
UNIT 1 NAIPAUL AND HIS CRITICS

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are to provide information about the life of V.S. Naipaul so that the complex influences that shaped his thinking as a writer are understood, and to examine in detail some of his other works besides *A House for Mr. Biswas*. This would give you a further insight into the different phases of his creativity. Finally it is also my endeavour to provide an overview of the indenture or 'girmit' system, which will serve as a backdrop against which you are to study *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

1.1 A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (b. 1932) has been awarded almost every international literary prize except the Nobel for which he has been shortlisted many times. Despite controversial attitudes and statements, some of which he shrugs off contemptuously like his alleged support of Hindutva in a newspaper interview, he remains one of the best writers of our times. His concern with the quality of his work comes out in a recent interview-based feature published in *Indian Today Plus*. To quote: "I spend a lot of time writing in my head when I am working on a book" (p.57) Only when he is satisfied with the way the day's writing has taken shape, does he put it on the computer. The result is predictable and in Naipaul's own words, "I have never written an unconsidered sentence. I have never even put an unconsidered punctuation mark." (p.57) For him writing is a liberating experience as one of his letters, written in 1987, suggests.

I wanted to be a writer because I wanted to be famous; because I wanted to be free... The contemplation that goes with writing, and the clarity it requires, make for calm. It is for me the equivalent of religion.
(Naipaul Archives)

Before we get on to some of the biographical details that provide a background against which *A House for Mr. Biswas* should be studied, a basic question has to be answered. Why did V.S. Naipaul decide to live and write in England? Naipaul has answered this question himself in his acceptance speech on being awarded the first David Cohen British Literature Prize in 1993 for a 'lifetime of achievement' :

Writing is more than a matter of spirit. A book is a physical commercial object. It requires a well-organised society. If you are going to make a living

as a writer you need publishers, reviewers, bookshops, libraries, a public looking for new work : a book trade.

When I was starting in the mid 1950s, there was no other place where I could have set up as an English-language writer, and found encouragement. It is, of course, different now. So as a writer I was separated, and sometimes deeply separated, from my background – if you take Trinidad as my ancestral background.

The concluding sentence of the passage cited is significant as it provides a valuable clue to the persona of exile that Naipaul assumed at the outset of his writing career and which has since been associated with his creativity. This can be linked with his ancestry of indentured labour, his brahmanic upbringing (which he tries to subvert but which surfaces time and again in his writings) and his colonial education in Trinidad and England, all of which combined to breed an exclusivity, an impelling desire to assert and retain one's individuality. So all his writing is done in his Wiltshire cottage where he gets the silence and solitude needed for his concentrated work.

In his early writing, namely *A House for Mr Biswas* the novel under study, Naipaul draws upon his life and experiences in Trinidad, especially the relationship with his own father Seepersad Naipaul. However, he does not talk about his ancestry or his early life till much later. *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* (Andre Deutsch, 1984) is made up of two "personal" pieces, "Prologue to an Autobiography" and "The Crocodiles of Yamousoukro". Of these, the first attempts to trace the beginnings of Naipaul's literary career. To quote him : "It is an account of something less easily seized : my literary beginnings and the imaginative promptings of my many-sided background."(p.9)

"Our own past was, like our idea of India, a dream." (p.61) says Naipaul in *Finding the Centre*. This is true not only of the descendants of indentured workers in Trinidad but most of those in Mauritius, Fiji and other former colonies where they had gone towards the end of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century to work on the plantations. While the third section of this unit will be devoted to a detailed discussion of this category of immigrants, it is sufficient to say that most of them were poor and illiterate, venturing out of their village for the first time in the hope of earning a better livelihood or at times to ward off starvation or disgrace. Very few of them preserved any letters or records pertaining to their lives in India and over the years, the tenuous links snapped.

However, Naipaul has some idea of the region from where his ancestors had migrated though he does not know much about them as this remark suggests. "Of my mother's father, so important to our family and my father's childhood I knew almost nothing. My father's father had died when my father was a baby."(p.61)

Naipaul's great grandmother on his father's side, migrated to Trinidad towards the end of the nineteenth century. According to Naipaul, she was in dire circumstances.

About 1880, in the ancient town of Ayodhya in the United Provinces in India, a young girl of the Parray clan gave birth to a son. She must have been deeply disgraced, because she was willing to go alone with her baby to a far-off island to which other people of the region were going. That was how the Parray woman came to Trinidad. She intended her son to be a pundit; and in the district of Diego Martin she found a good pundit who was willing to take her son in and instruct him. (There was no hint, in the tale I heard, of sugar estates and barracks and contract labour.)

The years passed. The boy went out into the world and began to do pundit's work. He also dealt, in a small way, in the goods Hindus used in religious

ceremonies. His mother began to look for a bride for him. . . . It happened that three brothers of a suitable clan had made the journey from India together, and it happened that one of these brothers had seven daughters.

The Parray boy married one of these daughters. They had three children, a girl and two boys. They lived in the village of Cunupia, not far from Chaguanas, in a house with a galvanized-iron roof. Quite suddenly, when the youngest child, a boy, was only two, the young Parray fell ill and died. Somehow all the gold coins he had hoarded disappeared; and the aunts and uncles thought the children and their mother be sent back to India. Arrangements were made but then at the last moment the youngest child didn't want to go. He ran away and hid in a latrine, and the ship sailed without them. (Ibid p.65-66)

The "Parray" woman who took such a bold step to ensure her son's happiness in surroundings where no one would know about the circumstance of his birth, was Naipaul's great grandmother. The young boy who did not want to go back to India was Naipaul's father Seepersad Naipaul. He was later sent to school and not made to work in the sugar cane plantation as was customary so that he might become a pundit and carry on the traditional vocation of the family.

The word "Parray" is sure to make the Indian student curious. One can safely assume that it is a derivative of "Pande", a brahmin surname quite common in that region. It is significant that Naipaul's father wanted to become a writer, though he came from a background with little education and equally little knowledge of English, in a small agricultural society where writing was considered an indulgence. Evidently there was a creative impulse which got transmitted to the son and found fulfillment. As Naipaul puts it, "The ambition to become a writer was given me by my father." (p.33) The relationship between Mr Mohun Biswas and his son Anand in the novel, which will be analyzed in later units, draws on this aspect of Naipaul's relationship with his own father.

Like Naipaul's paternal great grandmother, his mother's father had travelled out of India as an indentured immigrant at the turn of the century. He appeared to have done well as the description of the family house in Chaguanas, a little market town in the Indian area of Trinidad, indicates :

My mother's family house in Chaguanas was a well-known local 'big house'. It was built in the North Indian style. It had balustraded roof terraces, and the main terrace was decorated at either end with a statue of a rampant lion. (Naipaul, *Finding the Centre*, 35)

Though Naipaul says, "I didn't like or dislike living there; it was all I knew" (*Finding the Centre*, 35) it is clear that the house provided a kind of security that Naipaul's father with his poor agricultural labour background and inability to find a stable job, could not offer independently. When Naipaul was born, his father was the *Guardian* staff correspondent in Chaguanas, a job he quit two years or so later. After that he picked up odd jobs here and there, sometimes for his wife's family, sometimes for an uncle by marriage, "a rich man, founder and part owner of the biggest bus company in the island." (*Finding the Centre*, p. 34)

Naipaul realized as an adult what he might have sensed as a child that his father "dangled all his life in a half-dependence and half-esteem between these two powerful families" (*Finding the Centre*, p. 34). This has been fictionally represented in *A House for Mr Biswas*.

It took Naipaul a long time to be able to talk about his childhood. He could do it only in 1984 when he was an established writer himself, having got over the financial as

well as emotional insecurities of his early years. Even then he chooses to blur the temporal sequence of events in his childhood. To quote him:

Disorder within, disorder without. Only my school life was ordered; anything that had happened there I could date at once. But my family life-- my life at home, in the street--was jumbled, without sequence. The sequence I have given it here has come to me only with the writing of this piece.
(*Finding the Centre*, p.41)

In 1950 Naipaul won a Trinidad Government Scholarship. The basic purpose of such scholarships which could last for seven years was to help with the student's education till he had a profession. Naipaul's scholarship enabled his study in English at Oxford, not because he wanted to be an academic but because he thought it would help him to get away from Trinidad and become a writer in England. He imagined that in his three or four scholarship years at Oxford, his talents would be recognized and "...the books would start writing themselves." (Ibid p. 46)

That was not the way it worked out. In England Naipaul realized that he had no understanding of societies other than his own in Trinidad, and his life and reading in England did not provide him with material for a book. In 1955, five years after leaving Trinidad, he realized while working for the BBC as a freelance that the material for his writing had to be gleaned from his own experiences. He generalizes, "To become a writer, that noble thing, I had thought it necessary to leave. Actually to write, it was necessary to go back. It was the beginning of my self-knowledge." (*Finding the Centre*, p. 47)

So, after two failed attempts, Naipaul sat at the typewriter in the room in the Langham Hotel, sifting his Caribbean or more specially Port of Spain memories, settling finally on the image of Bogart whose father had travelled together with Naipaul's maternal grandfather as an indentured immigrant on the same ship. Some time during the long and frightening voyage they had sworn a bond of brotherhood which was honoured by their descendants.

