V. S. Naipaul's Br. Biswas and the search for necessity.

Ronald A. Williams
V. S. NAIPaul's Mr. Biswas and
The Search for Necessity

by

Ronald A. Williams

A Thesis
Presented to the Graduate Committee
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in
English

Lehigh University
1978
This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

April 25, 1978

DATE

Professor in Charge

Chairman of Department
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naipaul and History: Biswas and Society</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Absurd Rebellion</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Search for Order in a Shifting Universe</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The House: Symbol and Reality</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Biswas: Buffoon or Epic Hero?</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
V. S. Naipaul is one of those writers whom critics call "important" but "difficult" and whose work critics continue to greet with a mixture of respect and puzzlement -- respect because the writer's sincere commitment to his art is obvious and his creative imagination clearly of a high order; puzzlement because the style and method, although apparently simple, can develop into a Pandora's box of complexity once his work is examined. Critics, with their penchant for categorization, have attempted to classify Naipaul in a variety of ways, and in this connection Paul Theroux's comment is enlightening:

Critics have attempted the labels of "West Indian writer," and "Emergent Third-Worlder," "Mandarin" and "Transplanted Indian." Intending compliments, critics have invoked the names of Damon Runyon, and Ronald Firbank, D. H. Lawrence and Dickens, Bellini, Froude, Frantz Fanon and E. M. Forster. Compliments are deserved, but these comparisons are inappropriate and mostly futile. They are exclamations of delight, for each one of Naipaul's books has been an advance; few writers of his generation have shown the same consistent achievement. Wholly original, he may be the only writer today in whom there are no echoes of influence.  

---

Theroux's claim that Naipaul's work shows no "echoes of influence" is exaggerated, for, as Fido Martin shows, there does exist a close parallel between Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* and H. G. Wells' *The History of Mr. Polly*. Martin adds, however: "But the existence of such parallels does not mean that Naipaul can or should be accused of plagiarism. It is evident that he intended the comparison to be drawn: that he deliberately took Wells' theme to the West Indian community of Trinidad, and almost certainly expected this to be recognized.... He has varied his plotting from that of Wells, has extended the scope and range of his novel considerably; and, most important of all, avoided the potentially sentimental trap of the idyllic ending Wells used."

Anthony Boxhill, however, does not agree with Fido Martin's conclusions and, accusing Martin of "insensitivity," he contends that "although Naipaul makes liberal use of his wide reading in his fiction, he cannot easily be placed in the tradition of either European or Indian literature." Unlike Theroux, though, Boxhill

---


does ascribe sources to Naipaul, these being Naipaul's father, Seepersad Naipaul, West Indian history and the calypso. These sources, along with the traditional European ones, Naipaul manipulates to create ironic situations. 4

Though V. S. Naipaul is fanatically private, his work consistently displays that concern for life which is the badge of a man who lives in his time. S. Waiyaki says of Naipaul that his laughter is never "derogatory." "He treats his lawyers, and doctors and Ramsay Muirs with great compassion and sympathy. This is because he does not laugh at their inner strength but at their surface behaviour. So Naipaul satirizes their manner of dress, their behaviours at table without criticising their essentials as men. Even characters who are not central are regarded with a terrific amount of sympathy. Naipaul laughs to keep us from crying." 5 Naipaul's work is therefore profoundly relevant, not only to the Caribbean sensibility but to thinking people everywhere: to anyone genuinely concerned with the quality of our response to life. As Harriet Blodgett says, Naipaul's

4Anthony Boxhill, pp. 138-140.

"books are not confined within their local settings nor, for all their explicitly precise detail, are they tied to literal realism: he finds metaphor more expressive. The local settings are convenient to his ideational purposes. As a society 'continually growing and changing, never settling into any pattern,' Trinidad invites themes of instability and flux, and as a colonial and emergent nation it provides a good setting for problems of dependency and freedom.... The dominant pressures in Naipaul's fictional world derive from man's precarious existence."⁶

Because of his immersion in life, V. S. Naipaul succeeds in presenting a truly rare thing: a humane and honestly subjective vision of the world, what D. H. Lawrence once called "a man in his wholeness wholly attending." This particular ability of Naipaul's to see the world wholly is eminently present in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, which William Walsh describes as Naipaul's first novel to reconcile "a certain discrepancy between the perfection of the surface and the inclusiveness of the theme" so noticeable in the earlier novels.⁷ As S. Waiyaki correctly states, *A House for Mr. Biswas* can "in no way be considered as applicable to any local community

---


anywhere. The social substance it feeds on is obviously Trinidadian, but the novel has got relevance for human beings in general.\textsuperscript{8}

A House for Mr. Biswas takes the form of fictive biography,\textsuperscript{9} beginning with the inauspicious birth of Mr. Biswas in an obscure village and ending with his death forty-six years later. But Naipaul elects to explore and interpret the life and achievement of Mr. Biswas against a dense and changing background. The fiction also represents, in less depth, the life of the Tulsis, an Indian family into which Mr. Biswas came to be married. Inevitably, the novel has been seen as providing a picture of Indian life in the West Indies, with Hanuman House, the Tulsi residence at Arwacas, becoming representative: "Before Mr. Biswas, the West Indian East Indian was without form, features or voice. Now we know more about Hanuman House than we do about Brandt pen [in John Hearne's novels] or the Village of Love [in a novel by Merrill Ferguson].\textsuperscript{10} In fact, the kind of family life

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
represented at Hanuman House no longer exists in Trinidad. A brief account of the socio-historical situation upon which the novel draws may be useful.

After the emancipation of the slaves in 1834, India became the main overseas source of cheap labor for the British sugar islands: Between 1839 and 1917 no fewer than 416,000 indentured Indians were imported as substitutes for the freed Blacks. These new slaves were procured in the poverty-stricken districts of India; most of them were transported to Guyana (239,000) and Trinidad (134,000), where labor problems had been particularly acute. Today the descendants of Indians comprise forty-nine per cent of the population of Guyana and thirty-five per cent of that of Trinidad. Writing about the social structure of Guyana, Raymond T. Smith generalizes about the Indians:

In 1917, the system of organized immigration ceased, and after that time very few people entered the country from India. Even during the nineteenth century there had been a marked tendency for Indian languages to be replaced by the Guyanese lower-class dialect of English, and now this process was accelerated until today Indian languages are practically never used except on ritual occasions when they are about as widely understood as Latin is among Roman Catholics in England. The same thing happened in the other

---

fields of culture, such as dress, home furnishing, and recreational activities. The process of "Creolization" affected nearly all aspects of life so that customs and forms of social structure which superficially appear to be entirely "Indian" are in fact sharply modified by the local environment.

The same general process of "Creolization" has taken place in Trinidad, possibly at a faster rate than in Guyana.

But at first the Indians kept to themselves, and the better-off ones retained a family life in many respects similar to that fictionalized in **A House for Mr. Biswas**:

The organization of the Tulsi house was simple. Mrs. Tulsi had only one servant, a Negro woman who was called Blackie by Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, and Miss Blackie by everyone else. Miss Blackie's duties were vague. The daughters and their children swept and washed and cooked and served in the store. The husbands, under Seth's supervision, worked on the Tulsi land, looked after the Tulsi animals, and served in the store. In return, they were given food, shelter, and a little money; their children were looked after; and they were treated with respect by the people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis.13

The quotation comes from the earlier section of a novel that covers a period of forty-six years -- the span of Mr. Biswas' life. Over this fictional period, Naipaul chronicles the dissolution of Tulsi family life. The


closing chapters are set in the city Port-of-Spain, 
where, in a crowded house owned by Mrs. Tulsi, the Tulsi 
daughters and husbands co-exist as separate economic 
units, and the children are involved in a colonial 
scramble for education:

In the house the crowding became worse. Basdai, 
the widow, who had occupied the servantroom as 
a base for a financial assault on the city gave 
up that plan and decided instead to take in 
boarders and lodgers from Shorthills. The widows 
were now almost frantic to have their children 
educated. There was no longer a Hanuman House 
to protect them; everyone had to fight for him-
self in a new world, the world Owad and Shekhar 
had entered, where education was the only pro-
tection. As fast as the children graduated from 
the infant school at Short Hills they were sent to 
Port of Spain. Basdai boarded them. (pp. 435-6)

A House for Mr. Biswas has resonances one would not 
expect in a sociologist's account. Basdai, for instance, 
is satirized for the profit motive; but the rapid disin-
tegration of the Tulsi outpost following the momentous 
move from Arwacas to Short Hills corresponds to the break-
up of Indian family life described ny Naipaul himself 
in his non-fictional work An Area of Darkness.

The family life I have described began to 
dissolve when I was six or seven; when I was 
fourteen, it had ceased to exist. Between my 
brother, twelve years younger than myself, and 
me there is more than a generation of difference. 
He can have no memory of that private world which 
survived with such apparent solidity up to only 
twenty-five years ago, a world which had lengthened 
out, its energy of intertia steadily weakening 
from the featureless area of darkness which 
was India.14

14V. S. Naipaul, An Area of Darkness (New York: 
It is important to note how Naipaul uses the Tulsi cultural hulk in the creation of a nightmare world for Mr. Biswas; but not to be aware that Hanuman House represents something in the Trinidadian past and not to be aware of the sense in which *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a historical novel are to follow L. E. Braithwaite in saying that in "the world of Hanuman House, we have the first novel from the West Indies whose basic theme is not rootlessness and the search for social identity; in *A House for Mr. Biswas* we have at last a novel whose central character is clearly defined and who is really trying to get in rather than get out."\(^{15}\) *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the West Indian novel in which the search for social identity is most strongly manifested, and we are in a better position to take this view if we recognize the novel's historicity. For convenience, the case may be put like this: Mr. Biswas is an Indian who marries into an Indian enclave in Trinidad between the wars; he recognizes the blindered insulation of this world from the outside and senses its imminent dissolution. He spends most of his life trying to escape its embrace, only to find that the future, the colonial

\(^{15}\) L. E. Braithwaite, p. 16.
society upon which he wishes to make his mark, is as yet uncreated. Mr. Biswas struggles between the tepid chaos of a decaying culture and the void of colonial society. To put it like this is to gloss over C. L. R. James' remark that "after reading A House for Mr. Biswas many of our people have a deeper understanding of the West Indies than they did before."  It is necessary to get our background information right in order to avoid misinterpreting novels like A House for Mr. Biswas.

What this study does is to approach the novel as an imaginative response to social phenomena, examining the texture of the fictional world in which Mr. Biswas toils, as well as his characteristic responses to it. It shows, too, that while Mr. Biswas is a comic and absurd figure if viewed from the point of view of his individual acts, he achieves epic status if seen as an individual who refuses to be crushed by the oppressive totalitarianism of Hanuman House. Seen as such, Mr. Biswas is no longer merely an individual but a representative, almost allegorical, figure. He becomes the epitome of l'homme revolte.

---

16 C. L. R. James, Party Politics in the West Indies (San Juan, Trinidad: Vedic Enterprises Ltd., 1962), p. 150.
THE ABSURD REBELLION

It is the mark of the brilliance in the creation of Mr. Biswas that he defies simple classification. Mohun Biswas, clownish, small, petty, and sometimes rebellious is the prototype of the unimportant man. None of his acts has a great deal of significance in itself, but the complete story of his life turns out to be greater than the sum of its mundane parts. It is even possible to see, as Gordon Rohlehr does, universal implications in Mr. Biswas' highly personal struggle: "Biswas is Everyman wavering between identity and nonentity and claiming his acquaintance with the rest of men...."17 Biswas may be an archetypal Everyman, but if so he is a modernized version, for 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 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 the longing for happiness and for

reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." Biswas, then, simultaneously embodies the alienated modern man and the sensitive, though ineffectual, reformer.

What is the social and universal significance of the rebellion of a mediocre, ridiculous man? Biswas certainly is this: a clumsy figure who stumbles across the stage of life from one dimension of absurdity to another. He is forever trying to arrange his world and ending up more deeply immersed in the absurd situation. Though there are signs at his birth, these are part of the grotesque pattern which Biswas' life will assume. Like Oedipus, he is fated to kill his father. Unlike Oedipus, he fulfills this prophecy in the most ridiculous of ways: his father drowns in an attempt to retrieve from a pond the body of his son who is hiding under a bed at home. Later, Biswas is to be the Scarlet Pimpernel for a local newspaper and is to read Samuel Smiles on the dignity of labor and the virtues of being a self-made man. It is predicted that he will be a liar, a lecher and a spendthrift. Time proves him incapable of lechery, poverty preserves him from extravagance, and he is incapable

---

of falsehood since he constantly faces the harrowing facts of his condition. He is allowed no respite from the sense of his littleness. Riding on his bicycle, moving countless times with his cumbersome furniture, savoring the bitter irony of his position as an investigator of "deserving destitutes," he is *l'homme absurde*. But equally true of Mr. Biswas is the cognomen *l'homme revolte*, since he is persistent in his desire to understand existence and to make sense of his milieu. It is important to note that Naipaul has dramatized the rebellion of a weak, mediocre man, since in writing elsewhere about West Indian society he undervalues the quality of rebellion in a world which he rejects as mediocre.

