study" (383). Anand of course knows that the Benares-going part is but a piece of play-acting and to him the attraction of the ceremony lies in the shaving of the head. Unlike Ganesh (The Mystic Masseur) who had taken it literally and had set off for some 'Benares' in right earnest, the boys of Anand's generation already know that the request is only playacting. It speaks of the kind of changes that differentiate the subsequent generations of a diasporic community from its early generations. The loss of 'India' occurs gradually and not at one stroke. Anand asks Mr Biswas to write for him an "original" and "specifically Hindu prayer" to offer up to goddess Lakshmi. Anand does this evening worship of Lakshmi with a clear objective in mind, to get his father's
approval so that he can undergo initiation ceremony. But Anand has no real faith in Hinduism. For him the thrill of the ceremony lies in the fact that it will enable him to be the only boy with a shaved head, in a predominantly Christian School. And the way Anand subtly begins a strong campaign for initiation and continues it until he achieves his goal, is comically described by the narrator. The narrator observes that Anand begins his campaign subtly as he is aware of Mr Biswas’ strong prejudices against religious rituals. As a boy Mr Biswas has found that the deference showed to him on religious occasions at Tara’s house and at his rounds with Pundit Jairam, stayed only for a short span of time. And “as soon as the ceremony was over and he had taken his gift of money and cloth and left, he became once more a labourer’s child”(49). Mr Biswas had never questioned the deference shown to him on such occasions but at the same time he had never taken it seriously; he had thought of it as one of the rules of a game that was only occasionally played.

Although to Mr Biswas, a religious ceremony is only a game and the deference showed to him on that occasion is only a rule of that game, the family in which he gets married seems to be deeply religious. We are informed that the Tulsis “did ‘puja’ everyday and celebrated every Hindu festival”(244). The two sons of Mrs. Tulsi often do the “puja” in the prayer room, and following it, the burning camphor, which has been used to give incense to the images in the prayer room, is offered to every member of the family, who in their turn are to touch the camphor flame with fingertips and carry the fingertips to their foreheads. Though Mr Biswas opposes the idol worship of the Tulsis,
at the Hanuman House, he himself at his boyhood was intended by Tara to become a Pundit. After spending almost six years at school in Pagotes, in order to be initiated into priesthood, he is sent as an apprentice to Pundit Jairam. But this endeavour ends in “comic disarray” (Feder 174). His clandestine act of consuming a pair of bananas leads Jairam to make him eat the whole bunch which further causes stomach upset. Soon he is dismissed for defiling his much cherished oleander tree. Before his expulsion from Jairam’s place, while accompanying Jairam on his rounds, he used to do the mechanical part of his offices as offering the burning camphor to the devotees, collecting coins, etc. Mr Biswas did ‘puja’ at Jairam’s place mechanically, that is, without genuine faith and understanding which he had already lost to an extent. At Hunuman House, he refuses to take the heat of the sacred camphor fire offered to him after daily ‘puja’. He says to Owad, Mrs. Tulsis’ younger son, “you could take that away. You know I don’t hold with this idol worship” (130). The life of Mr Biswas is a fictionalized account of the life of Naipaul’s father about whom Naipaul’s biographer Patrick French says that he “had reacted to the complexities of his own background by embracing Indianness while rejecting orthodox Hinduism....Pa believed in Hinduism as a philosophical system and thought that old rituals should be swept away” (French 55). Mr Biswas rejects idol worship or the orthodoxy of religious rituals in Hinduism. But this should not mean that he rejects Hinduism wholly. We see him returning again and again to Hindu epic and Hindu mythology albeit motivated by a secret utilitarian
calculation. He goes back to them for a suitable frame of comparison which he needed during a quarrel or when he was humiliated or dishonoured. For instance, when the two labourers have been destroying his rose trees at Port of Spain house, Mr Biswas identifies them with Hindu mythological forces of evil, “rakshas” (387). Then he compares the doctor, who certifies Bipti’s death rudely, to an angry hero of a Hindu epic (483). Rāmāyaṇa, the great Hindu epic, is also referred to a number of times by several characters. It is told that Pundit Jairam is working on a Hindi commentary on the Rāmāyaṇa. Then Chinta, Govind’s wife, takes up reading the Rāmāyaṇa to be the first woman in the family to have read the epic from beginning to end. Indeed, Govind and Chinta deliver a series of pious songs from the Rāmāyaṇa in order to combat W.C. Tuttle’s gramophones. At Jairam’s place Biswas is to learn couplets from the Rāmāyaṇa and sacred Sanskrit verses as well. The novel also contains numerous other references to India, Indian films, Hindi songs and Hinduism. For instance, Tara’s room is “bright with pictures of Hindu gods” (58). At Hanuman House, “The balustrade which hedged the flat roof was crowned with a concrete statue of the benevolent monkey-god Hanuman” (80-81). Mr Biswas finds that the drawing room of Hanuman House is “made oppressive by the many statues of Hindu gods” (103) which Pundit Tulsi had brought back from his Indian visits. In the novel there are quite a few references to India and Hinduism which reveals the characters’ efforts to create another India outside India. When Mr Biswas speaks in favour of “conversion (of traditional Hindus) by the sword”, Shivlochan, disagrees
with him because it means rejection of the doctrine of non-violence, the doctrine, held so dear by Indians, their religious as well as political leaders. Peculiarly, Sushila, the widowed Tulsi daughter thinks that the beating she has received from her short-lived husband has been a necessary part of her training. She would even attribute "the decay of Hindu society in Trinidad to the rise of the timorous, weak, non-beating class of husband" (148). Thus, Indianness and Hinduism remain two pivotal factors in the lives of Trinidadian Indians, in one way or another. Preparing zestfully for his new job at the 'Community Welfare Department', Mr Biswas starts reading books about "village construction in India" (497) which he understands easily, in contrast to his borrowed books on Sociology, covering Trinidadian rural society (their charts or their language). Here Mr Biswas seems to belong more to India, than to Trinidad, his birth place. He finds himself as knowing 'Indian' villagers too well (498). When Mr Biswas visits Bhandat, as a reporter of Trinidad sentinel he feels relieved at not finding him shrunken to a "melodramatic Indian decrepitude"(449). On a number of occasions Shama sings sad Hindi Songs (424,177), causing displeasure to Mr Biswas, who however, does not have "the Hindu delight in tragedy and the details of death" (178). In Trinidad, we hear of the success of "Indian shirt makers" (478), "Indian bookshop" (460), "India club" (572), of magazines, nearly all of which are run by Indians. Thus, while considering all the details of the life and living of these Trinidadian Indians — their food, dress, habits, religious observance, and such other aspects -- they appear if not to belong, then to be longing for, in real-life as in
imagination, to that India which their ancestors had left behind them, permanently.