The story of Bogart was highly appreciated by Naipaul's three colleagues in the freelancers' room, an Englishman named John Stockbridge, a Jamaican named Andrew Salkey who also wanted to be a writer and Gordon Woolford from British Guiana. This story, later included in *Miguel Street*, Naipaul's first work (though not the first to be published), led to many others. As Naipaul puts it :

Over the next few days the street grew. Its complexities didn't need to be pointed; they simply became apparent. People who had only been names in one story got dialogue in the next, then became personalities; and old personalities became more familiar. Memory provided the material city folklore as well, and city songs... My narrator consumed material and he seemed to be able to process every kind of material. (*Finding the Centre*, p.28-9)

Naipaul finished writing the story in five or six weeks but found no takers. He went on to write a second work, a novel titled *The Mystic Masseur* which was the first to be published. He was still very anxious and insecure but did not let these feelings blur his ambitions.

In the next section I will discuss briefly Naipaul's works of fiction and non-fiction, other than those to be taken up in detail in conjunction with the novel under study, so as to give you a comprehensive idea about the different phases in his creativity. This would help you to place *A House for Mr Biswas* in the right perspective.

1.2 AN OVERVIEW OF NAIPAUL'S FICTION AND NON-FICTION

In a literary career spanning a little over three decades, Naipaul has written twenty three books. In chronological order they are *The Mystic Masseur*(1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira*(1958), *Miguel Street*(1959), *A House for Mr Biswas*(1961), *The Middle Passage*(1962) *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*(1963), *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *A Flag on the Island*(1967), *The Mimic Men* (1967), *The Loss of El Dorado*(1969), *In A Free State*(1971), *The Overcrowded Barracoon*(1972), *Guerrillas*(1975), *India: A Wounded Civilization*(1977), *A Bend in the River*(1979), *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad*(1980), *Among the Believers*(1981), *Finding the Centre*(1984), *The Enigma of Arrival*(1987), *A Turn in the South*(1989), *India: A Million Mutinies Now*(1990), *A Way in the World*(1994), and *Beyond Belief*(1998).

A detailed study of *A House for Mr Biswas* should be preceded by a brief look at some of his other works in order to put him in perspective and in tracing some of the different phases in his creativity. This would include a look at his early works, namely those three which preceded *A House for Mr Biswas*. Naipaul's complex relationship with India started with initial sharp first impressions which have mellowed over the years. Therefore it is necessary to know something about his three books on India in order to comprehend *A House for Mr Biswas* better. A brief look at his two books based in England (*Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* and *The Enigma of Arrival*) and his latest book, is in order for a comprehensive outlook on Naipaul. Taken together this would provide a useful backdrop to one's reading of *A House For Mr Biswas*.

Caribbean history records a long period of colonization. Whether the colonial masters were British, French or Dutch did not really make a difference to the subject people. What mattered was its total impact which intensified over the years. In the words of a critic, "The history of the region . . . carries the burden of a profound erasure, the traces of which haunt the area with a memory but no recognition of an autochthonous cultural base. What remains startling about Caribbean history . . . is the stark transparency of its European manufacture: of its populations, social structures, political organizations, and the outside orchestration of the region's participation in the events of the larger world."(Mustafa, 30)

Naipaul's early novels should be considered against the backdrop of this multiple colonialism. The choice of the East Indian Trinidadian community into which he was born and was familiar with, is natural. (This community consisted largely of indentured immigrants working as agricultural labour, who were relative newcomers in Trinidad. Also they carried with them their experiences and mainly insular outlook from the remote villages in British India from where they had been recruited. They clung to their cultural roots that often manifested themselves in rituals and traditions as a form of security which the new environs did not offer them.) Over a period of time Trinidad's Indian community like any diaspora, "developed idiosyncrasies and cultural changes in their efforts to maintain their customs and traditions....The adherence to categories of caste, and their kinship patterns all transmuted to the colonial setting of Trinidad's already stratified society....eventually their insularity only deepened their rigidity to custom as it had been practised in India at the time of their initial emigration."(Mustafa, 31-32)

While *The Mystic Masseur* is Naipaul's first published work, and *The Suffrage of Elvira* his second novel to be published, *Miguel Street* with its seventeen episodic sketches of characters and events loosely held together by a young boy narrator who leaves home for study abroad, was the first to be written. This departure can be read as a symbol of transience or a continued migratory process that one finds in a number

of Naipaul's later works. Also the mode of discourse allows the narrative to fluctuate between a mature voice recollecting the impressions of childhood and the child's own vision which is much more limited. In the words of a critic :

"*Miguel Street*...lays the foundations for Naipaul's increasingly more concentrated examinations of the colonized condition. In both *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, *Miguel Street*'s communal space is reworked into a more overt "national" framework, and the domesticity of its Dickensian "characters" into a sophisticated allegory of colonialism in *A House for Mr Biswas*." (Mustafa, 44)

In *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, Naipaul concerns himself with his version of the political reality of Trinidad, before and after the country became independent. Naipaul's colonial perspective gave his writing a pro-white bias. He looked at post independence indigenous entrepreneurship and related activities in Trinidad in an ironical manner. Ganesh, the protagonist of *The Mystic Masseur*, is the stereotypical upwardly mobile first generation colonial entrepreneur who capitalized on the political opportunities that came his way. The recurring reference to him in *Miguel Street*, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, *A House for Mr Biswas* and certain stories in *A Flag on the Island* is an early example of Naipaul's "...intertextual unfolding whereby he is able to create an internal narrative authority premised upon recognition and familiarity."(Mustafa, 45)

The Suffrage of Elvira continues the political themes dealt with in *The Mystic Masseur*. It is the story of the election campaign in one district called Elvira by the candidate called Surujput Harbans. Both novels satirize a national political process after making the reader aware of a long tradition of political brokering and polarization characteristic of Trinidad's ethnic and class divisions. This has been challenged by George Lamming who denounces Naipaul's position as wholly Eurocentric. To quote him, "When such a writer is colonial, ashamed of his colonial background and striving like mad to prove himself through promotion to the peaks of a 'superior' culture whose values are gravely in doubt, then satire, like the charge of philistinism, is for me nothing more than a refuge."(Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, cited by Mustafa, 56-57). We will discuss these three books in greater detail in the last section when we relate them to *A House for Mr Biswas*.

Naipaul's three books on India trace the growth of Naipaul's attitude towards India and Indians from sharp impressions and disappointments of the first visit as expressed in *An Area of Darkness* to a perception of India, in *India : A Wounded Civilization*, as a decadent civilization which needs to make a clean break with the past in order to progress. There is a gradual resignation to all that he sees in India and he attempts to interpret current situations and issues to his largely western readership in *India : A Million Mutinies Now*.

Naipaul's quest for India, a country that aroused his curiosity and which he had reconstructed in his mind from bits and pieces gleaned from racial memory and a childhood in a Brahmin household in Trinidad, started even before he first visited it in 1962. The first visit itself, ostensibly undertaken as a quest for his roots in the country of his grandparent's origin, was not a happy experience. It took him some time to get used to the vast physicality of India which threatened to submerge his identity.

Later, as Naipaul gave up his search for his "imaginary homeland", he became more responsive to the India that he visited in the seventies and eighties. He realized that while India was not and could not be his home, he could not reject it or visit the country as a casual tourist. The complexity of this relationship is suggested in a comment he makes in *India : A Wounded Civilization*: "I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far" (p.8-9). This spirit of acceptance can be related with the absence of anxiety, which indicates a shift from the outsider, colonial position he had taken earlier. Even the title is less negative, and Naipaul attempts to

transcend his itinerary and understand some of the issues and problems confronting India in the seventies.

This process is continued in *India : A Million Mutinies Now*. The deliberate colonial slant of the title can be simplistically interpreted as an indicator of the colonial bias in Naipaul's writing. It would be wiser to read it as the author's hint at the imperialistic attitude of a central government viewed as a neocolonial power, suppressing assertions of identity by the numerous socioethnic / religious/ political groups in India which had till then been marginalized. Economic progress and political clout have combined to strengthen them, giving them a voice which they raise in their march to the centre from the peripheries. However, the approach remains journalistic and Naipaul's attempts to study the problems of separatism in India are remembered as vignettes that stand out for their brilliant style (perfected over the years) rather than insightful observations.

