

'To lay claim to one's portion of the earth': Leaving a Mark on History in *A House for Mr. Biswas*

Oindrila Ghosh

Naba Ballygunge Mahavidyalaya, Kolkata, India

Abstract

V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* seems to express the novelist's personal need and quest for an anchorage in a ceaselessly fluid existence that was his peculiar Caribbean Post-Colonial legacy. Through the search for and endeavours of his almost-picaresque hero, Mr. Biswas, to build a house for himself by rejecting a readymade household, Naipaul seeks to both renounce a second-hand tradition thrust upon the likes of him by the receding colonial forces, as well as recreate for himself an identity, a house to house the cultural uniqueness and identity of the Trinidadian Indian exiled, dispossessed, emigrant diaspora. The metaphor of the house gathers significance not just as a material possession that will provide shelter and security but a symbol of achievement – a sense of leaving a mark on history, a means to escape the void. Naipaul through his narrative finds both a house and a home, or a literary tradition, that his exilic lineage had denied him.

[Keywords: Postcolonial, diaspora, house, history]

But bigger than them all was the house, his house.

How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it...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. (Prologue)ⁱ

This extract from *A House for Mr. Biswas*, which has been chosen as the epigraph of this paper, seems to effectively express the novelist's, V. S. Naipaul's, personal need and quest for an anchorage in a ceaselessly fluid existence that was his peculiar Caribbean postcolonial legacy. Through the search for and endeavours of his almost-picaresque hero, Mr. Biswas, to build a house for himself by rejecting a readymade household, Naipaul seeks to both renounce a second-hand tradition thrust upon the likes of him by the receding colonial tide, as well as recreate for himself an identity, a house to house the cultural uniqueness and identity of the Trinidadian Indian exiled, dispossessed, emigrant diaspora. In this novel Naipaul's focus has shifted from the immediate problems of the people of Trinidad, as in his first three novels, to that of the incidence of cultural clash. Naipaul assumes that the withdrawal of the colonial power ushers in chaos because the native dictators who replace them in West Indies and Africa have no real interest in the welfare of their people. In this novel Naipaul charts the position of the colonial man in a

Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities (ISSN 0975–2935), Vol.3 No.4, 2011.

Ed. Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay

URL of the Issue: <http://rupkatha.com/v3n4.php>

URL of the article: http://rupkatha.com/V3/n4/15_A_House_for_Mr_Biswas_Naipaul.pdf

Kolkata, India. © www.rupkatha.com

stagnant society, the protagonist is a stranger without any roots in his own land. Mohun Biswas is depicted as a marginalized individual who is constantly mobile in order to find his place in the limited world of Trinidad. As Mr. Biswas moves through his precarious existence through life – pushed out of his ancestral house and for the next thirty-five years being buffeted by destiny from one house to another, as unwelcome intruder or lonely inhabitant to finally stepping from the ‘void’ into an ordered universe symbolized by his very own house – Naipaul through his narrative finds both a house and a home, or a literary tradition, that his lineage of exiled personages had denied him. The protagonist assumes, almost, the stature of an ‘Everyman’ who journeys through the mire of life and faces the bludgeonings of fate to attain a portion of the earth before he dies. Though Naipaul has been seen by many critics as someone who occupies a kind of no-man’s-land as he is not Indian, nor is he English and he felt he was not Trinidadian (De: *Sunday Times*) his hero Mr Biswas is imbued with the ardent desire to finally settle down, belong to, possess and leave a mark on this foreign land of his birth with which he initially shares a love-hate relationship. This is a desire which is integral to all individuals of a diaspora. It has been suggested by Angshuman Kar in his essay that Mr Biswas’s journey from place to place actually culminates in his attaining a space, a vocation or workspace, for himself in the nascent nation of Trinidad (Kar: 69, 72). His desire to belong and be part of this place, something which will give him an identity and selfhood, is evident:

He was no longer content to walk about the city. He wanted to be part of it, to be one of those who stood at black and yellow bus-stops in the morning, one of those he saw behind the windows of offices, one of those to whom the evenings and week-ends brought relaxation. (‘Amazing Scenes’).

Just as attainment of a house becomes the objectification of the desire to gain a foothold in the hostile world of Trinidad, so also the desire to infiltrate the workplace is actually the manifestation of the latent desire to be incorporated in the emergent nation.