Mr Biswas spends his whole life sandwiched between his previous and succeeding generations. On one hand the younger generation is looking for an escape, yearning for the larger world outside Trinidad, where scopes are greater and ambitions are supposed to be successfully pursued. On the other hand the older generation is still dreaming of a return to India. In the arcade of Hanuman House every evening the old men gather and Mr Biswas feels: "It was the time of day for which they lived. They could not speak English and were not interested in the land where they lived; it was a place where they had come for a short time and stayed longer than they expected. They continually talked of going back to India" (194). Naipaul brings out the ambivalence that marks the relationship of an exile with his motherland. Though these old men continually speak of returning to India, when the opportunity comes, most of them refuse to go there being "afraid of the unknown, afraid to leave the familiar temporariness" (194). An exile always yearns to reach his homeland but the distance (temporal and spatial) that exists between settlement and 'home', — between an exile and his motherland, often makes the motherland an unwelcoming country to the exile. Mr Biswas belongs to that generation of Trinidadian Indians to whom India is no longer a country of their own as it had been to their ancestors, and with the little bit of education received, Mr Biswas cannot venture for a better future abroad. Therefore, Mr Biswas, a displaced person in Trinidad, is fated to be frustrated in pursuit of his ambition. For him to attain
fulfilment becomes more difficult as in a foreign land he fails to get adequate sustenance — spiritual, religious and cultural — from his immediate surrounding.

At Hanuman House, Seth, Mrs. Tulsi’s brother-in-law and the second-in-command, tells Mr Biswas that he “was getting the job only because he was an Indian” (81). Among the Trinidadian Hindus, the Tulsi family enjoys some reputation as a pious, conservative, landowning family. Mrs. Tulsi continually goes back to talking about Pundit Tulsi, the founder of the family. She always emphasizes his Indianness, piety and strict adherence to Hinduism but actually her real intention behind all these has been impressing Mr Biswas, the Hindu bachelor. Successfully she traps him in marrying one of her daughters. But Mr Biswas does not share the lady’s nostalgia in relation to the lost ancestral homeland, India. And as soon as he finds himself trapped, mainly because of his caste, he rebels. His protest is against all things traditional, against old rituals and religious taboos.

At Hanuman House Mr Biswas tries to save his selfhood by assuming a mask, by playing the role of a comic rebel. Patrick French notices that “Much of his time is spent getting things wrong; even when he tries to whistle, ‘all he did was to expel air almost soundlessly through the lecherous gap in his top teeth’” (French 198). The comments of Mr Biswas whereby he mocks the Tulsis’ idol worship — he says to Shama that Pundit Tulsi must have bought them (the idols of Hindu gods and goddesses) wholesale from some godshop — are expressions of his comic rebellion. Mr Biswas starts the game of name calling at the Hanuman House. Mrs. Tulsi is called by him as “she
fox”, “Roman cat”, “old hen” and “cow”; the two sons of Mrs. Tulsi are named respectively as “elder god” and “younger god”; they are also mentioned as two monkeys and Hanuman House is described as the “monkey house” and also as “a blasted zoo” (120). The scenes of his rivalry with Govind and W.C. Tuttle (433-435) or the episodes of Mrs. Tulsi’s fainting are instances of hilarious comedy. The scenes where Mr Biswas quarrels with Govind are particularly funny. For instance, during one such quarrel Govind beats Mr Biswas severely but when the beating is over Mr Biswas’ main concern is about his appearance: “He hoped nothing had happened to his pants” (136). As a mark of his protest against the tyranny of the Tulsis, he joins the Aryans, “Protestant Hindu missionaries who had come from India and were preaching that caste was unimportant, the Hinduism should accept converts, that idols should be abolished, that women should be educated, preaching against all the doctrines the orthodox Tulsis held dear” (115). Thus, even in his rebellion, he clings to another fragment of India.