One can juxtapose Naipaul's books on India with those based in England only to find a similar sense of alienation, an attitude that located the author somewhere between the country of his origin and the country of his adoption, in a state of permanent self-imposed exile. This could be linked up with the fact that *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, Naipaul's first "English" novel, was written in Kashmir, a place that calmed his hysteric response to the overpowering impressions of India. Kashmir had an idyllic insularity when Naipaul first visited it in 1962. The "English" character can be read as another of Naipaul's explorations of states of alienation. As a critic puts it, "Mr Stone's Prufrockian disaffection does suggest that life in the metropole, so fantasized about by distant colonials, houses its own varieties of rootlessness and frustrations." (Mustafa, 91)

"Prologue to an Autobiography" which is one of the two narratives in *Finding the Centre* and *The Enigma of Arrival* are possibly the most autobiographical of Naipaul's writings. The former has been used to substantiate facts from Naipaul's life and his development as a writer in the first section of this unit. The latter, an autobiographical work, is based in rural England, in Wiltshire where Naipaul has a cottage to which he often retreats. The novel is an acknowledgement of the narrator's imaginary England, especially the English countryside which is much more peaceful than the Caribbean Island or India. Also, the metaphor of the journey which recurs in Naipaul's works, gains prominence. "The protagonist knows that the journey he undertakes into the Wiltshire countryside is different from all previous journeys – it is an arrival with a difference... This arrival ... is a new life because he comes here having faced the final annulment – the deaths of those he has valued... And so this stranger in a new land has arrived in many ways." (Kamra, 170-1)

Naipaul's recent book *A Way in the World* starts by reiterating what he had taken up in *The Enigma of Arrival*, namely his own experience of racial politics in Trinidad in the late 50s. Characteristically, he is not interested in exploring the socio-economic reasons behind this. Possibly, Naipaul's own uprooted Indian identity, especially the idea of Hindutva which he has been partial to and argued for, is instrumental in distancing him from black politics in the Caribbeans. At the same time exploring Caribbean history through reminiscences and historical fiction is Naipaul's way of coming to terms with his own personal history. At the same time a discriminating reader can make out that his alienation stems from personal vanity and not just from cultural difference.

It would be difficult to place the book generically. At best it is formed of complicated, discontinuous but carefully arranged narrative fragments, oscillating in time, assimilating Naipaul's own experience as well as the experiences of Sir Walter Raleigh the explorer and Francisco Miranda, the nineteenth century Venezuelan revolutionary. What makes the book stand out is Naipaul's awareness of the fact that he cannot find what he is looking for, something that gives the book a sense of disquieting ambiguity which generally characterizes diasporic writing.

Naipaul's latest book *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted People* based on five months of travel in four non-Arab Muslim countries – Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia--shows a similar ambivalence and fragmented perception of Islam. The basic idea developed in this book is that all non-Arab Muslims have to reject their own history and heritage and adopt the Arab heritage. As this may be a perception that disturbs the existing society and sows the seeds for fundamentalism, it has been challenged and refuted by non Arab Muslims all over the world as a distorted view.

1.3 THE 'GIRMIT' PEOPLE

Documentary evidence shows that overseas migration was rare in pre-colonial India though within the country the mobility rate among Indian villagers was fairly high. Kings often spent a large share of the state revenue on their armies which consisted of professional as well as peasant soldiers. Since no single employer could provide them full security and adequate wages, they often shifted their loyalties and hence travelled from one region to another.

While this pattern of migration has been an ongoing process from the medieval times, nineteenth century overseas migration was an offshoot of colonialism. The migration from India, mainly as unskilled labour to work on plantations in Mauritius, the Caribbeans, and Fiji, began in the 1830's. European imperialist expansion in the nineteenth century with its new industrial and commercial ventures, especially plantations, created the initial milieu for large scale migration which generated expanding demands for labour. In most cases, the colonial governments and planters, working in tandem, did not consider it economically or politically correct to recruit the indigenous people.

With progressive prohibition of African slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century, India and China became the main alternative sources of labour. This was the main "pull" factor. Also, European colonialism had created severe economic and social disturbances among the peasantries of these two countries. The officers or labour recruiters or 'arkathis' went to remote villages in the interiors of the country which were stricken by drought or famine (often artificially created, as the colonizers shipped out foodgrain from India to their own armies fighting somewhere) or during a season when those working as tenant farmers or agricultural labour were unemployed.

In other words, the offers of arkathis in most cases were not accepted because they were tempting but because they were the only way out in a difficult situation. Not much is known about the cause of emigration from Gujarat. So far as emigration from eastern and southern India is concerned, it was mainly caused by financial loss. Fragmentation of the Mughal empire and administrative reorganization that the British colonizers introduced was greatly responsible for impoverishment. Often landowners became tenants at short notice and were not able to exercise their hereditary rights or fulfil their customary duties. This loss of status, and not just poverty induced many to leave the country despite traditional aversion to crossing the seas or *Kala pani*. This was the 'push' factor.

Also, the development of colonial economies created several commercial though low-level industrial opportunities at these points where the western capitalist economy interacted with the indigenous rural economy in the areas of retail trade and in the manufacture of goods needed by the increasingly cash conscious peasantry. Since native populations lacked entrepreneurs who could tap these limited but lucrative opportunities, India and China provided the risk takers.

Thus, there were two kinds of Indian and Chinese emigrants to the colonies: unskilled labourers and small-scale entrepreneurs. Among Indians the distinction between the kind of emigrants was largely (though not absolutely) region-based. The unskilled labourers came mainly from eastern Uttar Pradesh, Western Bihar, and provinces in Tamil Nadu then known as Madras. The entrepreneurs were largely from the northern district of Bombay province (now part of Maharashtra), Gujarat and Sind (now in Pakistan). As mentioned earlier this regional distinction is not absolute; for example both unskilled labourers and chettiar entrepreneurs came from Madras. However, in countries where the two types of emigrants or their descendants coexist, the distinction between them is a characteristic of intragroup relations in the Indian community.

Three main types of emigration and settlement stand out from others, a) the *kangani* system in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Malaya (now Malaysia) b) indentured labour in the Caribbeans, Mauritius and Fiji and c) free emigration to East Africa. In the *kangani* system, the migrants were recruited by headmen known as *kanganis*. Each *kangani* recruited a group of men belonging mainly to his caste and kin group, and from the turn of the century migration by families became quite common. Sometimes a number of emigrant bands, each with its own leader, combined under the direction of a high-caste head *kangani*. Often, the *kangani*, a man of means, lent his followers money to travel to settle down in a plantation. He negotiated with planters on wages and work conditions and could remove members of his group to another plantation if not satisfied with either. Each group occupied makeshift barracks known as 'lines' and pooled resources to meet common expenses. Even outside the workplace the *kangani* had considerable influence over the lives of his band of workers, establishing and exercising a kind of patronage over them. Within the system there were variations but one need not go into them.

Migration to the West Indies was organized by the indenture system introduced in the nineteenth century but discontinued in 1917, when the Government of India placed an embargo on indentured emigration. Emigration to Trinidad started in 1845, to Mauritius in 1834, to Fiji in 1878, to Guyana in 1838. Most of these emigrants did not return to the countries of adoption after completing their terms of indenture, something that can be linked with the reasons that made them emigrate, which has been discussed earlier. Significantly free emigration to these countries took place simultaneously but increased considerably only after 1917.

Indenture was basically a contract by which the emigrant agreed to work for a given employer for a period of five years for a specified wage. At the end of five years, the emigrant was free to reindenture or to work elsewhere in the same colony; at the end of ten years he was entitled to a subsidized air passage. The fulfilment of the contract was governed by an Immigration Ordinance enacted in the country of destination. Prospective emigrants testified before a magistrate in India that they understood the terms of the contract. On making such a deposition they were housed in a depot in Calcutta until a ship was ready to take them to their place of work.

In order to avoid cut throat competition, the Governments of Jamaica, Trinidad, Mauritius and Fiji maintained an emigration agency jointly in Calcutta. The agency issued licenses to subagents who were paid a commission on each satisfactory recruit. These hired recruiters or *arkathis* went round market towns, pilgrimage centres or wherever they were likely to find people desperate to get away from their present environs. The only qualifications required were physical fitness and experience of agricultural work. Initially almost all these recruits were male, later a quota of 40 percent females for every shipload was imposed by the colonial governments. Generally emigrants volunteered as individuals, emigration by family units, or caste groups or village communities were rare.

Most indentured emigrants were unrelated to one another and found themselves among strangers during the voyage and on the plantations where they were made to work. In the absence of any real kinship or family bonds, the establishment of a bond of brotherhood known as *jahazi* or *jahazi bhai* among individuals who had befriended each other during the long voyages, was instituted. The *jahazis* often got themselves assigned to the same plantation and the same barracks, regarded each other as real brothers, and treated each other's children as close kin. Marriage between the children of *jahazi bhai*s was considered incestuous. In Naipaul's *Finding the Centre* there is a mention of Bogart whose ancestors from Punjab travelled with Naipaul's grandfather on the same ship and developed the *jahazi bhai* kinship. As Naipaul weaves the various strands of his Trinidad memories into his early fiction, Bogart comes to occupy a significant position.

Life in the colonies was hard. The indentured immigrants lived an isolated and insulated life, little better than slaves. Any contact with the outside world was mediated by the plantation manager, the magistrate, the police and the immigration department. Desertion laws limited their freedom of movement. The indenture contract which the emigrants called the 'girit', an obvious distortion of 'agreement', placed them under complete control of their employers. The manager or his deputy herded the emigrants together each morning, assigned tasks, judged performance, gave some permission to report sick, and chastised others for feigning sickness. Those found guilty of indiscipline were sent to the magistrate's courts to be punished for breach of ordinance.

On completing indenture, some immigrants stayed on at the plantations, others moved out into the rural areas. In West Indian colonies the bulk of the population was of immigrant origin. So, the society as a whole, bore the strong imprint of the plantation system, its structures deeply influenced by the institution in which almost everyone and his immediate forbears had participated. Large numbers of Indians moved into villages and towns after completing their indenture, settling on the periphery of black villages, combining subsistence farming with wage labour. Indians seldom combined to form villages on their own and wherever exclusively or predominantly Indian villages were found, it was under government sponsorship.