The death of his father leaves Biswas homeless and emotionally bewildered. The early affection which he feels for his mother dwindles when embarrassment and decorum prevent her from showing him any affection in the presence of strangers. But Biswas needs to be mothered and uses his Aunt Tara as a mother substitute until he allows himself to be browbeaten into marriage. It is difficult to conceive of anyone less capable of physical or emotional love. He looks at his "comic, make-believe clothes," regards his body with disgust, and swings his loose calf like a hammock, or pokes a stomach too distended to be fat. He confesses that he "don't look like
anything at all" (p. 163). This sense of inferiority becomes particularly obsessive whenever Biswas is alone, and it leads to a grotesque exhibitionism, which indicates his need for love:

There were whole weeks when he devoted himself to some absurdity. He grew his nails to an extreme length and held them up to startle customers. He picked and squeezed his face until his cheeks and forehead were inflamed and the rims of his lips were like welts. When his skin became pitted with little holes, he studied these with interest and found the perfection of their shape pleasing. And once he dabbed ointments of various colours on his face and went and stood in the shop doorway greeting people he knew. (p. 184)

The principle of humanity, so overt in Dostoevsky's fiction, is also noticeable in Naipaul's. Mr. Biswas, the compulsive buffoon, insults his total environment. From the reader's (and the narrator's) point of view his buffoonery is defensive, a perverse display of his own inadequacy performed with comic zest. Like Smerdynakov Karamazov, Biswas is a master of sadistic play; his satiric insults and his acute perception of human (and especially his own) weaknesses are part of a general campaign to advertise his need for love. His conduct is roughly that of a child who, rejected by his parents, deliberately accentuates his faults to gain attention. He needs a mother as well as a wife. Shama, his wife, attracts him when she is mothering him, but he cannot
admit this. And he is a difficult person to mother:

As he was lying in bed one morning she came and placed her palm then the back of her hand on his forehead. The action offended him, flattered him, and made him uneasy. She undid his shirt and put her hand, large and dark and foreign on his pale, soft chest...

He wanted to scream...

He was violently angry; never before had he been so disgusted by her. Yet he wished her to remain there. Half-hoping she would take him seriously, half-hoping only to amuse and bewilder her, he said in his quick, high-pitched voice "something in my mind all right."

(p. 275)

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

Rebellion in Mr. Biswas is defined by his state as a cultural, psychological, and social orphan. So often his revolt contains a child-like rage and grief at violated innocence and a child-like need to prove that his suffering is always the fault of someone else. Indeed, he assumes that because he is oppressed, he is therefore innocent. This assumption allows him to justify some of the less pleasant aspects of his revolt, like kicking the pregnant Shama in the belly because he sees the new child as another Tulsi trap. He develops a nausea at the idea of birth: "Almost immediately he began to hate her. Her pregnancy was grotesque; he hated the way she sat down,...he hated it when she puffed and fanned and sweated in her pregnant way" (p. 274).

This nausea never quite abandons him. When he dismisses
Shama, he tells her to "take your girl children and go" (p. 277). Later, as a writer he has a recurrent theme: "The hero trapped in marriage, burdened with a family, his youth gone, meets a young girl. She is slim, almost thin, and dresses in white. She is fresh, tender, un-kissed, and she is unable to bear children. Beyond the meeting the stories never went" (p. 345). What Mr. Biswas hopes for, then, is a cessation of the entire process of birth and a sexless, sterile world in which he can be alone: "He tried to think of landscapes without people: sand and sand and sand, without the 'oses Lal had spoken about; vast white plateaux, with himself safely alone, a speck in the centre" (p. 267). He longs for inertia, a relapse into darkness, a bed which he will never have to leave, the enswaddling warmth of the bed in the Blue Room of Hanuman House. During the storm, Govind carries Biswas in his arms like a baby, while Biswas' son, Anand, walks in the rain (p. 295).

Beneath this self-laceration and play-acting, this assumption of the grotesque mask, lies a fear of the future, of objects, of people, of time, place, and mankind: "And always the thought, the fear about the future. The future wasn't the next day or the next week or even the next year; times within his comprehension and therefore without dread. The future he feared could not be
thought of in terms of time. It was a blankness, a void like those in dreams, into which, past tomorrow, and next week, and next year, he was falling' (p. 190). Biswas is living to an extreme degree the anxieties of the uprooted man. His elaborate poses, day-dreams, assertions of self, and evasion of responsibility are a result of the cultural, social and psychological vacuum produced by his position as an untalented second-generation Hindu in poverty-stricken colonial Trinidad.

As if aware of the grotesque, Dickensian quality of his life, Biswas becomes an avid reader of Dickens: "Without difficulty he transferred characters and settings to people and places he knew. In the grotesques of Dickens, everything he feared and suffered from was ridiculed and diminished, so that his own anger, his own contempt became unnecessary, and he was given a strength to bear with the most difficult part of the day" (p. 374). One wonders whether the catharsis which Biswas seeks both in a real and vicarious grotesqueness isn't a feature of Creole society in Trinidad. He seems to share with the Creoles a capacity to convert anxiety into absurdity and to make a grasp of the absurd dimension part of his total psychology of struggle.

As an Indian in the Trinidad of the 1930's Biswas is insecure and perhaps needs the support of the family
or the clan. At no time in the novel is he, or any of the Tulsi, able to come to any meaningful compromise with the Creole world, though he absorbs some of its spirit in his love for picong mamaguy, repartee and caricature. When he marries into the Tulsi family, he is offered protection, the sort of job he could scarcely get anywhere else, given his limited talents and lack of drive. Yet he rebels and makes the Tulsi the target of his revolt.

To understand Biswas' rebellion, one must understand the social structure of Hanuman House. On the surface, the Tulsi have effected an admirable reconstruction of the clan in a strange and sometimes hostile environment. It has its leaders, its scheme of prescribed duties and responsibilities, its own law and order, its religious ritual, and it tries to provide the individual with the sort of job for which his talents equip him. This is, at least, how it appears on the surface, and in a sense, Biswas' rebellion is inexplicable when one considers his prospects in colonial Trinidad. Because he has no alternative to life in Hanuman House, his rebellion suffers from a lack of direction, and he has to return to the protective warmth of the Tulsi time and time again.

But on closer examination, Hanuman House reveals itself not as a coherent reconstruction of the clan but as a slave society, erected by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, who
need workers to help rebuild the tottering empire. They therefore exploit the homelessness and poverty of their fellow-Hindus, and reconstruct a mockery of the clan which functions only because they have so completely grasped the psychology of the slave system. Like the West Indies, Hanuman House is constructed of a vast number of disparate families, gratuitously brought together by the economic needs of a 'high caste' minority. Men are necessary here only as husbands for the Tulsi daughters and labourers on the Tulsi estates. To accept Hanuman House is, therefore, to acquiesce in one's slavery.

The Tulsi daughters have no choice since they have known no other world. It is only late in the novel that education becomes a means of emancipation from Hanuman House, since it places the Indians on par with the Creoles as competitors in the wider society of Trinidad. But the Tulsi daughters of two generations ago are inalienably bound to the rhythms and rituals of Hanuman House -- the daily puja, the seasonal wedding, the occasional funeral. It gives them relief from the tedium and submissiveness of their daily lives. They have little real say in the running of Hanuman House but vie for the crumbs of authority which Mrs. Tulsi allows to filter down to them from time to time. Competition for favors
from Mai is keen, and Mai alone knows how to dispense these favors so as to prevent undue dissention.

She also knows that she must remain at the center of her daughters' consciousness; they must see her as their sole reason for existence. There is something archetypal in the organization of Hanuman House. Mrs. Tulsi is the powerful Mother-Figure and rules through an understanding of the psychology of slavery. She is constantly demanding to be loved and worshipped and is very good at staging strategic illnesses in order to inspire guilt in those who have failed in their worship. She has instituted an elaborate system of rules which make devotion easy for the would-be believer. Biswas, inveterate enemy of ritual, rebels. His deep skepticism prevents him from paying the emotional blackmail that Mrs. Tulsi constantly demands. A bad slave, he cannot be brought to feel grateful for his condition or sorry for the trouble he causes:

"You happy, eh, now that you make Mai faint?... Which foot you rub? You know, nobody hearing you talk would believe that you come to this house with no more things than you could hang up on a one inch nail."

It was a familiar attack. He ignored it. (p. 128)

It is the first and last accusation of Hanuman House, the one by which it seeks to justify its methods. Biswas, on the night of his final revolt, bitterly shouts,

"I curse the day I step into your house..."
"You curse the day," Mrs. Tulsi said. "Coming to us with no more clothes than you could hang on a nail." This wounded Mr. Biswas. He could not reply at once.

"I am giving you notice," he repeated at last. (p. 557)

One notices that Mrs. Tulsi and her daughters mention only the fact that Biswas came to them. They never speak of their efforts to get him to join the system, of the original pressures which they applied to get him to marry Shama. It is important for the smooth running of the system that the fiction be maintained that everyone joins Hanuman House of his own free will.

What Mrs. Tulsi has grasped is the fundamental idea that a slave system must be able to prove and contain all the apparent evidence of its own legitimacy. As Albert Memni observes in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*:

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

Hence Mrs. Tulsi, good colonizer that she is, justifies her exploitation with the explanation that she is really doing her subjects good. Her argument is the one which ex-colonial peoples most bitterly resent and also the one which gives them pause. Biswas "could not reply at

---

once" partly because he suspects that what Mrs. Tulsi says is true, and he cannot afford to admit that any good at all can proceed from so iniquitous a system. As T. S. Eliot's Gerontion puts it, "Virtues are forced upon us by our impudent crimes." It is the irony which humiliates Mr. Biswas. He knows at last that he has to forget all arguments of right and wrong and leave the system once and for all, that too much energy has already been lost in debate and in working out the paradox of the master-slave relationship.

Mrs. Tulsi is only one part of the power structure at Hanuman House. She cannot rule alone. She needs Seth, who is as powerful a Father-Figure as she is a matriarch. Mrs. Tulsi divides power among the sisters and rules by checks and balances. By allowing her daughters the illusion of freedom and democratic rights, she partially controls their husbands. But she needs Seth, her counterpart, to complete and fulfill the psychological requirement of slave-ownership. Not only a subtle manipulation of checks and balances but sanction, discipline, power obviously and ruthlessly wielded are necessary. Seth is almost an allegorical representation of Power. It is amazing, on reflection, how little we are told of Seth. Time and again we hear of his big, military boots, see him in his khaki uniform, note his big hands and square fingers, and hear his voice. He is
almost above the struggle. But he can rule without Mrs. Tulsi no more than she can rule without him, for it is together that they fulfill the psychology of ruler-ship.

Seth is aided in his job of preserving order by the husbands who accept their condition. The foremost of these is Govind, who becomes policeman for his master.

He was tall and well-built and handsome in a conventional, unremarkable way. Mr. Biswas thought it unseemly that someone so well-made should have been a coconut seller and should now do manual work in the fields. And Mr. Biswas was pained to see Govind in the presence of Seth. His handsome face became small and bright and restless; he stammered and swallowed and gave nervous little laughs....

Mr. Biswas thought of Govind as a fellow sufferer, but one who had surrendered to the Tulsis and been degraded. (p. 106)

Seth uses Govind to win Biswas into accepting an estate job:

"You should give up that sign-painting...."
"They looking for good drivers on the estates...."
"Give up sign-painting? And my independence?"
(pp. 106-107)

Independence is the ideal that Mr. Biswas seeks and which he equates with identity. The irony is that he will soon be behaving just like Govind before Seth and that he will eventually accept an estate job.

But there is a difference between the weaknesses of the two men. Biswas continues to defy the system although circumstances force him to conform; Govind, on
the other hand, beats up Mr. Biswas in order to achieve status in the eyes of the Tulsi world. It isn't that Mr. Biswas does not deserve punishment, but it is the mean way in which the punishment is administered, the way in which the weakest character aligns himself with law and order and helps to teach others to conform that makes us more sympathetic to Mr. Biswas. The children in Hanuman House are taught to ridicule the non-conformist in much the same way as Creolized Negro slaves were used to mock new arrivals from Africa into submission. It is worth noting, though, that Biswas wins the battle with Govind, for towards the end of the novel Govind, too, is a rebel of a sort. He refuses to welcome Owad when the latter returns from England; he disturbs the house by his loud unmusical singing, and he comforts Mr. Biswas after the final encounter with Mrs. Tulsi.

Besides Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, there are the Tulsi sons, Owad and Shekhar. In them the hierarchy manifests its continuity, its undestructibility. Hierarchy is established, settled and perpetual, and the brothers-in-law accept that rebellion is physically, morally and psychologically impossible. Religious ritual, prescribed over by the young sons, or by Hari, the symbolically constipated, negative and dying pundit, helps to seal the system together. As in slave society, the priest tightens the bonds between slave and master by incul-
eating a sense of moral obligation in the slave. The slave learns that his condition is divinely ordained and that rebellion is morally wrong.