Although his frustration and anger at not getting any dowry at his marriage primarily sets him in protest against the Tulsis, ultimately his protests are directed against the Tulsis’ oppression. For unlike Hari and Govind, the other Tulsi son-in-laws, he wants to be a free man. For example, when Govind, acting as Seth’s messenger, informs Mr Biswas that the Tulsis are looking for good drivers on the estate, Mr Biswas’ instant reaction is “Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No boy. My motto is: paddle your own canoe” (107). His rebellion against the Tulsis is essentially his attempt to assert his own
personality. Manjit Indar Singh observes: "Mr. Biswas' personal battle with the stronghold of the Tulsi household, a symbol of the colonial, manichean world, is a quest for existential freedom and struggle for personality" (Singh 1998: 126). Even Shama, his wife, initially belongs to the Tulsi family so much so that she does not consider Mr Biswas as an individual person. And it increases his need to have a separate identity of his own.

However, Mr Biswas' protest against the Tulsis takes yet another form. Landeg White observes: "For the shrinking Indian community, Hindi is not only a private language, but the language of privacy, of family loyalties, of friendship, of rebuke and apology, of love between man and wife or parent and child. English, is the language of the picaroon world outside, a language of mockery and abrasion" (White 92). Inside Hanuman House Mr Biswas starts speaking only in English. While Mr Biswas discusses his marriage with Tara, uncle Ajodha's wife, he avoids using Hindi as "Hindi was too intimate and tender" (101). "Hindi was a secret language" (360). In the first few days following his marriage with Shama, Mr Biswas uses English while talking to her, for in those days there has been almost no friendship in between them. At Hanuman House, both, Hindi and English are used; Hindi for intense emotional interaction and English during quarrels or in dealing with the outside world. But "Mr Biswas nearly always spoke English at Hanuman House, even when the other person spoke Hindi; it had become one of his principles" (119). But his rebellion against the 'Tulsidom' has been presented comically by the narrator. Mr Biswas had previously rejected the Tulsis' adherence to Indianness and orthodox Hinduism and in this
context his deliberate choice of the language of "mockery and abrasion" can be considered as another aspect of that rejection.

But in spite of that Mr Biswas' position remains awkward. Quite disturbingly he finds himself somewhere in-between the two worlds — the world inherited and the new surrounding reality. Biswas inhabits an 'in-between' space as he is forever suspended in between two inclinations — adherence to past and adaptation of everything that is new. It is evident in his attempt to portray himself in two opposite manners in his story titled "Escape". He thinks of a protagonist with a Hindi name, "short and unattractive and poor, and surrounded by ugliness"; or a central character with Western name, "faceless, but tall and broad-shouldered; he was a reporter and moved in a world derived from the novels Mr. Biswas has read and the films he had seen"(344). That Biswas is never able to finish the story is because he never gets beyond this dichotomy. Much earlier in his life, at The Chase, he regrets his inclination towards maintaining the Hindu taboo that prevents him from stocking lard at his shop. He scorns the Tulsis for marrying off their favourite daughter in a registry office, that is, without dowry. And at the same time he abuses them for sending their sons to the Catholic Colleges. Indeed, his atheism at Hanuman House at times seems to be a pose; an angry reaction of a frustrated man who views himself as being trapped within the 'fortress' (80), whereby all his freedom is lost. For, it is revealed in the novel that, throughout his life, he retains a strange clinging to Hinduism. For example, at Green Vale, the night when storm and rain have been practically doing the job of
destroying his unfinished house, Mr Biswas tells Anand, a frightened boy, "say Rama Rama Sita Rama, and nothing will happen to you" (283). That Hinduism and Indianness form the innermost part of his self and have underscored his character, attitudes and existence throughout his life, is revealed in Mr Biswas’ reaction after Bipti’s death. The narrator observes:

He longed to feel grief. He was surprised only by jealously.... He was oppressed by a sense of loss, not of present loss, but of something missed in the past. He would have liked to be alone, to commune with this feeling. But time was short, and always there was the sight of Shama and the children, alien growths, alien affections, which fed on him and called him away from that part of him which yet remained purely himself, that part which had for long been submerged and was now to disappear (480). His reaction at his mother’s death leads him to recognize that something important has disappeared. He realizes that he has gradually lost something which lies beyond this present experience and has been once a part of him. What he loses is a fragment of his identity which belonged to the past.