In these old settled overseas Indian communities there were no agencies of social control comparable to panchayats in rural India. Religion, on the other hand, was used as a means to organize and orient their lives. However, rigours of plantation life, uncertainties of an alien environment and competition from Christian missionaries, changed the form and content of religious activities. In this social set up, the brahmin pundits in Trinidad came to acquire considerable status, wealth and power in the community as compared to their counter-parts in India. Hinduism in India is a way of life whereas among the overseas Indians religion is formalized. Organizations of *yagna*, the sponsoring of *pujas* and *satsangs* were forms of religious activities which became more and more frequent. Festivals like Diwali, Id etc., were celebrated with great pomp and show and participation extended to Hindus as well as Muslims. In this ambience Tulsi Das's *Ramcharitmanas* acquired a new significance as the indentured emigrants visualized themselves banished from their familiar surroundings like Rama and undergoing great hardship. Along with this, *bhajans*, *kirtans* and readings from the *Bhagwad Gita* was part of the immigrant's socio-cultural life apart from giving them a spiritual sustenance.

In conclusion I would like to tell you briefly about yet another kind of emigration which took place along with the kinds that have been discussed. This is free emigration of traders and skilled artisans who were under no social or financial constraint to emigrate but did so to try their luck in a new country. They did not settle on the land as farmers or labourers. This emigration was not entirely unorganized as those who established themselves brought over their fellow villagers, kin and others belonging to the same caste. In that sense there is a basic similarity between free emigration and the *kangani* system. Free emigration prevailed largely

in East Africa, a desired destination to a large number of entrepreneurs from Sind and Gujarat. To an extent this kind of emigration can be compared with twentieth century emigration of entrepreneurs and professionals to the Gulf region, Europe, America and Australia as a) there are no compulsions to emigrate and b) they often sponsor their immediate family members .

A study of diasporic Indian writing needs to be accompanied by a brief discussion of the various kinds of emigration as that would help to put our study of Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* in perspective.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit I gave you a complete overview of the indenture or 'girmit' system. You will have to keep this in mind when you read the text *A House for Mr Biswas*. This will serve as a backdrop against which you will make a textual analysis.

Apart from this I also discussed some of Naipaul's other fiction and non-fiction so as to give you a comprehensive idea about the different phases in his creativity. This too will help you to place *A House for Mr Biswas* in the right perspective.

Last but not the least I provided an introductory note to Naipaul's life and works.

1.5 GLOSSARY

Temporal sequence	: A sequence or chronological order based on actual time of occurrence of events.
Autochthonous	: Found in the place of origin.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on V.S.Naipaul's early life in Trinidad and London, substantiating it with comments made by him in his books.
2. Write a brief note on nineteenth century migration with special reference to indentured immigrants in Trinidad.

1.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Naipaul, V.S. - *A House for Mr Biswas*. 1961. Penguin, 1969.
Naipaul, V.S. - *Finding the Centre : Two Narratives*. Andre Deutsch, 1984.
Jain, Ravindra K. *Indian Communities Abroad : Themes and Literature*. Manohar, 1993
Mustafa, Fawzia. *V.S. Naipaul*. Cambridge University Press, 1995

UNIT 2 MR. BISWAS AND THE TULSIS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Prologue
- 2.2 Pastoral
- 2.3 Before the Tulsis
- 2.4 The Tulsis
- 2.5 The Chase
- 2.6 Green Vale
- 2.7 A Departure
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Glossary
- 2.10 Questions
- 2.11 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to examine *A House for Mr. Biswas* in detail. Each section of this unit and the next one, is devoted to one chapter in the novel (in sequential order) and should be read along with the text so that the references autobiographical or otherwise, are clarified and your reading of the text is insightful, enabling you to interpret the text in your own way on the basis of the referential aids provided.

The first unit with its introductory note on Naipaul and the complex influences which shaped his thinking as a writer and an overview of the indenture or 'girmit' system should serve as a backdrop against which you are to study *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

2.1 PROLOGUE

A House for Mr. Biswas starts with the death of Mr. Mohun Biswas who had been working as a journalist with the *Trinidad Sentinel* and had been sacked ten weeks before his death. The character of Mr. Biswas is obviously based on Naipaul's own father Seepersad Naipaul, a journalist with the *Trinidad Guardian*. His journalistic career tapered off before coming to an end with the departure of the managing editor of the paper, Gault MacGown, who had inspired him to be a journalist. Seepersad had never realised his ambition to become a writer.

Mr. Biswas's desire to have his own house was natural as he did not want to live with the Tulsis. Naipaul would have sensed a similar desire in his own father who remained financially and emotionally dependent on his wife's family the Capil Deos, a rich and influential family of Chaguanas, a district of Trinidad. So Mohun Biswas who "...had moved from one house of strangers to another" as a boy and felt "...he had lived nowhere but in the house of the Tulsis" (p.8) was "...struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house" (p.8) To quote from Peter Hughes's monograph on Naipaul (Routledge, 1988) "The house desired by Mr. Biswas is an object of desire created by the unhoused state of his (V.S. Naipaul's) own father, long homeless under the roof of his extended family." (p.40)

On another level the house is a trope for anchorage, a common feature of diasporic writing, to be juxtaposed with the idea of homelessness that was deeply embedded in the psyche of emigrants, more so as the process of crossing the *kala pani* and settling down in an alien land was far from enjoyable or even voluntary. In Naipaul's case the emigration from Trinidad to London makes him doubly dispossessed in a way and the image of the homeless wanderer has been projected through most of his writings.

Ironically, the house which had seemed a fine one to Mr. Biswas when he had first seen it, appeared full of flaws as soon as it was bought. The staircase was dangerous, there was no back door, one door could not be opened. However, the disappointment appeared to fade in no time as Mr. Biswas and his family "... accommodated themselves to every peculiarity and awkwardness of the house" (p.12) regarding it as simply their own house. On a macro level the same holds true of the process of emigration and settling down in one's country of adoption, where everything appeared uncomfortable and bleak till the emigrants got used to their new surroundings.

Naipaul tells the reader that Mr. Biswas had built two houses of his own and spent a lot of time looking at houses. His idea of a good house was a brightly painted modern looking concrete structure, something that he assumed would be beyond his budget. So, when he saw something that broadly tallied with his expectations, he was enchanted with it and bought it without weighing the pros and cons. Naipaul's detailed description of the house is possibly assembled from childhood memories of houses he had lived in, apart from the "big house" belonging to his mother's family in Chaguanas.

While reading the text you would notice Naipaul's eye for detail and the irony that the description of the house is laced with. A couple of passages are cited from the text as illustrations :

Because the house faced west and had no protection from the sun, in the afternoon only two rooms were comfortably habitable : the kitchen downstairs and the wet bathroom-and-lavatory upstairs.

In his original design the solicitor's clerk seemed to have forgotten the need for a staircase to link both floors, and what he had provided had the appearance of an afterthought.(p.9)

These narratorial skills, displayed early in Naipaul's writing, have been perfected over the years. In "A Reporter at Large : After the Revolution" an article written for *The New Yorker*, Naipaul who visited Iran for the second time after the Islamic Revolution (the earlier visit had been in 1974), in 1997, a week before the election says :

I was staying this time at the Hyatt. It wasn't absolutely the Hyatt now : it was the Azadi Grand Hotel... All the five-star hotels of Iran had been taken over by the state and renamed... The polished marble floor of the big lobby was reassuring... But the piece of carpet in the lift was dirty and stained and didn't fit. The gilt of the lift floors.... had been torn or worn away in places.... The hotel porters were all in open-necked shirts; this was one of the badges of Revolution... Many of the porters were unshaven: this was Islamic. Some were shiny-faced and dirty. This was social defiance: the two styles of revolution, the religious and the political, running together. (p.45)

His writing is full of such passages, each word loaded and conveying layers of meaning. The latter passage shows how, over the last few decades he has perfected his style.

In the "Prologue to an Autobiography" Naipaul refers to a heavy bookcase-and-desk made from pine and packing crates, part of his father's furniture which he could relate to and slowly take a liking to. In the novel the bookcase becomes the slumbering bed which had become as useless to Mr. Biswas as the glass cabinet bought to please his wife Shama. Starting with Mr. Biswas on his deathbed, Naipaul goes back to his early life, a *bildungsroman* in reverse, setting a literary trend of sorts.