Every feature of Tulsi society works towards a general end of conformity. Any sign of individualism is punished in the children by severe beatings. Much is made of this ritual beating in the novel, and it is illuminating to see how in this respect also Hanuman House conforms to the classic slave society. Ralph Ellison shows how southern Negroes suppress impulses to individuality in order to adjust their children to the southern milieu. The people thus produced are termed "pre-individualistic," and they, in turn, perfect their elaborate defense mechanism:

Its function is dual: to protect the Negro from whirling away from the undifferentiated mass of his people into the unknown, symbolized by insanity and most concretely by lynching; and to protect him from the unknown forces within himself which might urge him to reach out for that social and human equality which the White South says he cannot have. Rather than throw himself against the charged wires of his prison, he annihilates the impulses within him.20

Ellison continues to show how

Even parental love is given a qualitative balance akin to sadism. And the extent of beatings and psychological maimings meted out by Southern Negro parents rival those described by nineteenth-century Russian writers as characteristic of

peasant life under the Czars. The horrible thing is that the cruelty is also an expression of concern, love.21

The world of Hanuman House differs from this world in degree but certainly not in kind. It, too, is pre-individualistic, and that is why Mr. Biswas' greatest crime is to have tried to be an individual. When he tries to make a sharp and complete break with Hanuman House and the Tulsis Biswas goes mad. Trinidadian law does not permit the Tulsis to lynch, but they know how to commit symbolic murder. When Biswas, ignoring the pressures that the Tulsis bring to bear on the aspiring individual, gives his daughter a doll's house, he upsets the entire equilibrium of Hanuman House, and their rejoinder is to tear the doll's house apart:

None of its parts was whole. Its delicate joints were exposed and useless. Below the torn skin of paint...the hacked and splintered wood was white and raw.... The edge of a wall scraped against his [Mr. Biswas'] shoulder, tearing his shirt and tearing the skin below.... (p. 219)

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

And suddenly his rage was gone. His shouts rang in his head, leaving him startled, ashamed and tired. He could think of nothing to say. (p. 220)

---

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

Chandra Jayawardena in his Conflict and Solidarity on a Guianese Plantation shows how the plantation system, by requiring a large unskilled and uneducated labour force, leads to an egalitarianism of the underprivileged. The result of this is continual social conflict, which is most pronounced whenever anyone through industry, craft, or thrift lifts himself a little above the rest of the community. Then complex feuds arise and an almost ritual quarrelling in which the slighted party is really appealing to the solidarity of the group to join him in censure of the social-climber. Biswas' experience at Hanuman House, then, is a more extreme version of what is still happening in the large segments of West Indian

---

society where the patterns imposed by a plantation system still retain their strength and form. It is therefore possible to see Mr. Biswas' rebellion, grotesque and strange as it is, as a paradigm of the perennial West Indian struggle for a more truly democratic society.

The nature of Mr. Biswas' rebellion is determined by his character, which, as we have noted, is saturated with the wit and irony of Trinidadian speech. The Tulsis refer to Mr. Biswas as "Creole" -- which is the worst insult they know. "I hear they have made more Creole converts. Brothers for you, Mohun!'" (p. 119). Throughout the novel Mr. Biswas rebels through the use of good, bad and sick humor, sarcasm and mamaguy. But the Tulsis come to regard his rebellion as a joke, and to accept him as a licensed buffoon, thereby neutralizing the effect of his wit. Like the traditional Negro comedian, Biswas is allowed to make those jokes which affirm his self-contempt and strengthen and justify the stereotype which his masters have created for him.

Yet in the early stages of the revolt, before the Tulsis learn that the best way to contain the rebel is to convert rebellion into a joke, Mr. Biswas' wit wins him temporary emancipation from Hanuman House. The Tulsis send him to the Chase to run a Tulsi shop, though there are several similar shops in that little village. It is a dubious independence, given in conditions which
guarantee failure. Mr. Biswas discovers that the task of changing from irony to construction, from the rhetoric of rebellion to the silent prosaic act of independence is beyond him. In fact, he doesn't even know what to make of his freedom.

How lonely the shop was! And how frightening!

He had never thought it would be like this when he found himself in an establishment of his own. It was late afternoon, Hanuman House would be warm and noisy with activity. Here he was afraid to disturb the silence, afraid to open the door to the shop, to step into the light.

(p. 145)

Independence is a decaying, rusty shop, with fly-blown groceries in a backward antediluvian village. Moreover, the shop belongs to the colonizers, who have perfected the tradition of absenteeism and have learned how to be invisible while they continue exploitation. So Biswas achieves only age in his six years of independence and eventually has to return to Hanuman House for comfort and sanity, and for a definition of identity and status. He still judges himself, for the most part, by their standards, and is grateful now for their good opinion. As Harriet Blodgett points out, "Biswas knows that the self-dignity and respect for which he hungers are precluded among the Tulsis; yet he continues to allow them variously to support him. Thus he victimizes himself."

His is the rebellion of the small, the weak, the acculturated. But his quest is nonetheless worthwhile. At the start he tries to convert the rank and file of the Tulsis to his cause, since he instinctively realises that he is not really at odds with them. He tries to convince people like Govind that his fight is really theirs, and his revolt is really the one they should be making themselves until individual struggle broadens into revolution, for Biswas is possessed with the idea that every man should enjoy the right of self-determination. But the pre-individualistic Tulsis cannot recognize the value for which Mr. Biswas fights.

It is only when the Tulsi hierarchy begins to crumble that they rebel. Shekhar, the elder son, marries. Owad, the younger, is in England. Seth quarrels with Mrs. Tulsi; Hari, the pundit, dies. Autocracy has collapsed, and so rebellion becomes possible. What follows is a general anarchic scrambling for wealth and power, the revolution of a rabble who have gained individuality without direction. The purity of motive which marked Biswas' struggle against an apparently indestructible system makes his rebellion an affirmation of universal values, transforms it from a sordid personal struggle to one undertaken on behalf of the group. Mr. Biswas doesn't know this, engaged as he is in the fight for a house; the Tulsis don't know it, engaged as they are in
teaching their children to conform and mock the rebel.
It is not surprising, then, that with the return of Owad,
the sisters willingly return to the old system, the old
ritual, the old death-in-life.

The crowning irony is that when Mr. Biswas does gain
his house it is irretrievably mortgaged to his uncle,
Adjodha. In order to escape bondage to his wife's
family, he is forced to enslave himself to his own. The
absurd situation is worked out to the end, which suggests
no resolution of the problems posed by the novel but a
further vista into futility and rebellion.
THE SEARCH FOR ORDER IN A SHIFTING UNIVERSE

One facet of Mr. Biswas' being trapped is his inability to identify any cultural standards. The sense of history which Naipaul attempts to give to Mr. Biswas ("The past could not be ignored, it was never counterfeit; he carried it within himself." [p. 316]) is not something which the character unselfconsciously possesses. It is the result of a conscious striving to be rid of cultural rootlessness, or, in other words, the absence of a sense of history. Biswas' major problem is his ignorance of cultural mores, symbolically expressed in his unquestioning acceptance of the house at Sikkim street:

It was dark. They did not note the absence of light on the staircase; the darkness masked the crudity of the construction. Used so long to the makeshift and the old fashioned, dazzled by what they had seen, and in the position of guests, they didn't stop to inquire, and once they had got to the top they were too taken by the bathroom and the green bedrooms and the verandah and rediffusion set. (p. 571)

What Biswas faces is a slave society, albeit one that has been nominally free for close to a century and a half. The Indian was never a slave; in fact, his

---

24 William Walsh suggests that it is the inclusion of the idea of a society newly liberated but still psychologically enslaved that gives A House for Mr. Biswas its depth, a depth which he recognizes to be lacking in Naipaul's earlier novels. William Walsh, A Manifold Voice, p. 71
importation was the result of the abolition of slavery. But having been incorporated into the slave society, the Indian found himself little different from the ex-slave, so much so that the subsequent development of the two ethnic groups shows the same traits: psychological dislocation, cultural anemia, and an overlying emotional deadness. In *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul points out that although there is a marked absence of physical evidence of slavery in Trinidad, the evidence of the deep wound which that institution has inflicted on the national consciousness is everywhere present. In the frantic circular struggle of the inhabitants, in the unconscious self-hatred, and above all in the absence of cultural integrity. It is there in the West Indian's fear of his own lack of individuality.

Naipaul is committed to exploring the truth of one's responses, and this commitment to truth necessarily alienates him from his society. Naipaul's first books from *The Suffrage of Elvira* to *The Middle Passage* seemed to have been written to record his alienation from, and even paranoia of, his homeland. The "castrated irony" of which George Lamming speaks in *The Pleasures of Exile*.

---


is the satirical humor in these novels, the major theme of these being rootlessness and personal disintegration. Out of this ramshackle situation, the boy in Naipaul’s short story "The Enemy" has accepted that only he can protect his being.

A House for Mr. Biswas may be seen as a classic struggle for individuality against a society that denies it. It is this struggle that makes Mr. Biswas a comically heroic figure rather than a pathetic one. It is a measure of Naipaul’s genius for irony that this small, irresponsible, even petty man can be seen as representative of anything but himself. From the moment that Biswas steps into life, he is presented with a formidable array of difficulties. He has an unlucky sneeze, he has to stay away from water, and it is predicted that he is going to be the cause of the destruction of his family. If Biswas is to survive, he has to overcome the difficulties that an uncaring or malignant fate has imposed on him. Or so it seems in the first chapter of the novel. What becomes noticeable as the novel progresses is that Biswas is not in a struggle with a superhuman entity but rather with the harsh realities of the Caribbean world, that is, economic and cultural deprivation. These are the real enemies; his fate is never a factor. And this is one of the strengths of the novel. Naipaul is aware of the danger of making a malicious fate the.
antagonist of his novel, for to do so would destroy what little dignity Biswas manages to maintain. The final message of the novel would not be the possibility of success but the futility of resistance. Naipaul the creative force would in fact be saying the same thing as Naipaul the social critic: that is, that the West Indian world is essentially comic and cannot be taken seriously. By giving Mr. Biswas the chance to succeed or fail, Naipaul obviates that defeatism that is so intimate to the argument which uses the slave and colonial past to excuse rather than explain the less pleasant aspects of West Indian life.

One such aspect is the cultural fragmentation of the society which Biswas inhabits. Hanuman House is at one and the same time the cultural focal point and the locus of cultural fragmentation in the novel. One of Biswas' problems is his inability to relate to Hanuman House in a creative, meaningful way, for in the moments when he is not in open rebellion, his relationship is curiously amoebic, even parasitic: "He remained in the Blue Room, feeling secure to be only part of Hanuman House, an organism that possessed a life, strength and power to comfort which was quite separate from the individuals who composed it" (p. 302). Or again: "It was better than he had imagined to be back in the sooty green hall with the shelf-like loft, the long pitchpine table,
the unrelated pieces of furniture, the photographs of Pundit Tulsi, the kitchen safe with the Japanese coffee set" (p. 330).

Yet Biswas' attraction to Hanuman House is understandable, for, above all else, Biswas is searching for order, an island among the conflicting swirls of possible ideals. And Hanuman House does seem to offer that order, although it is at the expense of his individuality. It is this that sets the scene of the struggle for Mr. Biswas. He cannot sacrifice either his individuality or the order that he seeks. He must have both. This is responsible for Biswas' difficulty of adjustment in his relationship with Tulsidom.

Mr. Biswas had grown up in a more liberal and changing environment than that which obtained at Hanuman House. And here the definition of the role played by Hanuman House in the creation of the system Naipaul chooses to call "Tulsidom" is very important. Hanuman House was founded by a pundut, a Hindu priest, a venerable man not only in Trinidad but also in India, an immigrant who had come not as an indentured servant, one of the rare Indians in Trinidad who knew his relatives in India and was in constant touch with them. As head of the Tulsi clan in Trinidad he provides a sanctuary for succeeding generations of the family. It is perhaps the fault of nature and of circumstances that Pundit Tulsi
and his wife had more daughters than sons, and since the daughters were either older or less educated than the sons, they married earlier. As a result, instead of the Tulsi sons marrying and bringing their wives to Hanuman House, the reverse obtained. Furthermore, nearly all the daughters seem to have married men in need of Tulsi money and glad for a space at Hanuman House. In addition, Hanuman House was a virtual cloister for the Tulsi family, since outsiders were rarely admitted.

Mr. Biswas, on the other hand, was the descendant of hut-dwelling peasants, and although the extended family system was operative in Biswas' personal experience previous to his encounter with the Tulsis, the absence of a single family house had made arrangements looser. For instance, Biswas' mother, Bipti, although dependent on her wealthy sister Tara, stays with some of Tara's husband's relations in a back trace far from Adjodha's (Tara's husband) house; Pratap and Prasad, Biswas' brothers, go to a distant relation in another town; Biswas' sister, Dehuti, lives as a maid with Tara; and Biswas, although living with his mother, becomes emotionally estranged from her. His father's hut is no more, his grandparents are dead, and he early begins his picaresque-like journey through life. He experiences the comparative cosmopolitanism of primary-school life; he then undergoes the rigid discipline of a pundit-in-training.
for a brief period, but abandons this for the insecurities and vagabondage of a sign-painting career. Before Biswas encounters Tulsidom, therefore, he has met not only a few people of other races, like his friend Alec, but also Indians like himself, but who subscribe to non-traditional mores, like Lal, his Christian school-teacher, and Bhandat (Biswas' boss in the rum shop) and his sons, who have un-Hindu sex lives. With all this, his education has excited his curiosity, and on afternoons at Adjodha's his eyes and mind would zealously explore the new worlds opened up to him by "The Book of Comprehensive Knowledge."

No wonder, then, that Biswas felt "trapped" when he fell into the clutches of Tulsidom, for Naipaul depicts Hanuman House as a symbol of traditionalism, rigidity, cultural infallibility (to its inmates), ritual, duty, hierarchy, and communal life. Biswas' being alienated from the imperial fact of Hanuman House makes his failure inevitable as he tries to impose order on the fragmented society.

Sharing is behind the principle that at Hanuman House floor space is bed space, and therefore at Short Hills Biswas finds that under the hotel-like arrangements which obtained, his property, like his children at night, was disposed about the house. One reads of mass floggings at Short Hills. Similarly, parents are absolved
from the responsibility of buying Christmas gifts for their offspring: the identical gifts received by the children were offered in the general name of Tulsidom -- a good system for suppressing jealousy, inferiority and superiority complexes, but also individuality.