Mr Biswas remains a Hindu throughout his life but it is clear from the novel that his faith in Hinduism and its old traditions, is shaken. At Green Vale when Shama insists that Hari should come and bless it before the construction of the house gets started, Mr Biswas says, “If Hari come and bless it, it wouldn’t surprise me if nobody at all even get a chance to live in it” (257). This happens not only in
the world of Mr Biswas but also, significantly, the same is true for many other Trinidadian Indians as well. With the passage of time, these characters become increasingly less Indians and more Westernized Trinidadians. Lal, the teacher at the Canadian Mission School that Mr Biswas attends as a boy, not only changes his religion, but he is also not rigid about inter-caste and inter-racial marriages. Thus Dehuti, Mr Biswas’ sister, marries Ramchand who is of a lower caste. Shekhar, Mrs Tulsi’s son, marries Dorothy who is a Christian. Raghu’s dead body is not cremated but interred instead, and we hear that Mr Biswas’ cremation is one of the last permitted by the authorities. Displacement makes all the characters open to foreign influences and this results into a kind of hybridization of culture. It is caused to a great extent by cross-cultural interactions which mark the life of an exile in a foreign society, which is, in the present case, a multi-racial one. Consequently the characters experience fragmentation of self. Naipaul of course presents the hybridization of these characters comically. The grotesque mimicry of the cultural constructs of both East and West (culturally these characters now belong nowhere and therefore they are given to compulsive mimicry) is rendered comically by Naipaul. With a comedian’s vision he sees what is ridiculous and funny. Mrs. Tulsi sends her two sons to a Roman Catholic College (117). Mr Biswas notices the hybridization of Mrs. Tulsi and mocks her for that. According to him she is a “Roman Catholic Hindu” (138). Her elder son wears a crucifix which is regarded in the house as “an exotic and desirable charm”(125). Moti speaks of some Hindu shopkeepers at The Chase, who are “selling salt beef with their own
hands’’(170). We see that the Tulsis celebrate ‘‘Christmas in their store and with equal irreligiosity, in their home’’ (191). That over the time, the Trinidadian Indians become increasingly indifferent about religious observance becomes clear from what the narrator says here: ‘‘For every ‘puja’ Mrs. Tulsi tried a different Pundit, since no Pundit could please her as well as Hari. And, no Pundit pleasing her, her faith yielded. She sent Sushila to burn candles in the Roman Catholic church; she put a crucifix in her room; and she had Pundit Tulsi’s grave cleaned for ‘All Saint’s Day’ ’’(521–522). At Ports of Spain house, Mr Biswas notices a Pundit, ‘‘in dhoti, vest, sacred thread, caste-marks and wrist-watch’’, reading ‘‘Soviet weekly’’ (540). During the ‘picture-war’(460) between Mr Biswas and W. C. Tuttle the narrator notices that Tuttle hangs several pictures of his own and his family members but in between ‘‘there were pictures of the English countryside in spring, a view of the Matterhorn, a photograph of Mahatma Gandhi’’(461). The narrator’s humorous observation -- ‘‘It was W. C. Tuttle’s way of blending East and West’’ brings out the crux of this exilic life, -- their incongruous yet sad ambivalence. Thus Naipaul comically depicts how these characters appear to be ridiculous in their attempts to follow the patterns of both the cultures — the Indian culture and the Western culture. With the penetration of English, the private language of these diasporic Indians, that is Hindi, starts to fade away. Language becomes a barrier that limits the communication between the early generations and the subsequent generations of this diasporic community as the children can only understand Hindi but they can no longer speak it (426). The sudden flow of
American dollars in Trinidadian society, unleashes ambition in such a way that all of a sudden the boys at school begin to take their English compositions seriously. They prefer such sophisticated terms as "Daddy" and "Mummy" to address their parents and not "Bap and Mai" which as they think, only debase one (440). A gap has already been there between formal education acquired from schools and the local history, local landscape and local traditions. Mr Biswas later perceives that the History taught in the school is "a discipline as unreal as the geography" (46). It is relevant to note Maureen Lewis' observation here. She says: "One of the main reasons for the disintegrating influence of formal education on tradition is that the topics treated in the system are European" (Lewis 98). Mr Biswas lives in a tropical island but at the Canadian Mission School he learns things which are absolutely irrelevant so far as his daily living is concerned. In his next novel, The Mimic Men, one of Naipaul's major themes is the disintegrating influence of formal education in a former colony, on human psyche. Here he just raises the question of irrelevance. Mr Biswas takes pride in being a self-made man but his pride is deflated when he in spite of his attempts cannot identify himself with Samuel Smiles' heroes who as he has thought earlier were equally self-made men like him. But he realizes that unlike him these heroes live in such countries where ambitions can be pursued. Thus Naipaul observes here, with an unfailing mellowed humour, the life and living of Trinidadian Indians in detail and captures the different facets of their exilic experience — the attempt to cling to one's roots, the fading away of old cultural heritage, the attempt to
acculturate to the new reality, the hybridization of culture etc.