2.2 PASTORAL

Even before one starts reading the first chapter, one is intrigued by the title. A reading of the chapter confirms what had occurred to one earlier – the use of the word "pastoral" is ironical as the ambience is anything but that. Mr. Biswas's parents are literary creations based on what Naipaul had heard of his father's parents. To quote from the "Prologue to an Autobiography" in support of my statement:

My father's father had died when my father was a baby. My father knew only his mother's stories of this man : a miserly and cruel man who counted every biscuit in the tin, made her walk five miles in the hot sun to save a penny fare, and, days before my father was born, drove her out of the house. My father never forgave his father.(p.61)

It appears from a reading of the text that Naipaul's father transmitted a dislike of his own father to his son. This is evident when one looks at the similarity between two passages, the first from the opening paragraph of a story titled "They Named Him Mohun" from a collection of Seepersad Naipaul's stories titled *The Adventure of Gurudeva*, the second from *A House for Mr. Biswas*. To quote :

Mohun's coming into this world of light was not an occasion of joy for anyone. There were reasons. In the first place, three months before his birth, Bipti, his mother, had left his father's home, as it turned out, never to return. With her two children – Sohani, aged four, and Krishna, a little over two years old – she had trudged seven miles to her mother's on a hot and dusty day. (*The Adventures ...* p.125)

Shortly before he was born there had been another quarrel between Mr. Biswas's mother Bipti and his father Raghu, and Bipti had taken her three children and walked all the way in the hot sun to the village where her mother Bissoondaye lived. (*A House for Mr. Biswas*. 15)

Mr. Biswas's father Raghu was mainly concerned with hoarding money, not caring if his family was deprived of necessities in the bargain. Since no one, not even his wife Bipti knew where he had hidden his hoard, no one benefitted from it when he died.

If you read the passage describing his death you would notice that there is no real sense of loss or grief, instead there is an urge to finish the rituals as quickly and correctly as possible and get down to sorting out the inconveniences caused by Raghu's death. In fact Raghu's death comes across, not as a tragic incident but an inconveniencing one which needed to be tackled efficiently, almost professionally. So, Tara, Bipti's sister, a woman of considerable means and social standing, received a message from her sister and arrived promptly. The author's comment, "She left the mourning to Bipti and arranged everything else." (p.32) leaves one in no doubt as to what was more important, the "mourning" or "everything else" which refers to the arrangements for the funeral. That this includes a pundit and a photographer, suggests a blending of the traditional with the modern, the sort of life the upwardly mobile descendants of indentured immigrants led.

Tara belongs to this class by virtue of marriage to a man who had “freed himself from land”, a phrase clearly indicating that post-indenture farming was not a free choice but a compulsion in the absence of better options. Indenture can thus be interpreted as, not just a period of five or ten years during which the immigrants had to work on plantations but the life that followed, mainly that of doing odd jobs or small time farming, both barely sufficient to provide the necessities of life.

You should note the strict adherence to rituals which are most obvious during ceremonies connected with birth, death and marriage, as these gave the Indians in Trinidad a sense of security and affinity to the mother country though some of them had never seen it. The rituals were many : such as proclaiming Bipti a widow, unsalted, unseasoned food cooked in someone else’s house as there could be no cooking in the house where someone had died. Tara saw to it that all these customs were observed, even “instructing” her sister’s children how to behave during the ceremonies. The sombreness of the description is broken by the fact that there was no real grief and Tara the self-proclaimed master of ceremonies had come wearing all her jewellery as if she had come to attend a family wedding and not a funeral.

There were compromises in view of the law of the land. Since cremation was forbidden, there was a burial which shortened the period of mourning considerably. After all customs had to be oriented according to one’s circumstances. To survive in an alien land, often in adverse conditions, called for flexibility and a functional attitude to life often dispensing with traditions that could not be carried on. Predictably, Raghu’s daughter Dehuti was less concerned with her father’s death and more with her future prospects in living with her childless aunt Tara who would give her new clothes, jewellery and in all possibility, arrange a good match and a sizable dowry.

Of late, creative writing in English has been flooded with linguistic experiments, mainly to give a story/novel/play/poem a regional flavour, especially when it is based in a locale that is not an English speaking area. When Naipaul was writing *A House for Mr. Biswas* such experimenting with English was practically non-existent. Keeping this in mind, his handling of English as a language spoken by people who speak in Hindi, is deft. Tara’s command to the photographer in English, “All right. Draw your photo now”. (p34) a literal translation of “*Theek hai. Ab photo kheench lo,*” conveys the ethos of a people who think in Hindi but speak in English if the situation demands it. The literal translation does not seem gimmicky, it hints at the dualities of language that the indentured emigrants had accepted as a part of their lives.

2.3 BEFORE THE TULSIS

After his father’s death Mr. Biswas lost his moorings as his mother Bipti sold the hut and land and moved to Pagotes where they became dependants of Tara though they did not live with her. Mr. Biswas went to the Canadian Mission School where the contemptuous behaviour of his teacher Lal who had “...converted to Presbyterianism from a low Hindu caste”(p.42) towards Hindus, specially Brahmins like Mr. Biswas, suggests that caste-based communal feelings carried from India, very often determined patterns of behaviour. Lal did not lose a chance to poke fun at Mr. Biswas for not possessing a birth certificate. That he pronounces it as “buth suttificate” heightens the irony of the situation.

Another instance of similar behaviour is noticed in the attitude of F.Z. Ghany “solicitor, conveyancer and a commissioner of oaths”(p.42) to whom Tara takes Bipti and Mr. Biswas for the birth certificate. In case the reader has missed the “good humoured scorn” in the way Ghany greeted the trio, the authorial voice reaffirms it as

one is told, "He made his money from Hindus, but, as a Muslim, distrusted them." (p.43)

Conditions of abject poverty in Pagotes are conveyed through subtle touches. The school teacher never changed his jacket, he possibly had only one; most of his students dressed in hand-me-downs, at times their garments were originally meant for women. One can safely deduce that Naipaul wrote from personal experience. His father came from a family of agricultural labourers. Like Mr. Biswas, he had lost his father as a child and was nearly sent back to India with his mother and brother on an immigrant ship. Naipaul refers to the incident in *Finding the Centre*. To quote :

The family had been 'passed' for repatriation; they had gone to the immigration depot on Nelson Island. There my father had panicked, had decided that he didn't want to go back to India. He hid in one of the latrines overhanging the sea, and he stayed there until his mother changed her mind about the trip back to India. (p.62)

Though he does not talk about it; Naipaul himself would have had a hard time during his childhood, dependant on his mother's family and living with them with his mother and four brothers and sisters. After his father left the *Trinidad Guardian*, he did not have a fixed source of income to look after his family, apart from the odd job he did here and there. This bred in him a sense of insecurity and abhorrence of poverty. While the first is covered by an arrogance, the way in which he distanced himself from his father's relations in India as recounted in *An Area of Darkness* (which will be taken up in detail later) definitely suggests the latter.

In an essay titled "London" which was first published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1958 and later included in *The Overcrowded Barracoon*, Naipaul articulates his strong feelings for Trinidad:

Trinidad may seem complex, but to anyone who knows it, it is a simple colonial philistine society. Education is desirable because it may lead to security, but any unnecessary acquaintance with books is frowned upon. (p.9)

This is reflected in his description of the education that Mr. Biswas received at school, making "copious" notes dictated by the teacher which had no meaning for him.

Naipaul's colonial conditioning and education prevented him from perceiving that the "philistine" character of Trinidad's society was not indigenous, it was a product of the colonizer's conscious efforts to strip the colonized people of their history, their cultural heritage in the name of improving them. In this context, the purpose of education was to make the student ashamed of his/her own history/heritage and adopt western ones. In the colonial context, it was dangerous to let the colonized develop a sense of pride or even a sense of curiosity about one's heritage as that might give rise to nationalist feelings. Also, in the stratified society of Trinidad, privileged ones like Tara's husband Ajodha might not be able to read but they could get others like Mr. Biswas dependent on them, to read to them. Education thus had a functional role to play.

Mr. Biswas's training with Pundit Jairam appears to be based on Naipaul's father's experience. While reading it you would notice a mechanical, ritualistic approach to religion without a trace of spirituality. A reference to the *Ramayana* along with its Hindi commentary reaffirms the statement made earlier about its special place in the psyche of the indentured emigrants who believed themselves to be exiled from their mother country. They identified with the image of Rama.

Even today in countries like Fiji and Mauritius, public readings from the *Ramayana* are common, something that is a dying tradition in rural India, especially in the face

of the TV serial or the epic. There is a reference in this chapter to another tradition that is still common in parts of rural India, that of putting one's palm-prints on the walls of one's house, not so much as a decoration as the novel suggests but as a post-marriage/post-festival ritual.

The chapter highlights Mr. Biswas's inability to train as a pundit not because of any special shortcoming but because, as the narrator suggests, the system is hollow and uninspiring. It ends with a mention of Mr. Biswas's meeting with Shama at Hanuman House. Another autobiographical parallel that you will notice in this chapter is the effect of the pundit's training and the harsh attitude of Pundit Jairam towards Mr. Biswas, resulting in stomach trouble that caused him acute pain when he was excited, depressed or angry. In *Finding the Centre* Naipaul talks about his father's stomach pains and depression.

2.4 THE TULSIS

The overwhelming presence of the Tulsis in the novel parallels the role played by Naipaul's mother's family in real life. The opening sentence in this chapter suggests the superior standing of the Tulsis in Arwacas as seen in the house they lived in. Surrounded by timber-and-corrugated iron buildings in dilapidated condition, Hanuman House "...stood like an alien white fortress." (p.80) assertive, defiant. The statue of "a rampant lion" on each side of the terrace as described by Naipaul in *Finding the Centre* (p.35) is replaced by "...A concrete statue of the benevolent monkey-god Hanuman" (p.80-81) in the novel drives home the traditional Sanatan identity of the inhabitants of the house who would have nothing to do with the reformist attitude of the Arya Samajists.