A House for Mr. Biswas belongs to such classics of literature as Patrick White’s *Voss* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* in which through the portrayal of an individual the complexities and aspirations of a previously ignored colonial or colonized culture are articulated, given epic and mythic stature. The protagonist Mr. Biswas shares Naipaul’s own sense of alienation, the sense of travelling everywhere but belonging nowhere. It carries the motif of exposing the predicament of souls which are unanchored in search of anchorage, in search of a house, in the ebb and flow of life, present in all his writing.

The discovery of the New world by Columbus paved the way for the inroads of European settlers who destroyed the indigenous tribes and their cultures, thus, depriving the islands of a native culture that is available to the postcolonial African, Asian or Pacific writer. The Caribbean writer is deprived of any tradition of continuity. Much of the society of West Indies is composed of

descendants of slaves – native as well as those slaves deported from India. Naipaul was the descendant of the latter community and his forefathers were a destitute community. This image of dispossession and rootlessness, of being homeless, becomes the recurrent metaphor in *A House for Mr. Biswas* – the search of a man who is historically displaced, floundering in a derelict land. The house in fact becomes a substitute for the unconscious search for a lost land which haunts Naipaul, a search which is stored in the depths of his unconscious and which seeps out only on rare occasions in his narrative, as in a single passage in the novel, where Bipti, Mr. Biswas's mother, comes to live with them for a fortnight in the Shorthills:

The ground in front of the house had been only partly cleared, and one afternoon, when he had pushed his bicycle up the earth steps to the top of the hill, he saw that part of the ground, which he had left that morning cumbered and unbroken, had been cleared and levelled and forked. The black earth was stoneless; the spade had cut cleanly into it, leaving damp walls as smooth as a mason's work. Here and there the prongs of the fork had left shallow parallel indentations on the upturned earth. In the setting sun, the sad dusk, with Bipti working in a garden that looked, for a moment, like a garden he had known a dark time ago, the intervening years fell away. Thereafter the marks of a fork in earth made him think of that moment at the top of the hill, and of Bipti. (The Shorthills Adventure).

The act of his mother digging the earth, the mark of the fork on the wet earth, the birth place of seeds, symbolic of growth and identity transports Mr Biswas into a mystical reverie where time seems to have suddenly frozen and made him stand face to face with the vision or dream of a land lost; face to face with the blurred image of an identity misplaced, almost lost, in the palimpsest of history as one among generations of expatriates exiled in an alien land. The significance of the moment of vision is heightened because it is his mother, the source of his life and identity, digging into the soil for the foundations of the source of life and identity which Mr Biswas seeks painfully in the entire course of the novel, perhaps unconsciously substituting this search with the search for a house of his own. The image of the 'garden he had known a dark time ago' has the ring of the universal loss of the Garden of Eden by Man, a garden we have all known and which lives on in our unconscious, making us exiles in search for that lost land, akin to Mr Biswas's, and Naipaul's, task of unearthing the land of their origin from the depths of their unconscious. This loss of the traces of his origin haunts Mr Biswas again and again in the course of the narrative and the dispassionate narration of the pulling down of the ancestral hut of his birth, the filling up of the swamp land and the building of a dam in the streams of his childhood fishing games heightens the pathos and poignance of this loss of identity:

When Mr Biswas looked for the place where he had spent his early years he saw nothing but oil derricks and grimy pumps . . . his grandparent' house

had also disappeared, and when hut of mud and grass are pulled down they leave no trace. *His navel-string, buried long after, had turned to dust.* The pond had been drained and the whole swamp region was now a garden city of white wooden bungalows . . . [t]he world carried no witness to Mr Biswas's birth and early years. (Before the Tulsis) [My italics].

His navel string, which had linked him to his mother's womb, was lost to flux and to the superimposition of symbols of progress on the locale of his birth and childhood, reminiscent of the way the indentured labourers from India eventually lost their identity cut off from the country of their birth, only to flounder in a land which could not equip them with an adequate new identity. Mr Biswas's acute sense of awareness of being without an identity in his native land makes him struggle all his life to leave a mark on history; to leave his unique footprint on the face of human history and the 'house' becomes just an external and tangible symbol of that intangible craving lurking at the centre of his being.

The metaphor of the house gathers significance as it gives the struggle of an individual to possess a house almost mythical proportions and significance. The image of a house provides both value and purpose to the postcolonial subject bestowing on his search an aura of dignity. Although at the end of the novel Mr Biswas's achievement is an incomplete one it does not rob him of the painstaking efforts he invests in attaining it. Throughout the novel in his struggles in regimented, dilapidated and lonely houses the vision of the 'house', his house, sustains Mr. Biswas as it is not just a material possession that will provide shelter and security but a symbol of achievement – a sense of having done something worthwhile, a sense of leaving a mark on history, a means to avoid annihilation and escaping the void. For Mr. Biswas, as well as for the author, it is the only way of becoming more than the short-lived flying ants carried away as food by the fire ants – so graphically depicted in the scene at the half-built house in the Green Vale phase.