At times he seems to be straining to keep up the comic tenor of narration by inserting amusing details. For instance, Hari is described as a “preoccupied eater” who believes in “chewing every mouthful forty times” (115). At The Chase, the villagers call Mungroo, “Moush” because his appearance is made ferocious by a large handlebar moustache. The puppy is named Tarzan by Mr Biswas though it turns out only to be a tension to the poultry (263). About the photograph of Mr Biswas that appears in the ‘Sentinel’ the narrator observes that it “was half a column wide and there was no room for his ears; he was frowning, in an unsuccessful attempt to look menacing” (328). During quarrels W. C. Tuttle is at times found exchanging angry words with no one, “contenting himself with silent contempt, a quivering of his long haired nostrils” (459). When the Tuttles shift to a new house of their own “the leave-taking was as tearful as if Mrs. Tuttle had just been married” (518). Furthermore, many of Biswas’ endeavours end comically in the book, for instance his apprenticeship at Pundit Jairam’s place can be referred to. At The Chase he attempts to draw a portrait of Shama but she abruptly gets up before he could finish the portrait as it is said: “He made her sit on a fat sack of flour — the symbolism pleased him: ‘suit your family to a T,’ he said and spent so much time on her clothes and the sack of flour that before he could begin on her face Shama abandoned him and refused to sit any more” (183). Mr Biswas’s angry retaliation against the “new regime” that takes over the paper Sentinel ends comically. The narrator notices that his
attempts of self-assertion ends in composing various letters, albeit mentally: "He had in fact mentally composed many sonorous letters of resignation, varying from the abusive to the dignified to the humorous and even to the charitable (these ended with his best wishes for the continued success of the Sentinel)" (375). But the sadness of his position drips through the comedy; instead of resigning, Mr Biswas has to spend his days in constant fear of being sacked. There is even another instance of Mr Biswas' comic responses to the trap he feels his life has fallen into. In response to the letter from his former editor Mr. Burnett he tries to write a letter. The letter of Mr Burnett is actually a "joke" (384). But the way Mr Biswas is emotionally moved and composes a very serious letter is incongruous and funny. But once again the 'comic' is used to hide the pain and sufferings of his life. As later, seeing how much in his writing he has revealed of himself, his anger and pain, he tears it up, realizing that anyhow he has to adjust to the present circumstances. Mr Biswas' repeated attempts to free himself from the anxiety of living, ends comically. He can never finish his story. When Mr Biswas starts telling his children the stories of his childhood days, he establishes himself as an easy victim of fate. He often says to the children "What fortune might have been theirs, if only his father had not died, if only he had stuck to the land like his brothers ...! If only so many things had not happened!" (396). The way Mr Biswas describes his surrender to fate "is comic not philosophic" (Morris 25).

However, Mr Biswas' struggle against displacement and the disintegrating influences of that, lie at the heart of this book. Mr Biswas' efforts to have a house of his own,
may be seen as his attempt to establish his own identity in a foreign land. His attempt is practically to change his status—a dependent on the Tulsis. As Gordon Rohlehr rightly puts it: “Independence is the ideal which Biswas seeks, and which he equates with identity” (Rohlehr 88). As a school boy, Mr Biswas takes enough care to avoid any of his school mates to see where he lives, “in one room of a mud hut in the back trace” (48). Receiving a good deal of beating, a humiliated Mr Biswas, angrily says to his mother, “I am going to get a job on my own. And I am going to get my own house too” (67). A visit to Dehuti and Ramchand deepens his depression as he is to return to live at the small hut at Tara’s backyard while Ramchand who has offended Tara by breaking caste, lives in the neat house “which indicated lowness in no way” (73). Comparing this house with the hut in the backyard, caste appears to Mr. Biswas as an absurdity. However, Mr Biswas continues to live in that hut until his marriage with Shama makes him stay at Hanuman House. His marriage increases for him the need of acquiring a secure job and his own house. Coming back from The Chase at the Hanuman House, when Mr Biswas receives the money of “insuranburn”, the author says that he is “determined to put his money aside, and add to it, until he had enough to build his house” (210). At Green Vale as soon as he sees the barracks that gives one room to each family, he decides to build his own house, “by whatever means”(206). And the narrator notices that “He had thought deeply about his house and knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted in the first place a real house, made with real materials” (210). Thus when Mr Biswas buys a doll’s house for Savi, as her Christmas gift, it
becomes symbolic; symbol of his wish to have a home of his own for his own family. During Mr Biswas’ stay at Green Vale, Shama usually lives at Hanuman House, with her children. On one occasion Mr Biswas wants to bring Anand back with him at Green Vale but fails. A frustrated Mr Biswas returns at Green Vale and “That week he decided he couldn’t wait any longer. Unless he started his house now he never would. His children would stay at Hanuman House, he would remain in the barrack room, and nothing would arrest his descent into the void” (237). Thus to build a house, becomes his means to arrest his fall into a menacing void in the disordered world outside. Impractically and quite comically he attempts twice to build a house of his own. But his attempts are repeatedly frustrated -- at Green Vale his unfinished house is nearly blown away by storm and at Shorthills it is burnt. At last he acquires his own house and this acquisition of his own house almost symbolises his assertion over fate which he accomplishes by his faith in life that is wanting in Naipaul’s later protagonists. Kenneth Ramchand observes: “...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” (Ramchand 204).