The debate between Sanatanis and Arya Samajists often threatened to become conflictual in early twentieth century northern India. The Sanatanis had a brahmin-oriented approach to religion and traditional customs whereas the Arya Samajists attempted to evolve a simpler approach to both by cutting down rituals. This annoyed the brahmins and made the situation conflictual. These conflicts found their ways into the psyche of the Indian Community in Trinidad. Predictably, established brahmin families like the Tulsis would have nothing to do with Arya Samaj while Mr. Biswas, like Naipaul's father, found it inspiring and the narrator sides with him. Mr. Biswas found the statues of Hindu gods in the formal drawing room of the Tulsis heavy and ugly and made fun of them, agreeing with a local social reformer called Pankaj Rai (partially because he was patronized by the Naths, rivals of the Tulsis) who considered idols an insult to human intelligence and to God and proclaimed that man's caste should be determined by his actions and not his birth. Rai's mysterious disappearance did not dampen his fervour and his place was taken by one Shivlochan who along with an idle journalist named Misir, passed impressive resolutions which would never be implemented.

Mr. Biswas's support for the Arya Samaj can be interpreted on another level. It is a manifestation of his resentment against the Tulsis who were avowed Sanatanis. He did not like the way he was sucked into the household by marrying Shama. To quote from the novel, "The world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He felt trapped." (p.91) His initial euphoria at being married to a daughter of the Tulsis disappeared when he realized that he had been chosen simply because he belonged to the right caste, like Govind the illiterate coconut seller. He had neither money nor position to be able to afford a separate establishment with Shama, so he was expected to become one of the Tulsis, a sort of *ghar-jamai*, something that he found hateful and rebelled against.

Another thing that you would note while reading this chapter is the way it details intricate operations of the extended Tulsi family, the power politics and the ways in which individual assertions of identity were nipped in the bud so as to keep the monolithic structure of the family intact. The narrator talks about complex relationships between individuals at Hanuman House, even those closely related, like sisters.

There is a touch of humour in the way petty jealousies between sisters are made to appear as close bonds of affection. (Mr. Biswas, absolutely ignorant about power politics in the family, decides to criticize Mrs. Tulsi and her sons to Govind, husband of Chinta, Shama's sister, to whom she is apparently very close. However everything is reported back to them and he has a hard time defending himself.) In keeping with the politically correct traditions of the extended family, Mr. Biswas's attempts to walk out are thwarted by Chinta since her husband is responsible for the row. Mr. Biswas slowly becomes familiar with the working of the extended family and knows he would have to tackle it from within instead of running away. Since his resistance affected the powerful hold of the Tulsis on the other dependent sons-in-law as well, he was literally ordered to move to The Chase, "a long straggling settlement of mud huts in the heart of the sugarcane area" (p.141). The next section will take up his life and travails there.

2.5 THE CHASE

Naipaul's father had tried his hand at a number of odd jobs when his son was a child. Mr. Biswas did the same. This chapter takes up his attempts to live on his own in a plantation area known as The Chase for some mysterious reason. The contrast between the colonial name of the place and the miserable conditions prevailing there, parallels the irony of Mr. Biswas's situation. His hopes and expectations from his small shop selling food items, should be juxtaposed with the reality, namely the poverty of the people living there as well as the hostility of the other shopkeepers who were determined to stali any competition.

Of course the move from Hanuman House did not really make him independent of the Tulsis. The small shop with the two rooms and a kitchen ("a derelict makeshift structure in the yard" p.142) along with space at the back that the villagers and later Mr. Biswas called "the bandon" meaning abandoned land, belonged to the Tulsis, and was an unprofitable property which they had not been able to utilize in any way at that point of time. From the detailed description of the people one can safely deduce that Naipaul had lived in a house like that as a child when his father had been variously employed.

It took time for Mr. Biswas to get used to living independently. Without the security provided by the warmth and noise that was part of the ambience of the Hanuman House he was generally afraid to face life on his own. "afraid to disturb the silence, afraid to open the door of the shop, to step into the light" (p.145), one of the early symptoms of the hysteria that was to overcome him later. As Naipaul describes the furniture in Mr. Biswas's house in the Chase, one feels that he had in mind the few pieces of furniture bought by his own father in Port of Spain. This was the first furniture he had considered his own, especially the large "canopy-less cast iron fourposter whose black enamel paint was chipped and lacklustre." (p.145)

Characteristically, it was his wife Shama who provided him with the feeling of security and stability. Earlier she had protested at leaving Hanuman House but now she was reconciled to the idea and tried her best to make the rest of her family feel at home. This is conveyed subtly by a show of confidence verging on aggression. "Her actions were assertive, wasteful and unnecessarily noisy. They filled shop and house;

they banished silence and loneliness.” (p.146) Possibly Naipaul’s own mother played a similar role when the family moved from place to place in his childhood.

**Mr. Biswas
and the Tulsis**

While reading this chapter you would notice Shama’s insistence on the house-blessing ceremony which turned out to be a Tulsis dominated event. This along with the ‘mounting’ of the sticks indicates the diasporic Indian’s penchant for elaborate rituals. Stick fighting has been one of the most popular martial arts in certain parts of rural India. In the absence of recreational facilities; it became a pastime and an assertion of identity among the emigrants, absorbing some of the local myths and acquiring an added aura of romance, awe and mystery.

The autobiographical note that pervades the book can be perceived in the description of Mr. Biswas’ fits of hysteria which came on while Shama went away to Hanuman House after a quarrel and stayed there for sometime before returning home. Actions like growing fingernails to an unnatural length and holding them up to people to startle them can be interpreted as a craving for attention which has not been received in the normal course. The same would hold true for applying dabs of healing creams of different colours on self-inflicted wounds on his face and standing in his shop doorway to greet people. On the whole this chapter gives you a glimpse of the kind of life which Naipaul might have led as a child as his father struggled to make ends meet, in conditions far from congenial.

2.6 GREEN VALE

The bleak note of the previous chapter titled “The Chase” is carried on to “Green Vale”. The title would suggest a soothing place but the trees with half the leaves dead and the other at the top “a dead green” (p.205), indicate otherwise. Even the new leaves had nothing fresh about them, “they came into the world old, without a shine, and only grew longer before they too died.” (p.206) These were the trees surrounding the barracks where the labourers working on the estate lived and Mr. Biswas as their “driver” or sub-overseer lived among them. Nature evidently offered nothing to soothe the bleakness from the lives of those who lived in the barracks.

The barracks themselves, built in a line, offered the labourers little more than a roof over their heads and were not built with a thought for any privacy or comfort. There is a lot of reference to barrack life in diasporic literature from countries like Fiji, but none of it even remotely suggests that the indentured emigrants liked living in them. Therefore it should not come to you as a surprise that the sight of them aroused in Mr. Biswas the strong desire to build his own house, “by whatever means” (p.206). Nothing could make the barrack room a ‘room’, least of all, the furniture that Mr. Biswas had bought in the last days at the Chase.

Mr. Biswas’s yearning for the outside world can be read as Naipaul’s father’s desire to get out of what he considered the claustrophobic life in Trinidad, a desire that he passed on to his son. Please recall that Naipaul won a Trinidad government scholarship. He decided to use it to study English at Oxford, not because he was particularly interested in the degree, but because he wanted to get away.

The indication that Mr. Biswas was absolutely dissatisfied with his work and environment is effectively conveyed by the author. His complaints to Shama, “Look at me... You could look at me and say that this is my sort of work?” (p.209) His itching skin, insect bites and dried dirt on fingernails were symptomatic of physical discomfort and self-loathing. There was no alternative so he carried on, finding an escape route in incessant baths, which any psychologist will tell you, is often a desperate subconscious attempt to get out of a situation while the individual knows consciously that it is not possible. One can sense the dissatisfaction in the description

of Christmas celebrations at the Hanuman House which was “only a series of anticipations” (p.215) instead of being a festive occasion.

An incident that needs to be considered seriously in this chapter is the breaking of the doll’s house by Shama. She had reduced the doll’s house to a bundle of firewood. “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.” (p.219). It could be read as a betrayal, an instance of Shama siding with the Tulsis instead of with her husband, which adds to his insecurity. Also, the doll’s house can be interpreted as a symbol of Mr. Biswas’ dreams and aspirations which were rudely shattered when he went against the code of conduct prescribed by the Tulsis, upon whom he was dependent.

This can be related directly to his hysteria which the chapter details, dwelling on its different manifestations at different points of time. His reaction to Shama’s fourth pregnancy can be cited as one such instance when his insecurity overwhelmed him. To quote, “He was falling into the void, and that terror, known only in dreams, was with him as he lay awake at nights, hearing the snores and creaks and the occasional cries of babies from the other rooms.” (p.227) The chapter describes a number of such manifestations, Mr. Biswas’ paranoia about his house being burnt down, his unnatural suspicion of Shama and children with whom he was unable to establish a normal relationship, his bitten down fingernails, a deep sense of depression and a constant fear of being killed. Evidently Naipaul who was close to his father, observed him during his fits of depression and recreated Mr. Biswas’ paranoia and hysteria fictionally from his memories.