Biswa is an anomaly in these surroundings, for from the moment that he is introduced to sign-writing and that highly individualized element in Alec, Biswa is set on the path towards his personal individuation. Ultimately, his gift for sign-writing is the instrument of his alienation for he finds sheer joy in the act of being unique. When one day in school he is ordered to write I AM AN ASS on the blackboard,

Mr. Biswa outlined stylistic, contemptuous letters, and the class tittered approvingly. Lal, racing about the classroom, waving his tamarind rod for silence, brushed Mr. Biswa's elbow and a stroke was spoilt. Mr. Biswa turned this into an additional decoration which pleased him and impressed the class. It was too late for Lal to flog Mr. Biswa or order him to clean the blackboard. Angrily he pushed him away, and Mr. Biswa went back to his desk, smiling, a hero. (pp. 47-48)

Leigh Winster correctly maintains that it is through painting that Mr. Biswa is able to survive the "terrifying sense of life's futility." Leigh Winster, "Naipaul's Painters and Their Pictures," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, Vol. 18, No. 1 (December 1976), p. 69.
The episode is important, for it is in his comic attempt at individuality that he gains respect and avoids corporal punishment. From this point, he, like the boy in "The Enemy," is aware that he has to reorientate himself to an inner individuation. It is hardly surprising that the Tulsi system, which fosters a strong sense of cohesion and, with it, anonymity, is anathema to Biswas.

The Tulsi house is alien because it represents the Hindu culture. This cultural influence is especially noticeable in the hierarchical distinctions which are an integral part of the Tulsi establishment. Because of her age and ancestral position, Mrs. Tulsi holds an honorary dictatorial position in domestic affairs; Seth is her man-of-business, the chief prosecutor at family tribunals, her counsellor and the agent of her will. Older sisters, like Padma, are respected because of their age; Hari, as family priest, is highly placed; but there are some lesser husbands, and there are generally divisions and subdivisions among the adults as well as the children. Apart from age-classification, there is a clearly defined division of labor, well demonstrated at times when Mrs. Tulsi has a fainting spell. In times of normalcy, however, the women cook the general food and feed their individual husbands. The children are fed in common and are punished by both mothers and widows. This last duty is not in the province of the
fathers of the Tulsi household, for Tulsi husbands serve their purpose by relieving Tulsi daughters from the single state, by fathering new generations of Tulsis, and by contributing to Tulsi commercial interests. In addition, there is evidence of discrimination on the basis of caste, particularly as it affects marriage.

Fixed roles naturally lead to an awareness of duties, conventions, and rituals. It is the duty of the new wife to adopt an air of self-satisfaction and a studied blasé air, well captured in her mannerism of sitting with legs apart. After a quarrel with, or a beating by, her husband, she adopts a piqued air of martyrdom, which must be publicly vaunted as part of the badge of her married status; once pregnancy begins, she must sigh and spit, both frequently. Her new baby must be bathed according to the traditional unwritten rules of the process -- the oiling, pulling of the arms and legs, the slapping. Husbands offending Mrs. Tulsi, and therefore Tulsidom in general, must be subjected to communal hostility, and the offender must show his repentance by making fervent and frequent inquiries after the stricken Mrs. Tulsi's health. Old women, like Bipti and Mrs. Tulsi, take up patient, suffering postures, inviting compassion by their tears and the pulling of their veils over their foreheads. Daughters-in-law must observe punctilious respect towards mothers-in-law; so
Shama knows it is her duty to cry at Bipti's funeral. In any case, funerals are occasions when it is socially necessary for the female relatives to display uncontrol-
labile grief. It is likewise part of the social ritual to attend other people's children's weddings so that similar events in their own children's lives will in turn be crowded. And it is through these social occasions, because of either the frequency with which they are ar-
ranged or the value and splendour of the gifts with which they regale their hosts, that a person's social standing is enhanced. Thus it is that Shama's annoyance at Bis-
was' building his house at Green Vale is assuaged only when she realizes that it provides an opportunity for a house-blessing ceremony.

It is into this apparent monolith of conventions, prejudices, and conservatism that Biswas barges. He openly disapproves of many of the Tulsi practices and policies. He even challenges their religious belief, and he associates with Hindus of another sect with whom the Tulsis disagree. He disregards everybody's acceptance of superior and inferior gradings within the household, is very disrespectful of the matronly Mrs. Tulsi and Seth, and sarcastically taunts the Tulsi boys with the name of "gods." He then refuses to work for the Tulsis as a labourer. He submits to them only when he is given jobs commensurate with his sense of his own importance and
human worth -- the jobs of shop-keeper and estate manager -- jobs where he could be semi-autonomous from Hanuman House and where he could command and decide and not be continuously pushed around. In brief, he refuses to feel inferior to the Tulsi, though he has no money to his credit. He actually feels that he is better than they are because he has strong intellectual interests, has vague ambitions for greatness, and, most of all, because he dares to have an independent mind. So where the glory of Tulsidom is its capacity to induce conformity among its members, Biswas revels in and exalts his individuality. He differentiates himself by speaking Creole English when everyone else in Hanuman House speaks Hindi; he ridicules Hari, the symbol of religious reverence and ceremony. He sees chaos in their communal family arrangements; he feels the birth of yet another child as a psychological and economic burden on himself; and he is always ready to point out the hypocrisy and illogicality which inevitably creep into conversation and ritual. Once he sarcastically comments, "Since I been in this house I begin to get the feeling that to be a good Hindu you must be a good Roman Catholic" (p. 125), thus commenting on the contradiction implicit in the younger Tulsi's son's habit of wearing a crucifix while doing Hindu puja.

It is not so much that Mohun Biswas is free of this pretentiousness as that he is aware of its existence in
a way that the Tulises are not. He is early made aware of the implicit contradictions of the superficiality which is so much a part of his early life:

He seldom went there [Tara's] except when Tara's husband, prompted by Tara, held a religious ceremony and needed Brahmins to feed. Then Mr. Biswas was treated with honour, stripped of his ragged trousers and shirt, and in a clean dhoti, he became a different person, and he never thought it unseemly that the person who served him so deferentially with food should be his own sister. In Tara's house he was respected as a Brahmin and pampered, yet as soon as the ceremony was over and he had taken his gift of money and cloth and left, he became once more only a labourer's child. (p. 49)

The assumption of the Brahmin identity is superficial, false and fleeting, and Biswas has to return to the reality of his life, a reality which is in marked contrast to the superficial, honorary existence. Biswas' rejection of his understudying to Pundit Jairam is symbolic of his rejection of the superficial life. The incident marks the beginning of his psychological problems, for he is not only physically but also religiously constipated.

But Biswas' destructive attitude is not confined to religion. Rather it embraces all facets of his environment for it stems from his need to be an individual. So, usually there is a generalized and undifferentiated rejection of all social elements. His reaction to Bhandat, his boss at the rum shop, is notable in this respect. When the crooked Bhandat ridicules him in front of the
customers in the rum shop, "He revenged himself by spitting in the rum when he bottled it" (p. 61). Eventually, realizing that working with Bhandat frustrates his search for individuality, he strikes out on his own, only to be confronted with the total chaos which is as effective in the repression of individuality as is working in the rum shop or with Pundit Jairam: "On Monday morning he set about looking for a job. How did one look for a job? He supposed that one just looked. He walked up and down Main Road, looking" (p. 67). Having spent the day examining a tailor, an undertaker's, a dry goods store, donkey-, horse-, and ox-carts, he returns to the back trace to declare to Bipti, "I am not going to take a job at all.... I am going to kill myself" (p. 69). Evidently, the path towards individualism is not exactly problem-free. Biswas finally leaves his family to work with Alec, and it is this relationship that takes him to the apparently monolithic structure that is Hanuman House.

From the first visit to Hanuman House Biswas is made aware of the contradictions between the apparent and the real in the Tulsis' home: "The Tulsi store was disappointing. The facade that promised such an amplitude of space concealed a building which was trapezoid in plan and not deep" (p. 82). India is counterpainted with Creolization. Biswas paints a roguish drawing of Punch amid the
"austere" surroundings of the Tulsi store. Also, the authenticity of the Tulsis themselves is constantly being questioned. They speak Hindi normally but English selectively so as to impress. This is important, for it is indicative of that absence of cultural integrity mentioned above. An incident worth noting is the one where a black woman enters the Tulsi store and asks for flesh-colored stockings. When she is offered black ones (which are flesh-colored for a black person), she angrily refuses to accept them. Such an incident dramatizes the cultural alienation integral to the Tulsi world.

In the Tulsi household, the characters, with few exceptions, are a faceless mass, lost within Tulsi society. This is true even of Mr. Biswas: "At Hanuman House, in the press of daughters, sons-in-law and children, he began to feel lost, unimportant, and even frightened" (p. 96). It is immediately clear that to enter Tulsi society is to surrender one's individuality to an undifferentiated mass; and, as his history shows, Biswas will not accept this surrender. His rebellion is therefore predictable and consistent with his psychology. There is nothing in Hanuman House with which Biswas can identify, for it represents the same confusion, cultural ambiguity, and secretism that he is trying to avoid.

Hanuman House is in an advanced stage of cultural disintegration, assaulted as it is by the Western-oriented
Creole culture of Trinidad, which constantly corrodes Hindu traditional customs and beliefs and which brings about a shift in attitudes along with a corresponding psychological bewilderment. It is the combination of the external force of westernization and urbanization, aided by internal human impulses, which brings about the decay of the highly structured social organization at Hanuman House, and which impels Mrs. Tulsi, the head herself, to suggest and execute the clan's removal from Arwacas, as if she herself recognized the inadequacy of the ancestral home in the face of modern aspirations. ("The old ways have become old-fashioned so quickly, Mohun" [p. 527].) Hanuman House belonged to another age. It takes a Biswas to expose the hypocrisies contained in a society like Hanuman House, for when Biswas enters Hanuman House he is already far along the road to Creolization, and so, he has the distance to see the illogic in their pretensions.

Not the least important factor in Biswas' rebellion is his formal education. It is this which instills in him a sense of his own superiority to his illiterate brothers and which exposes him to a life different from theirs. It has awakened his naturally alert mind and made him a rebel in the midst of conservatives. One reason why Biswas becomes a force which aids the cultural disintegration of Hanuman House is that his education is
non-Indian; in fact, it is European. The dichotomy between the foreign-inspired idea and the real and local is poignantly captured when Biswas imagines his dream house with a "bower," a word and object that he would hardly encounter in everyday life. Later when he tries to write fiction, he feels the frustration of setting his Caucasian characters speaking stilted English in foreign landscapes of snow-capped mountains.

By the time that Biswas enters Hanuman House, he is a cultural hybrid, neither Indian nor European but a curious amalgam of both. He is, in other words, the supremely colonial man, uncertain of himself and his culture. Biswas' triumph, however, is that from this uncertainty he molds a rebellion against what he conceives to be the repressive colonial society of Hanuman House. As if he instinctively knows that societies like Hanuman House cannot exist in the face of individualism, Biswas sets out to break up the Tulsi establishment by making the members aware of their individuality.

Gordon K. Lewis has said that the seminal problem of the West Indian scene is its need to resist pressures to its individualism or at least to adapt itself to their demands without being submerged by them. In his 

---

struggle against submersion in Tulsi society, by his attempts to transcend his conditions, Biswas achieves heroic status. But consistent with Naipaul's ironic approach to West Indian life (and to his protagonist), even Biswas' role as hero is dubious, contradictory, and confusing since his response to Tulsi society is the creation of his hybridization. In other words, his rebellion is the result of his many influences. As stated before, Biswas is as much in the process of modifying his cultural values as is the society symbolized by Hanuman House; the difference is that he, unlike the Tulsis, embraces and, to some extent, initiates his change. It is significant that Biswas voluntarily exposes himself to the city, for the disappearance of the values symbolized by Hanuman House is associated with the exposure of what in Trinidad is largely a rural way of life to an urban environment.

In this connection, Mr. Biswas' first few days in Port-of-Spain are very revealing. After his immediate exhilaration on arrival, the brave and spirited Arwacas paddler is completely baffled and humiliated by his new experience. He had never lived so close to Negroes before and is disconcerted by what seems to him to be their lack of social life: "They differed from country Negroes in accent, dress and manner. Their food had strange meaty smells, and their lives appeared less organized. Women
ruled men. Children were disregarded and fed, it seemed, at random;..." (p. 311). The brashness bred by Ramchand's (Biswa's sister's husband) self-assurance, again in a society whose social gradings Mr. Biswas could not yet perceive, disturbed him. But his awareness of the wider social arrangements in Trinidad becomes more acute when he enters the specialist's room in Port-of-Spain. His obvious rusticity, his race in its relation to the white community, his poverty, his awkwardness -- nothing in his background had prepared him for this painful self-awareness. He now finds himself in a world dominated by European values and ideas -- orderly lawns and gardens, primness, the new and glistening, a world of antiseptic smells and the muted whisper. It is a world of spaciousness and luxury, and this is why Biswas becomes increasingly sensitive to the fact that under the Tulsis he lives in a human chicken-run. It is a world of exquisite class-consciousness, and this explains why Biswas squirms whenever Shama drops ungrammatical phrases in conversation with Miss Logie, the American social worker. And the attitude of paternalistic toleration of "natives" meted out to him by the city receptionist is to be paralleled by the well-meaning Miss Logie, whose cultural values are so different from Tulsidom's that she has second thoughts about the seaside trip when she beholds Tulsidom's "swarm of children."
Closely associated with the growing urbanization as a factor in the cultural disintegration which the Tulsi face is the economic boom precipitated by the American presence in Trinidad during the Second World War. Govind, the pliable Tulsi son-in-law, is a product of this wind of change, and the sight of the ex-crab-catcher manipulating a large American car and exhibiting his suits is enough not only to incense Biswas but also to intensify that spirit of competition that dominated life from the very first moment at Short Hills. Under the incentive of the Yankee dollar, large-scale depre-dations of the Tulsi Short Hills property take place. W. C. Tuttle, another Tulsi son-in-law, who likes to read Westerns by an author of the same name, sells cedar trees; Govind disposes of citrus fruits and other agricultural products by the lorry-load; the saleable parts of the Ford V8 bought out of the common Tulsi purse are stripped off by someone when the car could move no more. Biswas takes off daily with a paltry number of oranges, and someone privately owns a cow. But beneath the apparently monolithic social structure at Hanuman House there had always been a spirit of selfishness and rivalry. It is simply that under the highly disciplined system at Hanuman House these human passions had been suppressed. If not, why was it that some sisters tried to distinguish themselves in particular ways -- for instance, by
brutality towards the children? And why was the family so upset when any member tried to break the hierarchal order by building his own house or giving his own children Christmas presents? Both jealousy and individualism had long been at work in Tulsidom, for the need for individuality is instinctive in the human race despite the fact that man is a social animal. In this connection, it is worthwhile to examine Anand's (Mr. Biswas' son) reaction to the doll's-house episode. Because his sister gets a large doll's house, Anand, in turn, wants a car, which shows that the system of joint ownership and subsistence-level amenities loses its hold upon the individual once the opportunity for novelty, private ownership, and unique, grandiose schemes is presented.