The house, an obsession for the protagonist, also signifies his freedom from the oppression of the Tulsis; his rival W.C. Tuttle envies him for his acquisition of Sikkim Street house, glowing in the night. The image of a glowing house at dusk, is what Naipaul uses again and again in the novel. At The Chase, the image returns to him. He remembers one evening, when he has been conducting one
of Ajodha’s buses: “The sun fell; and in the short dusk they passed a lonely hut set in a clearing far back from the road.... And in the gloom, a boy was leaning against the hut ...a boy who didn’t knew where the road, and that bus, went”(190). Anand, standing under the pillars at the Hanuman House, unwilling to leave Mr Biswas on that evening when he visits him suddenly, appears to him “staring like that other boy Mr Biswas had seen outside a hut at dusk”(236). With his final achievement, “all that was implied by darkness – the loss of identity with the loss of the past, the featureless present, the menacing void of the future -- finds its reassuring answer in the vision of the brightly lit house”(White 108).

Thus, as Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, the novel is about “the unaccommodated man’s repeated attempts to find a stable location in a ramshackle and random world”(Mukherjee 22) and it becomes synonymous to his identity. At Green Vale, just before the nervous breakdown, caused by the destruction of his house by rain and storm, Mr Biswas, well aware of his position as a man sinking in the void, tells Anand, “I am just nobody. Nobody at all. I am just a man you know”(279). Mr Biswas is painfully aware all the time, that he is a man who has not yet been able to establish his own identity. At Hanuman House, a complete surrender of his self is demanded by Mrs. Tulsi. In his struggle against that tyranny, he recognizes that establishing his identity means also to be able to recover his family from the grasp of the Tulsis at Hanuman House. When he finds the job of the reporter in Port of Spain, his first aim is to rescue his family from the clutch of Mrs. Tulsi. Once at the Hanuman House, needed and claimed by
no one, he has been reflecting on the unreality of his life and has wished to make a mark on the wall as a proof of his existence. Mr Biswas aspires to attain necessity and accommodation. Dying at the age of forty-six, at his Sikkim Street House, amidst the things he has acquired through his life-long struggle, and among his own family members who have grown to depend on him and respect him also since he has acquired the house, he feels: "How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one’s portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated" (13–14). Mr Biswas rebels against ‘Tulsidom’ and it is a measure of the author’s optimism at this stage that ultimately he gets success unlike the other protagonists of Naipaul’s later novels. The optimistic attitude of Naipaul is also expressed in his use of various comic elements as well. The novel is marked by Naipaul’s extensive use of humour. For instance, the narrator’s description of Raghu’s problems because of unlucky sneeze of Mr Biswas in his childhood days is amusing. The consequence of his sneeze is disturbing enough as his family is nearly threatened with destitution as he catches cold easily in the rainy season and his sneeze prevents Raghu to go out for work. But the extreme embarrassment of his family members at his sneeze is comic. Another comic episode in the novel, is Shama’s interaction with Miss Logie, the head of the Welfare Department. While conversing with her, Shama starts expressing her opinions
on diverse matters -- the new constitution, federation, immigration, India, the future of Hinduism, the education of women and so on. Mr Biswas listened to the flow with surprise and acute anxiety, finding Shama more well-informed than he has thought before and the narrator observes that he suffers whenever she makes a grammatical mistake. Mr Biswas' extreme anxiety regarding this interaction and his embarrassment at her mistakes, are what turn the episode into a comic one. Another episode which is comically presented, is the examination of the exhibition candidates. Here follows the narrator's description: "The exhibition candidates prepared for years for the sacrificial day, had all come dressed for the sacrifice....The schoolyard was full of Daddies, the heroes of so many English compositions; they seemed to have dressed with as much care as their sons. The boys looked at the Daddies; and the Daddies, wrist-watchless, eyed each other, breeders of rivals" (472). The very tone is comical. The reality is that "In a colonial society where the opportunities for advancement were so restricted, island scholarships...were fought over fiercely" (French 29). Naipaul uses humour to portray the real situation comically. The novel is also full of comic ironies. For instance, Ajodha who leaves Tara childless, goes on reading *That Body of Yours*, continuously, for years. It is ironical but funny also. The narrator says that on the occasion of Owad's departure, each sister of his sets herself in competition with the other in show of having greater emotion for the brother. Owad returns from abroad as a spoiled scholar. The narrator observes that he is an "'all rounder'" (544) and has his views nearly about everything. The narrator's mockery of him,
produces comic effect. On his arrival, every sister tries her best to appease him. For example, Owad comes to dislike all Indians from India for several reasons of his own and the narrator notices that "in one afternoon the family reverence for India has been shattered" (539). All of these are ironical but are comically presented in the novel. That the narrator calls the new-born baby Mr Biswas is another instance of Naipaul’s use of comic irony. Mr Biswas starts the game of name-calling at Hanuman House. When Mrs. Tulsi jokingly calls his daughter Savi "little paddler" (186) it is comical and at the same time ironical as her father has once declared his preference for his own independence, to paddle his own canoe but has yet got no success. In the book there is a fine orchestration of comedy, irony and pathos. At times sadness of life is presented comically by Naipaul. For instance, eventually Mr Biswas goes to a specialist doctor's clinic at Vincent Street. First he is embarrassed when the receptionist comes to hear what he supposes he has "commented mentally" about her — "fish-face". Then what is funny is his abrupt declaration "I am not a sick man at all" and with that his sudden departure from the clinic. But the sadness lies here that Mr Biswas starts feeling that he is not "correctly ill" (314) only when he realizes that treatment is expensive there. Then on another occasion Mr Biswas gladly promises to get his son one bicycle if he wins the College Exhibition. But only after a minute his mind is changed and he opens the fly-leaf of Collins Clear-Type Shakespeare; abruptly he comes to remember something and "changed the full stop of his declaration into a comma and added, war conditions permitting" (469). Mr Biswas' abrupt mode of behaviour is
comic but the pathos lies in his situation; in spite of his wish to fulfil his promise he cannot forget his poor economic status even for a moment.