The journey of Mr. Biswas's life is punctuated by his seamless temporary haltages at houses where he lives without ever leaving any marks of his being or existence on them; nothing which might make his absence felt or presence valued. He records this poignant and painful fact in an amused way:

He had lived in many house. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him! . . . in none of these places he was being missed because in none of these places had he ever been more than a visitor, an upsetter of routine. Was Bipti thinking of him in the back trace? But she herself was a derelict. And, even more remote, that house of mud and grass in the swamplands: probably pulled down now and ploughed up. Beyond that a void. There was nothing to speak of him. (The Tulsis).

The pain and darkness of these lines bring out the pathos of the protagonist, and of Naipaul too, as culturally uprooted with the acute sense of not being able to fall back upon anything beyond a borrowed identity in a land to which his forefathers had arrived as labourers.

Thus, the 'house' in *A House for Mr. Biswas* symbolizes the dislocated, void-of-native-traditions, displaced postcolonial writer's deepest desire to create an identity bereft of his destitute past as well as an individual's ceaseless efforts to put up coherence through a structure of brick, stone and cement (though not unmixed with blood, sweat, dreams and aspirations) in the face of shapelessness; by erecting a structure, a kind of coherence out of the chaos and attempting at 'building a . . . residence to annihilation' (Nandan: 65).

The focus on this aspect of the 'house' acts as the symbol and metaphor of an individual's search for anchorage in a world of flux as well as expresses a rootless, exiled writer's need for creating a tradition and culture devoid of the dregs of the receding tide of a colonial past. Through Mr. Biswas' journey from one kind of house to another, until he finds himself in the house of his vision, Naipaul charts the unsatisfactory and difficult quest of a writer for anchorage and creation of a cultural identity. The different houses through which the protagonist flounders represent the different stages in the creation of an identity – dependent on, aligned with or independent of society and community.

For the protagonist, Mr. Biswas, the search for a house becomes a search for himself, a search for what he really wants out of life, a quest for individuality and a search for a place in the flow of seamless history. The overpowering nature of his need is borne out early in the narrative when the ancestral hovel has to be sold after his father's death – the narrator says:

For the next thirty-five years he [Mr. Biswas] was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. (Pastoral)

Thus he was placed with two options, either to make do with that which came his way or to start from scratch to create a world of his own out of nothingness, a kind of choice confronting the postcolonial subject. Mr. Biswas feels severely repressed and cowed down before the matriarchal sway of Mrs. Tulsi and his agent Seth. His predicament in Hanuman House is the microcosm of a slave society. It has been suggested that:

Mrs Tulsi needs workers to build her empire. She, therefore, exploits the homeless and deprived fellow Hindus. She has grasped the psychology of the slave system. Like the Caribbean society, Tulsidom is constructed of a vast number of the disparate families, gratuitously brought together by the economic need of the high caste minority. To accept Hanuman House is to acquiesce to slavery. Mrs Tulsi, the cunning coloniser, justified her exploitation with her foxy explanation that she is really doing her subjects

good. Seth, in his bulcher boots, is the slave master: a brutal and brutalising symbol. (Nandan, 61).

Mr Biswas's rebellion against this fortress of slavery acquires heroism and significance but the recurring thoughts in his mind evince lack of confidence and direction: 'but go where? And do what? What could he do?' (The Chase). The sense of fear at being the originator after being the recipient of orders and decisions all along is evident from these thoughts. He calls the Tulsis obnoxious names and is simply disgusted with all the clamour and cacophony of the mammoth household but no sooner is he out of it all, at the Chase, that his first reaction are striking –

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 afternoon; Hanuman House would be warm and noisy with activity. Here he was afraid to disturb the silence. (The Chase)