But Mrs. Tulsi's absenteeism changes the ambiance at Hanuman House. The living symbol of the past deserts, if only for part of the time, and the system founders. And once Seth is temporarily head of the establishment, a struggle for power ensues between himself and his sisters-in-law. They refuse to accept his authority unquestioningly. Only now do they see fit to point out the cultural anomaly that Seth is merely a Tulsi son-in-law and therefore not a rightful inheritor of power. The sisters therefore make a bid to "paddle their own canoe." It is this squabbling for power that causes Tulsidom to disintegrate rapidly. Eventually Seth moves out -- he
too is jealous of Biswas' success -- and Mrs. Tulsi de-
cides to move the whole chaotic household to a new set-
ting and thus accelerates the disintegration. At Short
Hills there is no Seth to organize, and so, besides the
depredation, there is the scandal of the eighty dollars
stolen from Govind and his wife, Chinta; and eventually
each sister begins feeding her children separately and
secretly. In Woodbrook there is a free-for-all competi-
tion among adults over acquisitions, over the parking of
cars, and over their children's academic progress, and
Mr. Biswas and W. C. Tuttle are hostile to each other
because they both happen to be interested in books.

So, because of various influences, Tulsidom and
Biswa are exposed to change. The difference is that the
Tulsis, unlike Biswas, try to resist these innovations.
This resistance is most clearly seen in their objection
to Dorothy the Presbyterian Tulsi daughter-in-law's way
of life. It conflicts with theirs, and the less contact
between Dorothy and themselves, the better. She outrages
the long-skirted, veiled sisters by her unseemly short
European dresses. She also has European toilet habits
and is immoral as far as the sisters are concerned.

But gradually, syncretism provides a natural way
out of the cultural dilemma, so that apart from the
religious hybridization already mentioned as practiced
by the Tulsis, there is the compromise by Shekhar in the
matter of his marriage. Having absorbed modern ideas and mixed with other ethnic groups whose marriage procedures are different from those of Hindus, Shekhar objects to having a wife chosen for him, and after suicide threats, eventually compromises with an Indian, educated, rich, high caste, but Presbyterian wife with an English name. But it is W. C. Tuttle who is the most noticeable product of cultural cross-breeding. He is a strict Hindu, but he is interested in the material as well as the spiritual life, and while he is a modern man, his manner of blowing his nose is definitely uncivil in terms of the modern society. As a matter of fact, Naipaul subjects the process of syncretism to satiric humor when he gives a pathetic but highly comic exposition of the attempt at cultural transplantation at Short Hills.

Now this estate in one of the valleys of the Northern mountain range is a relic of the old days of the white power class, of grand Creole life -- its English tastes and luxuries in a tropical setting. The Tulsis encounter here neither rice nor canefields but citrus, fruit and forest. Their neighbours are French-patois-speaking Negroes. Telling changes in architecture occur: the toilet becomes a sewing-room, the electric plant provides W. C. Tuttle, the physical-culture enthusiast, with dumbbells, a cowshed is raised on the cricket pitch, a temple is created. This apparent insensitivity to gracious
living is really imposed by deep-seated customs and cultural habits. Then Naipaul shows up the irony in the fact that the Tulsis, in following the lure of education as the gateway to material and social progress and money, at the same time create new and slightly modified versions of Hanuman House both at Short Hills and at Woodbrook: "The drawing room furnishings of Hanuman House had been similarly scattered. There could be no division of this house into the used and the unused, and the thronelike chairs, the statuary and the cases were left in the drawingroom, which in appearance and purpose presently became the equivalent of the Hanuman House hall" (pp. 400-401). Space is still at a premium, the widows scandalize the bourgeois Woodbrook society by putting out trays of oranges on the sidewalk, and the Tulsis make themselves objects of curiosity when the invasion from the country for Owad's farewell ceremonies begins, and to a limited extent communal eating arrangements for "readers and learners" are operated in the old fashion by a group of widows.

The cultural gap between the old and the new, however, widens relentlessly, so that in the urban situation, the individual family unit -- father, mother and children -- is certainly more in evidence than at Arwacas. Less Hindi is spoken now. Trinidad Creole English holds sway,
and the narrator informs us that the younger generation of Tulsi can understand, but not speak, Hindi. Meanwhile Dorothy and her children speak Spanish. At the same time, Woodbrook becomes a brain-improving community for the children, and among the adults, an arena for competitions over status symbols like cars, bicycles, glass-cabinets, side tables, suits, and radiograms. Indeed, it does not take long before Biswas starts displaying pride in his suits and ties, which he, like the Creole society, now accepts as symbols of westernization, progress, and respectability. He lures his children to Port-of-Spain by the exoticism of European-type food, and he is very embarrassed when Anand loudly declares in a restaurant that Coca Cola looked like "horse pee." His pride in his social promotion in having acquired a bicycle is only overshadowed by Govind's and W. C. Tuttle's cars, and when he joins the community of car-owners, he exhibits all the mannerisms peculiar to his class. Hampers, picnics, and a seaside holiday are now part of his existence. Meanwhile Shama devotes her attention to acquiring suits for her husband, to dropping names, throwing expensive tantrums, and she simply revels in her lone opportunity to converse with a white woman. The children too are very particular about their father's car; they accept that the dropping of "Mai" for "mummy" and "Bap" for "daddy" is a sign of cultural advance; Anand's brief
training in the benefits of the anonymity of a communal household cannot withstand the involvement and curiosity on the part of members of the Creole society in such vital matters as the jobs of schoolmates' parents, their possession or non-possession of a car and a maid, for, after all, these are class determinants, and the Creole society is as fussy about class as the traditional Hindu society is about caste.

Yet it is vital to remember that at the same time the old system of values is passing away, Mother India is the sustaining dream of the old Hindus, for they long for cultural stability and familiar patterns. But on the whole, the young are caught in strong cultural cross-currents and cease to dream of return to India:

Despite the solidity of their establishment the Tulsis had never considered themselves settled in Arwacas or even Trinidad. It was no more than a stage in the journey that had begun when Pundit Tulsi left India. Only the death of Pundit Tulsi had prevented them from going back to India; and ever since they had talked, though less often than the old men who gathered in the arcade every evening, of moving on, to India, Demerara, Surinam. Mr. Biswas didn't take such talk seriously. The old men would never see India again. And he could not imagine the Tulsis anywhere else except at Arwacas. Separate from their house, and lands, they would be separate from the labourers, tenants and friends who respected them for their piety and the memory of Pundit Tulsi; their Hindu status would be worthless and, as had happened during their descent on the house in Port of Spain, they would only be exotic. (p. 390)
Yet it is ironic to note that when presented with Owad's observations on the impurity of culture exhibited by Indians from India, the first-generation-overseas Indians see themselves, although far from the motherland, cast in the role of the last bastion of the old, pure, and noble culture: "Owad disliked all Indians from India. They were a disgrace to Trinidad Indians;... The sisters said they had never really been fooled by Indians from India; ...and they grew grave as they realized the responsibilities as the last representatives of Hindu culture" (pp. 539-450). So while the old is not totally useless or discredited, Naipaul does show its points of weakness, directly and through irony, as it submits to profound revolution and is betrayed on every side.

Among the issues treated in A House for Mr. Biswas is the problem of geographical uprooting of peoples and the results of culture contact. Each uprooting brings further weakening of traditional forces -- a problem faced by all racial groups in the West Indies and which raises the constant dilemma of "identity." If one takes these traditional forces as a yardstick, and one considers the slowness of change in traditional ways, then one could say, as Biswas and Naipaul do, that the society drifts without rules or patterns. This is not essentially true -- it is a statement of comparison, but the ironic
dichotomy of the situation persists: the old is invaded by the new but not completely.

Naipaul's vision of Trinidadian Hindu society (and by symbolic extension Creole society in general) seems balanced, for while the hero of the novel vigorously hoists the flag of independence and individuality, it is an image of exposure that Naipaul uses to describe the present condition of Trinidad. Without a Hanuman House to offer protection, "it was now every man for himself" (p. 407), for now, with the central control gone, "there was no one to complain to" (p. 405). There is a sadness in Biswas when he realizes that the reason for the look of abandonment at Short Hills is that "There was still no one to plan or direct" (p. 404). It is a measure of Naipaul's colonial experience that he lets Biswas not only fight against a system which tends to destroy individual personality, but that he also records Biswas' appreciation of the positive benefits of that system -- the sense of security it gave its members and the psychological and financial supports it afforded in times of illness and distress. Naipaul himself seems reluctant to praise or condemn either way of life, for not only does he present many aspects of Tulsidom in a ridiculous light, but he also seems to have intentionally lodged it as "Hanuman" or "monkey" house for satiric purposes. Yet it is not necessary to read his views on contemporary
Creole society in his *The Middle Passage* to see that his exposition of the new order in *A House for Mr. Biswas* shows that there is much that is petty, dishonest, and hypocritical in it, so that in the end there does not seem to be much to choose between the two.
THE HOUSE: SYMBOL AND REALITY

It is, of course, no great discovery to find out that the meaning of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is not in the plot but rather in the shaping of Biswas' life by his experience, at the centre of which is his search for a house. As was implied above, Biswas is a transitional figure, situated as he is between Raghu, the back trace, and the old Indian ways and Anand, Port-of-Spain, and Europe. The novel is a study of cultural history, and as Biswas drifts anchorless on a sea of syncretism, we are given an intimate and detailed vision of that middle generation of Indians, that unique group so uncomfortably poised between their traditional life and an encroaching creolization. As Landveg White notes:

Mr. Biswas is only forty-six when he dies, but by the end of the novel a whole history has passed before our eyes. Naipaul conveys the impression of decades elapsing, and not only by such obvious means as references to the world wars or to the coming of motor cars, cinemas, or to Americans. He notes the effects of economic change; Mr. Biswas, returning as a reporter to his birthplace, sees only 'oil-derricks and grimy pumps.' He records the alterations in his characters as they age: from Mrs. Tulsi the supreme monarch to Mrs. Tulsi the cantankerous invalid....He chronicles the stages in the loss of India, the shift from country to town, from Hindi to English, from preoccupation with Fate to a preoccupation with ambition, so that as we move from the world of Raghu to the
world of Anand, we are dealing not only with the life of a man but also with the history of a culture.29

It is not only significant but appropriate that Biswas does not win his house until near the end of his life, for, like Moses, he is destined to lead those who follow him to the Promised Land but not to enter it himself. Biswas spends his life trying to find a bridge on which to cross over from East to West, and the effort destroys him. His satisfaction comes from having something to bequeath to his children, for it is they who will live in that other world for which he has sacrificed so much. The spirit of this is beautifully evoked in the Prologue: "How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it [the house]; 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" (pp. 13-14). The word "unnecessary" is worthy of note, for Biswas' life is a struggle to establish his human necessity. As William

Walsh says,

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 none the less realised with such complete conviction, so living a reality that he becomes a model of a man, just as the history and the situation which formed him are seen to be a metaphor of the process which constitutes any man.  

At the centre of everything is the house, the metaphor that integrates the mass of detail that Naipaul injects into this novel. It is the object which gives Biswas a consistent vision and unifies his apparently frantic actions. Finally, it is the object which must be used to judge Biswas' success or failure. A single quotation will put the importance of the house in perspective: "Soon it seemed to the children that they had never lived anywhere but in the tall, square house in Sikkim Street. From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent" (p. 581). The house, then, destroys the chaos which had surrounded the children all their lives and institutes order and coherence. In this respect, the house is given a god-like function — that is, the ability to create something out of nothing. And the house is also responsible for the destruction of the painful memories of the past.