Though for several times Mr Biswas tries to write the story, comically he never writes beyond the first sentence. And the story he tries to write is named ‘‘Escape’’. Yet in real life he is not an escapist. He fights against all kinds of odds and attains fulfilment. The significance of the house is stupendous as it means to him fulfilment of his aspiration, his final attainment of necessity and accommodation. In the words of Robert Morris, the house he acquires is ‘‘the grand symbol of his freedom, personal independence, pride and dignity…redeeming all his past trials, perhaps the very past itself’’ (in Mason 35). There is certainly a heroic quality in his final attainment but that is not wholly free from irony which ultimately modifies the attainment to a paradox. Emotionally Mr Biswas gets immense relief and satisfaction in the acquisition as the narrator observes: ‘‘During these months of illness and despair he was struck again and again but 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…’’ (8). But in contrast to his freedom which he is able to achieve ultimately, stands his total inefficiency to pay the debt: ‘‘But the debt remained. Four thousand dollars. Like a buffer at the end of a track, frustrating energy and ambition’’(586). This contrastive picture makes one to conclude that ‘‘what is notable is that Naipaul refuses to grant any sense of achievement to Mr Biswas, while the
novel attaches only a pathetic and small importance to his struggle against the odds” (Singh 1998: 177). Irony converts almost each situation in the novel, into a contradictory or paradoxical one. For instance, Tara is rich but childless. Mr Biswas is named Mohun which means ‘beloved’. But ironically, right from childhood he suffers only neglect and indignity and it is only for a few years before his death, that is, only after acquiring his house that he gets respect and love from his family members. Mr Biswas just after his marriage starts protesting against Tulsidom. But for a long time his protest acquires no meaning as he remains a dependent on the Tulsis. Though he becomes the father of four children he seems to have no right to name his children. The names of all of his children are chosen by others. Later he tries to escape from the anxieties of living in his stories. But he can never write beyond the first sentence. Mr Biswas does not conceal his emotions after his mother’s death; he even writes a deeply emotional poem about her love and care for her son. But he cannot ignore the truth that actually he has neglected his mother much when she lives. Mr Biswas wishes when his death would be reported to ‘Sentinel’ the headline would be ‘ROVING REPORTER PASSES ON’. His choice of the headline reveals his inner wish to get due honour from his work place. But ironically the headline is changed and in place of that his death is reported coldly under the headline ‘JOURNALIST DIES SUDDENLY’. And the narrator adds wryly ‘No other paper carried the news. An announcement came over twice on rediffusion sets all over the island. But that was paid for’ (589). Mr Biswas is cheated into buying that variously flawed house. But the
readers are convinced that it would be dreadful, not to be cheated, to die among the Tulis. Mr Biswas’ rebellion against oppression, may be viewed futile as his attainment of freedom leads him to this difficult situation -- he is to spend the remaining years of his life in terrible anxiety as there always remains the huge debt -- but it is also positive and praiseworthy as he is a doer and throws himself consciously into a larger world. Gordon Rohlehr holds: Mr Biswas is presented “in all his littleness” but there is still preserved “a sense of the man’s inner dignity” (Hamner 190).