Even in the Greenvale episode, alone with Anand, in the face of a cataclysmic storm Mr. Biswas feels the dire need of protection and community against the hostilities of the natural world. Mr. Biswas's plight symbolizes the plight of the postcolonial subject – rebelling against the oppression of the Colonizer, trying to escape but does not know where to escape – having no past to retrieve, a future indistinct – and he fears falling into a void. The novel highlights the image of the house all through and embodies the protagonist's ardent desire for a house of his own which actually translates into his attempt to acquire his unique social identity in a transitional society. Mr. Biswas's quest for identity in *A House for Mr. Biswas* actually sheds light on the dilemma of the anchorless existence, uncertainty and vain struggle for security and identity in a postcolonial society. To be a colonized subject is to be secure, protected, fed with the decisions of the rulers and to be thrown into freedom entails the exertion of one's own mind and capacities to fend for oneself. The story of the novel is punctuated with Mr. Biswas's repeated bouts of exhilaration at being free and his breakdowns and backsliding into the refuge of Hanuman House. After his recovery from mental collapse, assisted by the care of the Tulsis, his first thoughts are: '[h]e welcomed the warmth and reassurance of the room. Every wall was solid . . . unrattled by the wind and rain.' (A Departure).

However Hanuman House is not an evolving society but a kind of temporary refuge for those unable to find a foothold in Trinidadian society, which lacks in the resources for authentic independence. It provides a way to elude being sucked into the void and dodge the inhospitable outside society but at the cost of strict regimentation. Mr. Biswas's rebellion against this security provided by Hanuman House is bound to fail time and again without money, power skills or available employment for his westernized sense of self and individuality. His search for his house is not a desire to abandon community or family ties but the desire to form a new society whose nucleus will be he himself, never again having to take orders from others and work for the benefit of any agency other than his own. The ambition of not being assimilated in the throng of the Tulsi family is a

negative ambition but his struggles nevertheless attain heroism in a milieu which is devoid of heroes or heroic causes. These lines of the prologue highlight the protagonist's desire for an orderly life and an anchorage in the world of flux:

And during these months of illness and despair he was struck again and to again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it: to walk in through his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family, to wander freely from room to room and about his yard, instead of being condemned, as before, to retire the moment he got home to the crowded room in one or the other, of Mrs. Tulsi's houses, crowded with Shyama's sisters, their husbands, their children. (Prologue).

The protagonist's feeling for his own house is similar to that of a soldier who has won a long and difficult war. The house attains the stature of self-identity, self-worth and his unique foot print on the flow of human history.

Thus, in a society which has to offer no or limited possibilities, Mr. Biswas's appeal and universality lies in the fact that he emerges triumphant after his repeated failures to escape from the clutches of repression of selfhood, to finally achieve the possession of his own house, flawed though it is in material terms. The house becomes a legacy which Mr. Biswas can bequeath to his family. Just as through his writing Naipaul attempts to salvage his own family history and the history of the Trinidadian Indian community so also the hero of his novel makes a final effort to create a new world out of nothingness, thereby leaving behind his footprint on history and escaping annihilation and attaining fulfilment.

Note

ⁱ All references to Text are From: Naipaul, V. S. *A House for Mr Biswas*. London: Penguin, 1969. Print.

References:

- 1) De, Shobhaa. 'Politically Incorrect'. *The Sunday Times*, 14 October, 2001. 5th November, 2011. Web. <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1523258558.cms>>
- 2) Kar, Anghuman. 'V.S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas: Interfacing Workplace and Nation-Space' in Ketaki Dutta ed. *Indo-Anglian Literature: Past to Present*. 2nd ed. Kolkata: Booksway, 2011.
- 3) King, Bruce. *V. S. Naipaul*. London and Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1993. Print.
- 4) Mustafa, Fawzia. *V. S. Naipaul*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.
- 5) Nandan, Satendra. 'The Diasporic Consciousness' in *Interrogating Postcolonialism* ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee and Harish Trivedi, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advance Study, 1996. Print.
- 6) Gupta, Suman. *V. S. Naipaul*. Plymouth: Northcote House, 1999. Print.

Oindrila Ghosh is Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of English at Naba Ballygunge Mahavidyalaya (College) in Kolkata. She graduated in English Literature from Presidency College, Kolkata in 2003, with second position in the whole University and received National Scholarship. She earned her Masters from Jadavpur University in 2005. She cleared the National Eligibility Test for Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) and Lectureship in 2004 and was JRF at the English Department in Jadavpur University. She is currently carrying out research on the depiction of motherhood and the victimization of women in the short stories of Thomas Hardy, for a Ph.D. degree at Jadavpur University, under Professor Shanta Dutta. She received a prestigious Grant from the Charles Wallace India Trust to visit and source materials for her ongoing research at The British Library, London in 2009. She has published a number of papers in reputed journals and presented papers at national seminars and conferences.