---

But even before the house is attained, its metaphorical significance is established and its therapeutic function determined, for it is the house that gives Biswas the strength to fight for his individuality against Tulsidom, and if his early attempts at paddling his own canoe are repeated failures, the fact that he never gives up is also a comment on the intensity of his dream. It seems clear that the novel is about Biswas' growing maturity and developing readiness for independence and individuality. Because of his unpreparedness for individuality, his early attempts are ludicrous and so he is repeatedly swallowed up by Hanuman House. Although he sees Hanuman House as coercive, he also sees it as a sanctuary, and this latter view is a confession of his inability to act as a full-fledged individual. To emphasize Biswas' decrepit independence, Naipaul provides symbolic evidence. First there is the burning of the house at the Chase and, more importantly, the story of Savi's doll's house, which seems analogous to Biswas' own efforts to build his house. The house is given to Savi to separate her from the faceless mass at Hanuman House, and for that reason the house has to be destroyed. It is eventually broken up by Shama, who by her action confesses her unpreparedness for individuality and her content with being one of the faceless mass at Hanuman House.
But the vision of the house remains with Mr. Biswas, and as the novel progresses the house metaphor expands to incorporate a variety of meanings. But to examine these meanings, as White points out, "is to realize the new quality of Naipaul's irony." The house is transformed from being in the Prologue a mere realization of an ordinary human dream, ("He was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house" [p. 5]), into the means of relieving all the children's psychological pain ("The mind, while it is sound, is merciful. And rapidly the memories of Hanuman House, the Chase, Green Vale, the Tulsi house in Port of Spain would become jumbled, blurred" [p. 581]).

At the same time that we laud Biswas' achievement, however, we begin to question the reality of his success. True, he has the house, but at what cost? He is almost on his deathbed, he is hopelessly in debt to his uncle as a result of borrowing to pay for the house, and the house itself is a poor investment. It is poorly constructed, overpriced, and its need for constant and costly repairs is a drain on his all but depleted resources. Biswas, on his deathbed, therefore, has achieved his ambition, but that very achievement has made him look...

---


67
more absurd, for he is cheated, indebted, and dying. There is a good deal of pathos in the passage that begins: "...everything by which he was surrounded was examined and rediscovered, with pleasure, surprise and disbelief. Every relationship, every possession" (p. 12). Naipaul then lists Biswas' possessions -- the kitchen safe, the typewriter, the hatrack, the bookcase, the dining table, the Slumberking bed, the glass cabinet, the morris suite, and the Prefect -- and the bald details dramatize the paltriness of his achievement. The final statement of the passage ("But bigger than them all was the house, his house" [p. 131]) serves only to emphasize this.

What one realises is that, to use White's words, "Achievement and failure are aspects of a single experience. The truth lies in the paradox, and the house is the image of the paradox."\(^{32}\) Paradox is at the core of A House for Mr. Biswas -- "It is written around the assumption that every judgement automatically implies its opposite."\(^{33}\)

But the vision of the house is also the resolution of the paradox, for it is this that makes Biswas, who seems unable to control his circumstances, a rebel. Adrift, always uncertain of where he wants to go,


\(^{33}\)Ibid.
Biswas constantly has choices forced on him:

At the road junction Mr. Biswas had still not decided where to go....And it was while he was trying to decide whether Ramchand's invitation could be considered genuine that a bus...came to a stop inches away with a squeal of brakes and a racking of its tin and wood body, and the conductor, a young man, almost a boy, bent down, seized Mr. Biswas' cardboard suitcase, saying imperiously, impatiently, 'Port of Spain, man, Port of Spain.' ...finding himself separated from his suitcase and hearing the impatience in the conductor's voice, he was cowed, and nodded. (pp. 307-8)

His foray as a journalist is equally the work of circumstances. But this life, like his ironic Brahminical existence as a child, is superficial, for the wish to escape is embodied in his story "at the age of 33."

In this respect Bipti's death is crucial, for it is here that Biswas comes to a real understanding of himself. He is aware of

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 to himself, that part which had for long been submerged and was now to disappear. (p. 480)

He is finally and assuredly certain that something is lost, and from this awareness comes his first individual, unaffected act. He writes a prose poem and for the first time "he did not think of rhythm; he used no cheating abstract words" (p. 484). A temporary discovery, but a discovery nonetheless. And it is important to note
that his discovery comes only with the death of that last remnant of the back trace, his mother. There is now no real tie to that universe, the final link is gone and Biswas is now forced to look to the other world for his reference point. The next section of the novel pointedly begins with a self-assertive statement from Biswas: "Whatever happened, Anand would go to college" (p. 485). This is an affirmation of his belief in that other, Western culture.

The irony of the situation is that, having embraced the alternative, Biswas gets no relief, for he is not comfortable in his new world either. Port-of-Spain, like the back trace, is still conceived in darkness. He still sees the streets as "dark, concrete caverns" (p. 486); he still sees the society as one without "rules and patterns" (p. 510); the years still stretch "ahead, dark" and night after night he sinks "into the void" (p. 495); finally, he loses "the vision of the house" (p. 494). Biswas' problem is that "he lacks the morally and aesthetically coherent environment in terms of which to discover who he really is."\(^{34}\) Ultimately, for Biswas, the journey from the back trace to Port-of-Spain is part of the absurdity of his life, for his journey is

\(^{34}\) White, V. S. Naipaul, p. 103.
from darkness to darkness. It is the vision of the house that shines a faint ray of light into the darkness of Biswas' world, since in Port-of-Spain it is those who possess houses who have a defined status. As unstructured as Port-of-Spain seems, there are some fundamental distinctions between those who have money and those without, and between those who own houses and those who do not. It is at first the vision and ultimately the possession of the house that give Biswas the tools necessary to carve out that order, that little area of light in the darkness. With the house, Biswas is like the little boy whom he had seen once when riding a bus -- that boy who was standing in the gloomy light, yet never distant from the darkness.

The house, though, for all its symbolic implications as an instrument for creating order, remains in the end a house -- especially for Mohun Biswas. At Green Vale, much of the excitement Biswas feels comes as a result of the physical details of the house: "Mr. Biswas was delighted by the new scantlings, and the new nails that came in several wrappings of newspaper. He took up handfuls of nails and let them fall again. The sound pleased him" (p. 254). The nails, the sawdust, the shape of the house on the freshly cleared plot of land -- these are the things that Biswas notices and comments on favourably. Later, when living in Port-of-Spain, he
is overjoyed to be in a house where each thing has and performs an assigned function, and he demonstrates his joy by making a pond and a rose garden. When he finally succeeds in getting his own house, all his impulses towards aesthetic order find fulfillment in the rose bushes, the orchids on the coconut stumps, the anthurium lilies, the sweet-smelling laburnum tree. The house becomes his personal area of peace won from the hostile universe that had surrounded him from his birth.

The point is forcefully made near the end of the novel, for the proof of Biswas' victory is contained in W. C. Tuttle's visit. The antagonism between W. C. Tuttle and Mr. Biswas, which had begun when Mr. Biswas called W. C. Tuttle's westerns "trash," had quickly developed into a battle of possessions. Biswas' defeat had seemed assured when W. C. Tuttle had bought an old wooden house. When Biswas buys his house, then, it is only natural that the Tuttles should visit in order to compare the two homes. In the semi-darkness of the evening light, the flaws are hidden, and the Tuttles, who had come to Sikkim Street to sneer, leave there jealous of Biswas' achievement. Even Shama and Mr. Biswas are deceived, or at least lulled, by the weak light, for "they forgot the inconveniences of the house and saw it in the eyes of the visitors" (p. 580).
But although Biswas remains ignorant of the symbolism his house incorporates, it is obvious that the house is much more than a shelter, for insofar as a shelter is concerned, the Tulsis provide this early in the novel. What Biswas (and the reader) finds is that it is not so much the protection of the body that is of paramount importance but rather the survival of the spirit, the soul. When Biswas rejects the Tulsis and Hanuman House, he immediately transforms the house from merely a means of keeping the rain out into a metaphor for survival at the highest spiritual level. Biswas' concern with freedom, the highest quality of life, is frustrated by Hanuman House, for if Hanuman House offers protection, it also denigrates its inhabitants. Biswas is aware of this from early in his relationship with the Tulsis, so that on his wedding-day, which should be the climax of his romantic dreams, he feels restricted and spends his time thinking of escaping from his new responsibilities. His fears are soon proven to be justified, for Hanuman House gives shelter on its own terms. Biswas can become a Tulsi and share the security they offer, but, in return, he has to relinquish any desire for forging ahead on his own. The extent of his denial of self is seen in his marital arrangement with Shama. Instead of Shama's going to his home, he stays with Shama, and so he is symbolically emasculated, since he fulfills the traditional role
of the Hindu daughter-in-law. He not only has to work for the Tulsis but also has to surrender his individuality. The anonymity which the other Tulsi sons-in-law accept is anathema to Biswas, for he has no intention of being a slave. He finds it detestable that the Tulsi daughters, when they want to be considered "destitutes," can offer to use their husbands' surnames as a cover for their Tulsi background. Hanuman House, then, has to be seen as the opposition, so to speak, of Biswas' house, for if Biswas' house invigorates, then Hanuman House emasculates. Biswas calls Hanuman House "a blasted zoo," referring to the Monkey god outside, but the embarrassing docility of the inmates makes the metaphor more all-embracing than Biswas knows.

Since Seth and Mrs. Tulsi are responsible for the smooth running of the "zoo," they are separate arms of the same bureaucratic machine. Although each complements the other, a contrast between them is informative. Seth is the visible head, giving direction to the labours of Hanuman House. More than anyone else in the novel, he seems familiar with the world he inhabits, as his handling of the "insuranburn" case clearly shows. But though the narrator strives to make Seth the personification of Power, he never quite succeeds, for Seth is instinctively a generous person, willing to give help when it is needed. He is concerned about Biswas' recal-
citrance, not because he thinks that Biswas will hurt Hanuman House but that he will harm himself. When he chastises Biswas, it is not because of animosity but because he finds Biswas' rebellion incomprehensible:

'I don't blame him,' Seth said, 'these paddlers go away, padding their own canoe -- that is how it is, eh, Biswas? -- and as soon as trouble start they will be running back here. Seth is just here for people to insult, the same people, mark you, who he trying to help. I don't mind....' (p. 111)

There is no reason to doubt Seth when he says that he doesn't mind, because he sees himself only in relation to the Tulsi household. He may be in command, but he is not in control. He, too, has lost his identity to the Tulsi name, and he never questions his function until much later when he is practically forced out of the Tulsi family. Throughout the novel, it is Seth who, by his humorous refusal to take Biswas seriously, creates a little niche, a little protected corner for Biswas and shields him from the worst barbs of Hanuman House. But Seth can never be Biswas' friend, for he (Seth) enjoys order for its own sake and loves to take care of other people's affairs. This Biswas finds objectionable because he sees it all as part of that conspiracy to strip him of his individuality. It is worth noting that Seth is absent from the scenes in which Biswas is physically assaulted -- when Govind beats him up and when Shama smashes the doll's house. If Seth objects to
Biswa's recalcitrance, he does not actively attempt to destroy the man. All he asks for is the appearance of conformity.

Mrs. Tulsi, on the other hand, cannot be satisfied with mere conformity. What she demands is the total abrogation of the spirit. When she says, "I don't see how anyone can be sorry for something he feels" [Naipaul's italics], the contrast between her and Seth becomes immediately clear. If one is ever inclined to think that Seth rules at Hanuman House, one only has to notice the chaotic state of affairs that obtain as soon as Mrs. Tulsi's directing influence is removed. When she goes to Port-of-Spain, Seth's orders are constantly challenged. As White points out, Naipaul emphasises the irony by having Biswas, in an act of rebellion, follow Mrs. Tulsi to Port-of-Spain, where his subservient position in the Tulsi family in general and to Mrs. Tulsi in particular, is assured. To have remained at Hanuman House might have given him some degree of personal freedom. As it is, that "studied manipulation of his deepest self" continues. 35

It is from this need to escape being manipulated by his environment that Biswas' rebellion springs. But as long as his rebellion lacks direction, as long as it

---

35 White, V. S. Naipaul, pp. 111-112.
merely destructive, Biswas remains in a real sense as emotionally dependent on Hanuman House as Govind, whom he ridicules for being subservient. Although Biswas sees himself as far superior to Govind, he is just like him in his relationship to Hanuman House. They are the "wife-beaters," the ones who are expected to be unfriendly and caustic. They are both lost without Hanuman House. Once Biswas strikes out on his own, it becomes clear that being ironic cannot substitute for being a bread-winner. Sarcasm and indefatigable wit are effective means of winning his son's affection, but these are not enough to pull Anand out of the water at Docksite when he is drowning. Biswas can deflate Mrs. Tulsi with statements about coal-barrels, but he cannot answer the questions that force themselves upon him -- where could he go? What could he do?