The chapter ends with a severe storm that all but demolishes Mr. Biswas’s house and can be read as an externalization of his inner fears. He could not offer even a word of comfort as Anand screams, terrified by the havoc created by the storm. He only lies on his bed muttering ineffectively as the house almost collapses. Ultimately a person called Ramkhilawan (note the name and the association that goes with it), a labourer from the barracks, comes, possibly after hearing Anand’s screams and closes the windows, lights the lamp and comforts Anand. Once again Mr. Biswas’ attempt to build his own house and live in it, fails.

2.7 A DEPARTURE

The concluding chapter of the first part of the novel tries to round off the happenings in this section. The inevitability of Mr. Biswas’s return to Hanuman House is juxtaposed with the reassuring warm treatment which gradually brings him back to normal. To some extent he is still disoriented and “...couldn’t assess what had gone before or what was to come.”(p.295), oscillating between the comforting warmth of his present situation and the sharp disturbing memories of what had happened the previous night.

The Roman Catholic, Indian doctor, respected by the Tulsis, not for his professional capabilities but for good manners and affluence, diagnoses the problem as nerves and a certain vitamin deficiency. In keeping with the community’s superstitious feelings, attempts are made to exorcize the evil spirits that had supposedly caused the mishap.

At this point you should be able to discern the paradox of Mr. Biswas’ situation which is subtly conveyed. On one hand he did not belong with the people at Hanuman House like Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, as he found them rather patronizing. On the other, he felt secure only as a 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)

Another thing that you would notice in the description of Mr. Biswas' convalescence is a touch of tenderness in the narratorial voice, almost as if the narrator were trying to soothe his troubles away by enveloping him in a dark cocoon, almost womblike :

"...Mr. Biswas slept and woke and slept again. The darkness, the silence, the absence of the world enveloped and comforted him. At some far-off time he had suffered great anguish... Now he had surrendered, and this surrender had brought peace."(p.299)

As a young boy Naipaul would have watched his father racked by fits of hysteria helplessly; as an adult he tries to atone for it by placing Mr. Biswas in as comfortable a situation as possible, such that enables him to sleep away his troubles.

What keeps the chapter from getting too bleak is the light touch of humour that Naipaul manages to infuse in a situation which would have become far too depressing otherwise. The comic relief is provided by Ramchand, husband of Mr. Biswas's sister Dehuti. He worked in a lunatic asylum and when he came to visit Mr. Biswas, he took it for granted that his brother-in-law was a certified lunatic and had to be treated accordingly. So he suggested that a gramophone be provided for Mr. Biswas so that he could listen to music as the inmates at his asylum did. A well-meant suggestion takes on a farcical note because of the aside, "We does play music to them all the time."(p.300)

The author adds his bit to make Ramchand's suggestion even more absurd. To quote: "He spoke of prerequisites of the job as though the Lunatic Asylum had been organized solely for his benefit." (p.300) A discriminating reader, familiar with Naipaul's brahminic arrogance (despite professed agnosticism) would cite this as an instance of the same, as Ramchand was from a lower caste, something that the women in Hanuman House made fun of. As one of them said, "However much you wash a pig...you can't turn it into a cow." (p.301) In the closed society of Trinidad caste hierarchies were important and transgressors were not looked upon kindly, even if they had succeeded in life.

The first part of the novel ends on a positive note though there is uncertainty regarding the future. Mr. Biswas looked upon the past as "...counterfeit, a series of cheating accidents." (p.305) and was determined to start life afresh, on his own, away from Hanuman House. As he set out with his small brown cardboard suitcase, he experienced no "spasms of terror" (p.305) as in the past, the "...knots of fear were still in his stomach, but they were so subdued he knew he could ignore them."(p.305). His nails were unbitten and whole. Mr. Biswas's resilience can be read as a wish fulfillment on a fictional level, something that Naipaul would have liked to see in his father in real life.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit the first part of the novel has been analysed section by section. Certain autobiographical parallels have also been pointed out. Naipaul's narratorial skills have been commented upon and Mr. Biswas' relationship with the Tulsis has been focused upon.

2.9 GLOSSARY

Trope :

Metaphor

Bildungsroman :

A novel concerning the early emotional or spiritual development or education of its protagonist. Famous

examples are Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774); Dicken's *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Pastoral :	Related to shepherds or the kind of peaceful rural life that they lead. Often treated with irony, for the most part pastoral tends to be an idealization of shepherd life, and creates an image of a peaceful and uncorrupted existence.
Duality of language :	The double role played by a language. In this context the knowledge of English suggests power as used by the speaker to assert herself. At the same time the regional flavour suggests a lack of education.
Colonial conditioning :	An upbringing that instils abiding faith in the colonial set up and the ideology that supports it.
Monolithic structure :	An architectural term meaning a structure held up with the support of a single pillar. In this context it refers to a joint family controlled by a single person who is head.
Paranoia :	Intense and irrational fear or suspicion.
Comic relief :	According to western literary tradition a continuously sad situation needs a comic respite. Otherwise the reader's response is affected.

2.10 QUESTIONS

1. Mr. Mohun Biswas is a character based on V.S. Naipaul's own father. Substantiate with reference to *A House for Mr. Biswas* and other texts that have been cited in this unit.
2. Discuss the significance of the title, highlighting the way the house is used as a trope to indicate certain situations or states of mind.
3. Irony and humour add a lightness of touch to a situation which would otherwise have become very bleak and depressing. Elaborate with instances from the first part of *A House for Mr. Biswas*

2.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Naipaul, V.S. | <i>The Overcrowded Barracoon</i> . 1972. Penguin. "A Reporter at Large : After the Revolution" <i>The New Yorker</i> , May 26, 1997. P45-69 |
| Hammer, Robert D. | Ed. <i>Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul</i> . Heinemann, 1979. |

UNIT 3 MR. BISWAS AND HIS DREAM HOUSE

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 'Amazing Scenes'
- 3.2 The New Regime
- 3.3 The Shorthills Adventure
- 3.4 Among the Readers and Learners
- 3.5 The Void
- 3.6 The Revolution
- 3.7 Coming Home
- 3.8 The Epilogue
- 3.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.10 Glossary
- 3.11 Questions
- 3.12 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous unit we analyzed the first part of the novel, noted certain autobiographical parallels and commented on Naipaul's narratorial skill. In this unit we shall examine the second part of the novel, chapter by chapter. You are advised to read the text along with these notes so as to comprehend the fine nuances of the novel. Farrukh Dhondy, the well known novelist and playwright based in UK who is associated with BBC channel IV, is making a telefilm based on the novel. If you manage to see the film, the visual impact will add to your appreciation of the novel.

3.1 'AMAZING SCENES'

The first part of the novel ended with Mr Biswas leaving the Hanuman House, determined to find his way in the world and make a living for himself and his family, so as not to be dependent on his in-laws. He had not decided where to go but his unbitten nails and the absence of spasms in his stomach, suggest that the uncertainty about the future did not make him nervous.

The question that you would naturally ask, at this point is, why did Mr Biswas choose to visit Dehuti and Ramchand rather than his brothers or Ajodha and Tara? Before answering this question you must remind yourself exactly why he left Hanuman House. Once you do that, finding an answer to that question becomes easier. It was no use visiting his brothers; they worked on plantations as labourers and would not be able to help him to find work in keeping with his aspirations. Ajodha and Tara did have money and position but their unhelpful attitude on an earlier occasion had been evident. Mr. Biswas had visited them intending to borrow money to build a house for himself but had come away without voicing the request.

Ramchand was a successful man in Mr. Biswas' opinion; he had risen from humble beginnings, had a regular job and had defied social norms to marry a brahmin girl though he came from the lowest social strata. Though Mr Biswas did not say

anything directly, one can safely deduce that such considerations guided the choice of Ramchand. When he actually turned up at Dehuti's place, the squalor of the imagined comforts surprised him, and he stayed on because there was nowhere else to go. Predicably, the symptoms of his hysteria came back, the spasms, the bitten nails, an external manifestations of his frustration at not being able to find work.

Finally, he got a job with the *Trinidad Sentinel*, first on a trial and then on a regular basis, at a salary of fifteen dollars a fortnight. Naipaul has based Mr Biswas' journalistic forays on his own father's experiences as a reporter of the *Trinidad Guardian*. For instance in *Finding the Centre*, he refers to the time when for some reason his father had to spend the night on a tree, something that is fictionally recreated in the novel. In *Finding the Centre* Naipaul questions his father's account. He says, "My father had his own adventures. Once, on a rainy night and far from home, his motorcycle skidded off the road and for some reason he had to spend the night up a tree ... I understood that the story was exaggerated," (p.38) The situation is reconstructed more meaningfully in the novel. The friendly editor of the *Trinidad Sentinel*, Mr Burnett whose help launched Mr Biswas' journalistic career, is based on Mr. MacGowan, the editor of *Trinidad Guardian*, whose guidance turned Seepersad Naipaul into a good journalist. You should read "Prologue to an Autobiography" for Naipaul's account, albeit sketchy, of the father's years as a journalist.