Yet, Mr Biswas’ final achievement is marked by irony. The house he builds is a big achievement of the little man. But what worries him deeply before his death is that the house is mortgaged to uncle Ajodha at whose yards he first took the vow to have a house of his own. The house badly needs repairing but at the end, though the house is empty without him, it does not fall down. Mr Biswas’ final achievement like that of Ganesh’s in The Mystic Masseur is marked by irony but here the irony is tinged with sympathy. Naipaul never forgets that Mr Biswas is also struggling against the odds of displacement. The irony that marks this novel is, in the words of Landeg White, a kind of “protective irony, combining sympathy and judgement, balancing personal inadequacies against the contradictions of life itself” (White 98). In The Mystic Masseur, Naipaul employs irony and mockery in such a way that both the virtuous and vicious aspects of Ganesh’s character are brought out. But here the quality of irony gets changed. The irony is of “protective” sort so that Mr Biswas finally emerges as a tragi-comic character. Irony is at times used to
produce a kind of sad comicality. For instance, when Mr Biswas collapses in the *Sentinel* office, the narrator says: "It was not the stomach which was at fault, the stomach he had so often said he would like to cut out of himself and have a good look at, to see exactly what was playing the fool. It was the heart, about which he had never complained" (587). Mr Biswas dies a man, almost broken-hearted. Towards the end of the novel we hear that though laughter breaks out in the family, Mr Biswas can take no part in it. But still for him there are some consolations; he has his own house and at least Anand and Savi are getting higher education. However, the final section of the book is darkly ironic but at the same time Mr Biswas’ quest for autonomy against the backdrop of post-colonial Trinidad is sympathetically presented in the book. The debt is there and Mr Biswas even considers the idea of selling his car; the older children on whom he might have dependent are both abroad on scholarships. Mr Biswas spends the remaining years of his life only waiting for Savi and Anand, studying at abroad. The narrator notices that his complexion gradually grows darker and the darkness "seemed to come from within" (588) that is, originating from his anxiety particularly about the debt and about Anand from whom in place of encouraging letters he receives only strange, impersonal letters that deepens his sadness further. Mr Biswas dies almost broken hearted, realizing that there is nothing to wait for.

Another remarkable feature of this novel is that here the protagonist, Mr Biswas, himself plays the role of a buffoon. Caricature is his chief weapon in his rebellion against the Tulsis. Living an uncertain life, again and again,
Mr Biswas, puts himself back "into the role of the licensed buffoon" (204). At Green Vale "being the buffoon with Seth" he mounts one of Seth's horses but is thrown away after a few yards. He takes resort to buffoonery and says: "I didn't want to go where he was going" (208). At Hanuman House, Mr Biswas, to console grieving Anand starts playing the role of a buffoon. "He told about his own misadventure, at Pundit Jairam's, caricaturing himself and ridiculing Anand's shame" (236). The narrator notices that, on Sunday all the men of Tulsi family, including Anand, go for a bath at the harbour extension at Docksite but, "Aware of his unimpressive physique, Mr Biswas began to clown" and even "he tried to extend his clowning to Anand". He asks Anand to 'duck' and when Anand abruptly refuses to do so, that "abrupt denial of his father's authority had become part of the clowning" (353). Again Mr Biswas' method of multiplying, "ought oughts are ought. Two fives are ten" never ceases to amuse. It works as he thinks even in a very frustrating or unhappy situation (551). The members of Tulsi family can never forget that Mr Biswas has been a clown. For example there is Shekhar; whenever he meets him, he tries to provoke an act of clowning. Mr Biswas finds that new relations also adopt this attitude, and it disappoints him since he has adopted the role largely to protest against the oppression of the Tulsi's, and also partly to cover up his own helplessness and uncertainty. Gordon Rohlehr observes: "Throughout the book Biswas rebels through the use of good, bad and sick humour....But the Tulsis come to regard his rebellion into a joke, and accept him as a licensed buffoon, thereby neutralizing the effect of his wit" (Hamner 90). The Tulsis' attitude to Mr Biswas not
only results into "neutralizing the effect of his wit" but thereby his rebellion is also belittled. He often plays the buffoon as a cover for his helplessness. He makes laughter a means of defence, an escape from the anxiety of living. Gordon Rohlehr puts it thus: he turns "anxiety into absurdity by using humour as a weapon and an escape" (Hamner 93). Mr Biswas' clowning and buffoonery remain the sources of much comedy in the novel. But the irony is that he uses humour only to cover up the sadness of his existence. It is "Laughing on the outside, crying on the inside" (575). Thus the irony that permeates the book, turns Mr Biswas in one of the immortal tragi-comic heroes in English literature.

Naipaul's use of ironies makes one see the sad aspects of exilic life. The tragic dimension of the book that can be suitably termed as an ironic comedy, has been denied by no critic but still it is not as dark in mood and tone as Naipaul's next novel The Mimic Men or the subsequent novels; this has been possible because of Naipaul's extensive use of comic elements, particularly humour and comic ironies. And here there is still one assumption or illusion that is left untouched, unexamined and free from irony. The characters in the novel can still safely assume that there are chances beyond the sea. Although the immediate surrounding is marked by despair and desolation, one is yet to explore the opportunities in the West, and thus there is still something to hope for. Certainly Mr Biswas is hugely relieved before his death seeing Anand studying abroad.
Note

1. According to Hinduism the woman who dies at the pyre of her dead husband is termed a ‘suttee’.