But the essential difference between Govind and Biswas is the vision of the house which the latter possesses. The house stands for all that Biswas believes that his life should be. It is indicative of his place in the universe, the light which repulses the darkness of the void that so terrifies Biswas; it is proof of his necessity, that he is accommodated; ultimately, it is the creative side of his rebellion, the justification of his refusal to accept things as they are.
Shama is fully aware of the significance of the house as soon as it is begun at Green Vale. She sees it for what it is -- the erection of Biswas' banner in his fight against tyranny -- and, in fear, she tries to cow him into abandoning the fight against his oppressors. One notices that Biswas' house at Green Vale is started not only in a desperate attempt to hold back the symbolic darkness which surrounds him but also as a direct result of the open contempt in which he is held by the labourers whom he ostensibly oversees. The house becomes, therefore, his escape from the derisive world as well as a means of showing that it is within his capability to perform some significant action. Man and object, therefore, become identified, indistinguishable. The house becomes an extension of Biswas, a means of aiding his rise from the void, of revitalizing his dying self. The imagery that begins the chapter containing the building of the house at Green Vale captures perfectly this half-dead-half-alive state:

Half the leaves were dead; the others, at the top, were a dead green. It was as if all the trees had, at the same moment, been blighted in luxuriance, and death was spreading at the same pace from all the roots. But death was forever held in check. The tonguelike leaves of dead green turned slowly to the brightest yellow, became brown and thin as if scorched, curled downwards over the other dead leaves and did not fall. And new leaves came, as sharp as daggers; but there was no freshness to them; they came into the world old, without a shine, and only grew longer before they too died. (pp. 205-206)
Biswas, too, comes into life "without a shine," supremely unnecessary, but unlike the leaves he has a choice. He can try to gain "freshness," to live instead of merely growing and dying; he can attempt to make his life meaningful and his death significant. And the house becomes the means of achieving all this. That is why, even if his house is at first conceived in desperation ("he couldn't wait any longer. Unless he started his house now he never would" [p. 237]), he exhibits so much enthusiasm when it is begun. That is why he wants everything to be new and hates it that economic necessity forces him to use second-hand materials. That is why his mental collapse is coincident with his fear that the house might never be finished. Biswas is so closely identified with the house that its partial destruction in the storm initiates his breakdown. Even after he has finally given up on the house, he remains incapacitated until he is told by Seth that the remains of the house had been burnt by the workers:

An immense relief had come upon Mr. Biswas. The anxiety, the fear, the anguish which had kept his mind humming and his body taut now ebbed away. He could feel it ebbing; it was a physical sensation; it left him weak and very weary. And he felt an enormous gratitude to Seth. He wanted to embrace him, to promise eternal friendship, to make some vow. (p. 31)

The house at Green Vale was doomed to collapse from the start because of Biswas' unpreparedness for acceptance
of his independence. But it is an action both necessary and informative, for the house at Green Vale dramatizes yet another aspect of the metaphorical significance of the house. It is at Green Vale that Biswas, for the first time, accepts his responsibilities as a father. This is clearly indicative of growth, especially when one compares it to his feelings of entrapment earlier in the novel. The bond between children and father grows as a result of the struggle against the Tulsi. Biswas has enlisted Anand and Savi as allies, and he gives them the weapons with which to fight the Tulsi household. He provides them with satiric barbs to throw during his absence. It is the gift of Savi's doll's house that brings about the most acrid of Tulsi reactions to Biswas. In the scene of the destruction of the doll's house, the forces of Hanuman House are arrayed against Biswas and the children. The remains of the doll's house, which Shama had destroyed, become almost personified, being described as having "torn skin" and "delicate joints." When Biswas accidentally rips his skin on the wall, the identification of the doll's house and the father-figure is complete. Biswas' reaction is as immediate as it is logical within the context of the novel's symbolism. He takes Savi away with him to Green Vale. But as he leaves he is stopped by a policeman for riding a bicycle without a light. As we have now come to expect, Biswas cannot save
himself, and it is Seth who eventually gets the court case dismissed. Hanuman House again has to save Biswas.

His acceptance of responsibility for Anand follows a similar pattern. As if Anand realizes the symbolic overtones of the house at Green Vale, he warms up to the project, exhibiting a protective, proprietorial air towards the house. It is Anand who voices the opinion that they should not use second-hand materials (a comment which is eventually responsible for Biswas' changed attitude towards the house). At Green Vale the relationship between father and son is cemented, and some of the brightest moments in the novel occur in this section. But the acceptance of responsibility is not enough, and in spite of the half-finished house, in spite of the children, the void continues to threaten, until finally Biswas "surrender[s] to the darkness" (p. 267). When the storm comes and Anand cowers in terror, Biswas can offer no assistance, and it is eventually the sons-in-law from Hanuman House who go to get Biswas and take him and Anand back to Hanuman House. But if Biswas appears to be down, the imagery of the final paragraph of the chapter indicates that he is far from defeated:

The oil lamp was not broken. There even remained some oil in it. The chimney was cracked, but still whole. Ramkhilawon brought out a damp box of matches from his trouser-pocket and put a lighted match to the wick. The wick, waterlogged, spluttered, the match burned down; the wick caught. (p. 293)
The relationship which develops between Biswas and his children during the episode at Green Vale never quite disappears, though it periodically weakens. When he returns from Port-of-Spain as something of a celebrity, the children are possessive about him and very soon he moves his whole family to Port-of-Spain. Living together as a family allows the love that had been planted during the stay at Green Vale to blossom into true affection and trust.

But if Biswas gains this victory, it is only temporary. Like the lost person, Biswas strikes out in a number of directions, hoping that one will be right but unable to judge which direction leads to his salvation. When Biswas goes to live at Short Hills five years later, it seems to reverse all that he had gained in the Green Vale episode. Yet here, the house is closer to his ideal than that at Green Vale. It is made with concrete, new and proper materials, occupies a site which approximates his "bower," and most important of all it is his effort from beginning to end -- he needs no help from Hanuman House. Ostensibly, the Short Hills house is the realization of Biswas' ambition, and in celebration of his success he asks Bipti to live with him. But the emotions from which the original vow of giving his mother shelter had sprung are long gone ("It was as if the relationship between them had been granted without their asking, and
had only been accepted" [p. 426]). Biswas' responsibilities, it is discovered, no longer lay in his relationship with his mother. They have been replaced by the more immediate responsibility to his wife and children; and if Bipti is non-committal, Shama and the children are clearly dissatisfied with the house at Short Hills. Shama thinks that Biswas' actions are provocative and "did not approve of the move" (p. 424). She resents and fears movement away from her family, in which she has a defined place and function. As usual, she sees Biswas' actions as undermining the foundation of her security, and like Seth she finds Biswas' rebellion incomprehensible. She cannot understand why he wants to be free of the Tulsis. For that reason, Shama from the beginning had attempted to divorce herself from her husband's actions, the supreme act of denial being the destruction of Savi's doll's house. This action had placed her squarely on the side of the Tulsis' forces.

At the same time that one wonders about Shama's loyalty, though, one is forced to be somewhat sympathetic, for her fears are very real. Biswas does threaten her security, and the rightness of his cause does not change this. When Biswas brings the doll's house to Hanuman House, the action ostracizes Shama as certainly as if she had bought the gift herself. Shama's denials of her husband spring from the terrible loneliness that results from
his actions, a loneliness which Biswas is both unwilling and unable to mitigate. But Shama is not always denying her husband; away from Hanuman House she becomes affectionate and playful. When she visits Biswas at Green Vale, she apologizes for having destroyed the doll's house, and, in a moment of rare insight, she blames Hanuman House, in the person of Chinta, for her actions. But inevitably Shama returns to her niche at Hanuman House, where she is comfortable, where her life is defined for her. In fact, what strikes the reader most forcefully about Shama is her unbelievable naïveté. She cannot become involved in Biswas' machinations; she has little interest in arousing her family's animosity and is always willing to overlook the insults aimed at her husband. The oppressive stolidity of Hanuman House is all that she desires for both herself and her children, and her actions for the greater part of the novel are aimed at making sure that she is not alienated from the Tulsis.

When Biswas, frustrated and hurt by her total acceptance of Hanuman House, takes the children away from her to Green Vale, the action is bound to fail because Biswas cannot accept part of his responsibility (the children) and ignore the rest (Shama). He finally leaves for Port-of-Spain, apparently abandoning Shama and the children, but his subconscious haunts him, and his first stories
are about four children and a mother. Finally Shama is allowed to join Biswas in Port-of-Spain, and there she predictably tries to recreate a Hanuman House. But since this is impossible, she is very lonely:

She was often alone in Port of Spain. The children were not anxious to go with her to Hanuman House, and as dissension there increased she went less often herself, regretting the old warmth, fearing to be involved in new quarrels. She had hardly moved outside her own family and did not know how to get on with strangers. She was shy of people of another race, religion or way of life. Her shyness had got her a reputation for hardness among the tenants, and she had done little to get to know the woman who lived in Owad's room. (p. 381)

Nor surprisingly, she forces Biswas to follow the Tulsis to Short Hills, showing total insensitivity to Biswas' struggle for individuality.

But if Biswas goes along at Shama's insistence, he is still not willing to give up his independence. So he builds his Short Hills house, which satisfied no one. The children do not like Short Hills, preferring the Creole atmosphere of Port-of-Spain:

The children wanted to go back to Port of Spain, to the life they had had before Short Hills. They knew about the housing shortage but blamed Mr. Biswas for not trying hard enough. The new house imprisoned them in silence and bush. They had no pleasures, no cinema shows, no walks, no games even, for the land around the house still smelled of snakes. The nights seemed longer and blacker. (p. 424)

What the Short Hills adventure shows is that Biswas' house, the symbol of his independence, involves more than
a rejection of the Tulsis and the erection of a shelter, that Biswas' independence is no longer an intensely personal experience. Whatever personal freedom he achieves must perforce include Shama and the children. His dilemma is created because they seem to desire different means of fulfillment. Biswas' problem, then, is to provide a congruent symbol that will unite the divergent drives of Shama and the children and satisfy their needs as a family, since it is only in the familial setting that the house as shelter and symbol becomes realized. When later, in Port-of-Spain, completely disillusioned and defeated, Biswas realizes that "he had lost the vision of the house" (p. 494), it is the familial experience during the holiday at Taco that gives him the strength to go on.

Biswa's house develops as a symbol as the novel progresses, beginning as simple shelter, then moving on to incorporate all that is beautiful in life, to a means of ensuring Biswas' endurance, his psychological and aesthetic fulfillment, and becoming the unifying factor in his development as a father, a husband, and a man. The dignity of his quest, however, is far out of keeping with the pettiness of his actions, as a look at the process by which he gets his house will show.

When Biswas leaves Short Hills and returns to the Tulsi house in Port-of-Spain, the regimen of Hanuman
House is almost completely gone. Without a hand to direct the energies in that household, it begins to destroy itself. There are factions now, and without Seth or Mrs. Tulsi to resolve conflicts these factions now actively engage each other. Govind, the former lackey, is now the one to be feared. Education, not tradition, now rules at Port-of-Spain, and the house is crowded with the learners and readers. But education offers only a dubious protection, since it is so irrelevant to Trinidadian life that if one didn't know better one would think that Naipaul was purposely satiric. Education, like Hanuman House, is relevant only as an escapist institution. It is at this point when disintegration and illusion are at their peak that Owad, the epitome of both forces, returns from England, and, for a short while, Hanuman House is recreated. It is also at this time that Biswas becomes irrevocably committed to his house in a way that is perfectly in character.

With Owad's return, the old Hanuman House values again come into play. It is just like "the old days which seemed to have returned with Owad" (p. 540), and there were discussions "like the old Hanuman House family councils" (p. 548). But, as Biswas is constantly pointing out, there were many contradictions contained in the old Hanuman House world, and this is made immediately obvious when Owad returns. When Owad steps off the boat in
Trinidad, Seth greets him in Hindi, and he is snubbed by Owad, who replies in English. Seth, the traditionalism of Hanuman House, and the past are totally obliterated in that moment on the dock. Not surprisingly, only English is spoken from this point on in the novel. Ignorant of his symbolic destruction of the Indian past, Owad convinces the Tulasis that they are the last stronghold of Hindu culture. But that culture is utterly and irrevocably dead.

The old days are gone, but the threat to Biswas represented by the Tulisis is not. He is still at their mercy, shifted around for their convenience. When he is forced to drive total strangers to the wharf to meet Owad and he realises that he does not know where his family is, he is aware of exactly what Owad's return means. He remembers that Owad was responsible for his worst humiliation, the beating at Govind's hands. He is fully aware when Owad insults Seth that education for the returned scholar has not meant enlightenment but a confirmation of the superiority complex that Owad had always exhibited. Biswas correctly reasons that Owad, culturally deprived and dazzled by the traditions of Europe, is more of a threat than ever before.

This time, however, Biswas is attacked only indirectly. The victim of Owad's oppression is Anand, who
had been basking in the reflected glory of a relative "who knew T. S. Eliot." His pride in Owad, however, is not enough to offset the disability of being Biswas' son, and he is chosen as the sacrificial lamb. Ironically, it is exactly this humiliation that father and son share that completes the process of cementing their love. It also includes Shama because, whereas earlier she could reject her husband to keep her family, she is now incapable of rejecting her children. When she tells Anand to apologize, it is an automatic gesture, for she is finally aware of the injustice of which the Tulsi can be guilty. At last all three elements involved in the house's symbolism are in agreement, and Anand's insistence to his father, "We must move. I can't bear to live here another day" (p. 551), merely reflects the sentiments of the whole Biswas family. Once given the consent of his family, Biswas makes the final commitment. That night he quarrels with Owad and insults Mrs. Tulsi. This is the re-enactment of an earlier Hanuman House scene, and the Tulsi family waits in hushed expectation for a repetition of the familiar scene. But things have changed. Govind, who had been the one ready with the whip to beat the rebellious slave, is now a changed man. The scene begins in identical fashion,
with Govind racing to Biswas’ room:

A wonderful sentence formed in Biswas’ mind, and he said 'Communism, like charity, should begin at home.'

Mr. Biswas' door was pushed open, fresh light and shadows confused the patterns on the walls, and Govind came into the room, his trousers unbelted, his shirt unbuttoned.

'Mohun!

His voice was kind. Mr. Biswas was overwhelmed to tears. 'Communism, like charity,' he said to Govind, 'should begin at home.'

'We know, we know,' Govind said.

Sushila was comforting Mrs. Tulsi. Her wail broke up into sobs.

'I am giving you notice,' Mr. Biswas shouted, 'I curse the day I step into your house.' (p. 557)

Govind is now Biswas' ally, urging him on in his rebellion. Yet Biswas' act of rebellion leaves him feeling "appalled in the room, not daring to move, to break the silence, unable in the dark and the stillness to believe fully in what had just happened" (p. 557). This scene, however, is the ultimate rejection scene. When the Biswas family moves into the house at Sikkim Street they have all rejected the ideals which Hanuman House had espoused and are now content to be away from the Tulsi family. Anyway, by this time, the Tulsi family is fast losing even the appearance of solidity and homogeneity which it once had. Seth is gone; Owad has left for good, and Govind is in opposition to the Tulsis. In Book One Seth had said to Biswas, "This was a nice, united family before you come" (p. 141), and now the
prophetic significance of that statement becomes clear. The dragon is destroyed, and it is Biswas who is St. George. Admittedly ludicrous, he is still the dragon-slayer.

As if Naipaul is afraid of the proportions that his protagonist has assumed, he again reduces Biswas to a figure of fun. Biswas finally gets his house but only after being swindled. Having struggled against the oppression of society and his environment all his life, all that he has prepared himself for is to be cheated. But his being cheated is inconsequential when compared to the sweetness of Biswas' ultimate triumph, for it is not by accident that the money which makes the purchase of the Sikkim Street house possible comes from the sale of the Short Hills house. Thus Biswas' present success is the result of the experience accumulated from past failures. All the themes of the novel now coalesce and become centered in the new house. Biswas' drive for individuality is finally achieved. He has found "his own portion of the earth" (p. 8), and out of it he creates that vision of beauty for which he had searched his whole life. Although Biswas' actual dying is not reported in the novel, it seems safe to assume that he died satisfied, for it must certainly have been gratifying to him to know that Shama's sisters "had all moved to their own houses" (p. 589); and the measure of his
success is discerned when this -- the destruction of Hanuman House -- is contrasted with his own house, which is "scratched" and "dusty and shiver[s] continually" but which, we are told, "did not fall" (p. 590).

The novel's symbolism is thus made clear. The house is both the representation and the thing itself; it accommodates both the aspiration and the body of the man. It fulfills the same function of finality and reward as the house of "unity" in *Piers Plowman* and the "Celestial City" in *Pilgrim's Progress*. It symbolizes the quest on which Mr. Biswas is engaged; and there are many false conclusions to this quest. The house completes him, as powerful an idea of self-fulfillment as the Grail is for Galahad. Because it is placed early and its shadows appear throughout, it dominates the novel as much as it does the title. But because the need for shelter is universal, the house never becomes obtrusive in its symbolism. When most symbolic, it is most the thing itself, keeping out the rain, or, when the house is shadowy and ill-made, letting it in. Even in its final form, it is no place but confirms a dream.

That the dream is less than it might have been provides the novel's pathos, but that it exists at all provides its epic qualities.
Both Wilson Harris and George Lamming have accused Naipaul of lacking in "revolutionary possibilities." Harris in particular makes a statement that is interesting when one considers *A House for Mr. Biswas*. He says that Naipaul's characters while "achieving pathos tend to consolidate our ordinary preconceptions about human beings." Naipaul's statement, if any, is therefore seen as essentially ordinary, predictable, and unimportant. Yet while Biswas is an ordinary figure, it is certain that by the end of the novel he has achieved a status totally out of keeping with his meagre existence.

Because of the ironic nature of the work, it is never possible to state with any certainty whether the novel is about Biswas' rise or fall. One suspects that the narrator is sympathetic to the hero, but the narrator's voice is so controlled, so objective, that it is not always possible to say for certain if the narrator is laughing behind his mask of inscrutability. For instance, what does one make of the narrator's voice in the following passage?

---


37 S. Waiyaki, p. 62.
Ten weeks before he died, Mr. Mohun Biswas, a journalist of Sikkim Street, St. James, Port of Spain, was sacked. He had been ill for some time. In less than a year he had spent more than nine weeks at the Colonial Hospital and convalesced at home for even longer. When the doctor advised him to take a complete rest the Trinidad Sentinel had no choice. It gave Mr. Biswas three months' notice and continued, up to the time of his death, to supply him every morning with a free copy of the paper. (p. 7)

The voice is antiseptic, the tone journalistic, the distance between narrator and subject total. There is no indication of empathy, and although this distance periodically lessens in the course of the novel, it never completely disappears.

In keeping with the objectivity of his stance, the narrator does not comment on the success or failure of his protagonist, and, so, it is left to the reader to assess Biswas' efforts. There is no denying that Biswas does make some progress in the novel. After all, he does escape the crushing poverty of the back trace, and he does have a house, a family, a car, two children in university, and some security when the novel ends. The question that presents itself is: does Biswas' progress constitute the stuff of which heroic ventures are composed? Biswas moves from total and conscious anonymity to a mediocrity which he views with a certain degree of satisfaction since he is unaware of that mediocrity. Again the narrator's voice prevents any clear-cut evaluation, for the antiseptic, journalistic tone is
also present at the end of the novel: "The cremation, one of the few permitted by the Health Department, was conducted on the banks of a muddy stream and attracted spectators of various races. Afterwards the sisters returned to their respective homes and Shama and the children went back in the Prefect to the empty house" (p. 590).

Since the narrator consciously refrains from evaluating his character, that task is left to the reader, and it is a task which must be undertaken if he is to arrive at an interpretation which reconciles tone, theme, and character. It is clear that Biswas' life is meagre, his advance limited, and his achievement small -- on a literal level. On this level, the novel is ordinary, for Naipaul presents a pathetic figure who is, predictably, crushed by the forces which surround him, a man who has struggled to no avail, for he has not escaped the morass of poverty, anonymity, and lack of necessity which are the forces of oppression in the novel. If this is what Naipaul says, then Wilson Harris and George Lamming are correct, for the novel would be, by any aesthetic standard, ordinary, since nothing is more predictable than that the weak man will be crushed by those forces of oppression. If Biswas (and Naipaul) is to escape the charge of being ordinary, it is necessary to show that Biswas does rise above the forces which
operate against him in the novel.

Tempting as it is to call these forces Fate, one is forced to resist the temptation, for any reference to a fated existence necessarily weakens both Biswas' struggle and the theme of the novel. It also denies the virtues that both Biswas and his wife have acquired through their life of struggle:

...Shama did not run straight off to her mother to beg her for help. Ten years before that would have been her first thought. Now she tried to comfort Mr. Biswas and devised plans on her own. (p. 7)

And again:

He didn't now care to do anything against his wife's wishes. He had grown to accept her judgement and to respect her optimism. He trusted her. Since they had moved to the house Shama had learned a new loyalty to him and to her children; away from mother and sisters, she was able to express this without shame, and to Mr. Biswas this was a triumph almost as big as the acquiring of his own house. (p. 8)

By the end of his life Biswas has achieved necessity. As Walsh says, "In the end it is by the filling of space with his own human concern that he achieves not simply the control but the creation of his own identity."\(^{38}\) And it is such a creation of identity that makes Biswas more than ordinary, for it is only on a metaphorical level that the novel can be sensibly

interpreted. In *A House for Mr. Biswas* the commonplace indifference of institutions like the *Trinidad Sentinel*, the Tulsi family, and the Community Welfare Department becomes a metaphor for the impersonal, inscrutable face of society, and it is in Biswas' refusal to accept this impersonality that his heroism and success lie.

As is always the case with heroic ventures, the acquisition of the goal in this novel is subordinate to the hero's struggle to achieve it. It is fitting, therefore, that Biswas should not enjoy the success that he has achieved but dies once his struggle is over. The reader becomes engaged with Biswas' quest at the same time that he laughs at Biswas' follies. By juxtaposing Biswas' life, with its small, apparently repetitive cycles, with Life itself, which goes on unconscious of the triumphs and failures of man, Naipaul gives Biswas' efforts a critical quality, for Biswas has to create a meaningful existence from the bedrock of indifference that surrounds him. He has to fight Life itself, which points out to Biswas "with increasing degrees of ferocity how less and less necessary he was." 39 In his refusal to accept what Life is determined to show him -- that he is a nobody -- Biswas achieves heroic status.

When Biswas was born in the back trace, poor as he

---

was, he still had the one thing that brings security to any biological organism -- a sense of place. The back trace was ordered, unchanging, secure, and predictable; Biswas had a defined status, and he was even somewhat special, for his horoscope made him a person to be careful with. The back trace was an inverted Eden, a place where Biswas' needs were considered, and if these were not always satisfactorily fulfilled it was not because of any malignancy in his environment, it was just the way things were. It is from this paradise of order that Biswas goes into exile to a world that is unordered and unmindful of his needs, and he spends the rest of his life attempting to regain the order and security of his boyhood. Since a return to the back trace is unthinkable, Biswas is forced to find a congruent symbol in his life to act as a focal point for the reinstatement of order. By exercising his power of choice as a human being to find meaning in his life, Biswas embraces loneliness: "He was to be a wanderer, with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis" (p. 40). But it is through the fortitude he displays in coping with his loneliness that Biswas lays claim to being heroic, for the hero always acts alone. His acts are those of the singular individual who confronts a hostile, uncompro-
mising environment and who triumphs in spite of adversity. That is why Biswas' attachment to Shama is tenuous at best. Biswas cannot afford to be caught in the mass, for there he is lost, so he constantly deserts Shama in order to perpetuate that heroic loneliness. Biswas' problem is that he, at first, confuses loneliness itself with heroism, not being aware that it is the actions performed in that loneliness which give life significance:

He was strained and irritable when he went back to Hanuman House....All his joy had turned into disgust at his condition. The campaign against the Tulsis, which he had been conducting with such pleasure, now seemed pointless and degrading. (p. 131)

It is not the isolation from Tulsidom, which is originally mere stubbornness, that gives Biswas any satisfaction, for such isolation merely makes him a buffoon and emphasizes his insignificance. Immediately after he thinks that his campaign is "pointless," he sums up his insignificance: "He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him" (p. 131).

It is from this frenetic, undisciplined, and selfish attack on Tulsidom that Mr. Biswas must fashion the tools for his heroic attack on an uncompromising society. The tool that is created is the house, and since Biswas defines this as his goal in life, it seems unfair, no matter how paltry, how insubstantial this goal, to judge his success on terms other than his own. One might attack him on his limited vision, his compromising of
his personal possibilities, but this would be to lose sight of who and what Biswas was, where he came from, and what he attempted and achieved. For what strikes young Biswas as he contemplates his commitment to the Tulsi is that, however imprisoned, however lost, unimportant, and frightened he feels in Hanuman House, life outside is still more menacing and more chaotic. When Biswas steps out into that threatening world in spite of his fear, in spite of his loneliness, he voluntarily dons the mantle of the hero. Bandied about between desperation and anger, panic and apathy, guilt and ennui, Mr. Biswas never loses his resilience. Confronted with almost insuperable obstacles to his escape from nonentity, Biswas is able time after time to mount an attack on the forces that strive to pull him down. What can you say about a man who, with no prospects of economic success, with a family to support, a man who has just watched the symbol of his integrity -- his house -- burn to the ground, yet is able to bounce right back and attack the world afresh?

He was going out into the world to test it for its power to frighten. The past was counterfeit, a series of cheating accidents. Real life, and its especial sweetness, awaited; he was still beginning. (p. 305)

There are no ironic overtones in the passage, for the narrator for the moment seems close to his subject and is sharing the reader's admiration of Biswas' indomi-
tability. And this is probably the highest compliment that could be paid to Mr. Biswas, for the narrator strives untiringly to avoid any emotional entanglement with the protagonist, and yet even he is won over.

Only at the end of the novel can one truly evaluate the monumental importance of the house to Mr. Biswas and understand the universal implications of the novel. Biswas' displacement is representative enough of our predicament: a man without a past, an orphan wavering between equally dubious cultural alternatives, winning a sort of independence and returning in humiliation to the people he is still forced to fight, turning anxiety into absurdity by using humor as a weapon and an escape, trying to create an identity from the void, and sometimes, unknown to himself, exercising and expressing identity in the very act of searching for it. The interest in the novel arises out of the protagonist's struggle to ascertain his rightful place in defiance of a society too fragmented to provide the order he is instinctively urged to seek. The very qualified success that Biswas achieves undoubtedly makes him appear much less than a heroic figure, but one must allow that his experiences hardly seem calculated to inspire in him a sense of personal worth powerful enough to combat a legacy of social and economic inferiority. Yet from this inchoate beginning Biswas is able to forge a symbol of
success which keeps his life from being totally wasted, "unnecessary and unaccommodated." It is in overcoming the difficulties that encumber him in his pursuit of the symbol of his necessity that Biswas rises above the fetid environment that surrounds him. His shaky, poorly-built house achieves a metaphorical grandeur, and he rises above his pettiness to epic heroism.
LIST OF WORKS CITED


Boxhill, Anthony. "Mr. Biswas, Mr. Polly and the Problem of V. S. Naipaul's Sources." *Ariel*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (July 1977), 129-141.


VITA

The author, Ronald Alexander Williams, was born in Barbados on 30th September, 1950, to Mrs. Elsie Williams. He attended Coleridge and Parry High School in Barbados and in 1968 was awarded four G.C.E. certificates at "O" level. In 1970, he was awarded two "A" level certificates from the Barbados Community College. From 1970 to 1973 he taught high school in Barbados and in the fall of 1973 came to Lehigh. He was awarded the B.A., summa cum laude, in 1976 and was initiated into Phi Beta Kappa. He was granted a Teaching Assistantship in the Department of English and worked in that capacity from 1976 to 1978.