Now that he had a steady job, Mr Biswas acquired a status in his family which he did not enjoy earlier. The children at the Hanuman House gave him a magnificent reception when he went there, clamouring for the *Sentinel* dollar tokens which might get them a prize. Shama's new found respect for him, particularly his position, can be discerned in her admonishment to the children as they clambered on to his lap. "Anand you will get your father's suit dirty." (p.329) You should read this section of the chapter along with chapters in the first part in which Shama had adopted a martyred attitude or openly expressed her exasperation at his inability to establish himself financially. This chapter also records the start of a relationship, at times verging on awkwardness, between Mr Biswas and his son Anand. When one reads this along with Naipaul's references to his father in "Prologue to an Autobiography" one feels that he would have liked the relationship with his father to have developed similarly.

You should note the semi-festive occasion, almost like a family wedding that preceded Mrs Tulsi's son Owad's departure to study abroad. The women in their bright clothes and best jewellery came with their children and brought musical instruments with them, which they played till late at night. You can read this as a conscious attempt to blot the racial memory of the sombreness and apprehension and tears which would have preceded occasions when their ancestors sailed out of India in very different circumstances. Since the chapter ends with a reference to Mr Biswas's ill health, it is possible that Naipaul drew upon his own memory of the time he left Trinidad for England. A lifting of the bleakness, a promise of better things to come, are some of the indications in this chapter.

3.2 THE NEW REGIME

Naipaul's father had worked contentedly at *Trinidad Guardian* as long as MacGowan edited it. Recollecting the rapport between the two men, Naipaul says:

... a relationship was established between the two men. And my father – at a starting salary of four dollars a week – began to do reporting. There the voice was his own, the knowledge of Trinidad Indian life was his own; and the zest – for news, for the drama of everyday life, for human oddity – the zest for looking with which MacGowan infected him became real. He developed fast. (*Finding the Centre*, p. 69-70)

MacGowan increased the circulation of the paper but ran into trouble with its management. Some of the directors who had local business interests felt that he was harming those. Naipaul recalls, "MacGowan, fresh from the depression in England, wanted to run a 'Buy British' campaign; the Chairman of the *Guardian* Directors owned a trading company which dealt in American goods." (*Finding the Centre*, p.71) To put it in a nutshell, MacGowan's priorities were journalistic and at times they clashed with the business interests of the management of the paper.

Things came to a head when MacGowan ran stories in the *Guardian* about "mad bats" that flew about in the day light and he sent cables to the *The Times* and *New York Times* about vampire bats rampant in Trinidad and responsible for paralytic rabies. The story was based on facts. A local doctor had established the link between bats and paralytic rabies and was experimenting with a vaccine for the same. His work was soon to be acknowledged in text books of tropical medicine. But some of the directors had invested in tourist ventures which suffered because of this exposure and the *Guardian* Chairman who said he had never heard of anyone in Trinidad dying from a bat bite, decided that MacGowan must go. Since MacGowan had a contractual job and could not be sacked, he was harassed into leaving. This went on for some time and had an impact on the *Guardian* and its employees, especially those close to MacGowan like Naipaul's father. Finally MacGowan had to leave and predicably Naipaul's father lost his job after some time.

Years later, Naipaul could talk about it objectively and say, "MacGowan left. My father stayed behind. He became disturbed, fell ill, lost his job, and was idle and dependent for four years ... in his clipping book, an old estate wages ledger, I came upon his relics of his heroic and hopeful time with MacGowan." (*Finding the Centre*, p. 72)

This was two years after he had written about Bogart and the life of the street in Trinidad in his first three works and was looking for fresh material. It occurred to Naipaul that he could reconstruct the life of someone like his own father on a fictional level. This was the genesis of *A House for Mr Biswas* which took three years to write and Naipaul considered it very much his father's book.

The purpose of this digression from the novel is to establish the strong autographical parallels in this chapter which you should not miss when you read about the relationship between Mr Biswas and Mr Burnett which came to an abrupt end when Mr Burnett left Trinidad. Mr Burnett was possibly the only person whom Mr Biswas could relate to and share his thoughts and aspirations with, knowing there would be understanding and the right kind of advice. Also Mr Burnett was Mr Biswas' only link with the world outside Trinidad, a world that he longed to visit and explore but could not.

This chapter also traces the growth of a new bond between Mr Biswas and his son Anand as "each saw the other as weak and vulnerable, and each felt a responsibility for the other, a responsibility which ... was disguised by exaggerated authority on the one side, exaggerated respect on the other." (*A House for Mr Biswas* p.374). Anyone familiar with Naipaul's style would deduce that it is part truth and part fiction, highlighting the closeness to his father that Naipaul was denied as an adolescent, something that was not possible because of Seepersad's nervous ailments. You should be able to make out the contempt in Naipaul's tone as he details the futility of the mechanical system of education that Anand was subjected to and which Naipaul must have been caught in, himself.

Last but not the least, the way in which Seth forcibly parks his lorries in the shed at the side of the house, uprooting the rose plants, can be read as trampling on Mr Biswas' finer feelings by Seth who stands for insensitivity and callousness that Naipaul associated with Trinidad.

3.3 THE SHORTHILLS ADVENTURE

Indentured immigrants generally dreamt of coming back to India after completing the bond period. The idea of settling down in an alien country across the *kala pani* did not appeal to them. Most of them wanted to go back to their village and lead a comfortable life now that they had some money. This posed various practical problems. The money saved was inadequate for the return passage of the entire family; links with the village had snapped, land and house had been taken over by others who were not willing to vacate. This desire to go back to India diminished with the coming generations. So, with the death of Pandit Tulsi in the novel, the chances of the family returning to India diminished. In Naipaul's own family, after his grandfather's death, his mother was almost sent back to India with her children. The plans had to be abandoned when Naipaul's father could not be found at the time of departure.

An extended family runs smoothly as long as it has an effective head to supervise everything. When the head is old or ill, generally losing a grip over the family, disintegration sets in. You would notice this in the chaotic situation in the Tulsi family with Mrs Tulsi confined to the bed. Seth, who had been her right hand man previously, was now living separately with his family, the disagreement between them having already turned to open war. Naipaul tells the reader, "The cause of the quarrel remained obscure, each side accusing the other of ingratitude and treachery." (p. 391) and you realize that the cause did not matter, it was the growing rift between the two sides which was inevitable in the given circumstances. However all this did not weaken the bond between Seth's wife and the Tulsis.

Without a manager, the Tulsi household drifted like a rudderless ship. Very skilfully Naipaul conveys the prevailing chaos and dereliction. He refers to the lack of authority in the sugarcane fields with the crop season at hand and the acute shortage of provisions. He mentions economising measures like using maize flour from the crop grown on the estate, making coconut oil instead of buying it and looking for all kinds of food substitutes, some of them desperate like Mrs Tulsi's order to the widows to experiment with cooking meals with birds' nests.

The move to the Shorthills was doomed from the beginning. Even as the grandiose plans of becoming rich quickly by dairy farming, rearing sheep etc. are unfolded you know that nothing will come out of them. One could side with Mr Biswas for making fun of such visions. Nothing that the Tulsi widows tried their hands at, worked, not even the shack which was set up to sell coca cola, cakes, oranges, and avocado pears and later rum to American soldiers. There is no evidence in Naipaul's autobiographical writings that his mother's family went through this phase of destitution, so one can safely deduce that this was imaginary, possibly Naipaul's way of getting back at his mother's family for dominating his father. He refers to his father's resentment of his in-laws in *Finding the Centre*. To quote, "My father, when I got to know him, was full of rage against his mother's family." (p. 75)

Life at Shorthills was bleak and Naipaul's description of it has traces of black humour of the kind later perfected by Salman Rushdie. Let us look at a passage describing an occasion when the car meant to transport the children to school broke down and the driver, who knew nothing about cars, enlisted their help.

Like ants around a dead cockroach the children surrounded the car (the dark girls in their dark blue uniforms) and pushed and pulled. Sometimes they pushed for more than a mile. Sometimes they pushed the car to the top of a hill, jumped aside as it rolled down, heard it start, raced after it, the driver

urging them to hurry, sprang inside three at a time ... Sometimes the car got into Port of Spain with one side of the bonnet up and a child on the wing, operating a pump of some sort. Sometimes the car didn't go to Port of Spain at all. This pleased the children more than the driver : he had not packed lunch.

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(p. 410-11)

The atmosphere at Shorthills was not particularly cordial and Mr Biswas hardly saw his own children. He noticed that there was no affection between them and Anand was ashamed of his sisters as he considered them weak. Mr Biswas decided it was time for him to move and kept his eyes open for a suitable site. You might have noted that the trope of travel recurs in Naipaul's fiction and non-fiction. In the latter he likes to project himself as the perennial wanderer without a fixed home. In *A House for Mr Biswas* moving from one house to another serves a dual purpose. On a general level it suggests the homeless status of the indentured immigrant and a yearning for a home of one's own in the literal as well as metaphorical sense. Interpreted autobiographically, it seems to have originated from Naipaul's early memories when he had to move along with his family as his father changed jobs.

Finally Mr Biswas found the site he wanted and had a house constructed. The process is described in great detail along with the furniture that he acquired for the new house. But an attempt to have a hill on fire close to their own backyard set the house on fire and once again Mr Biswas was left homeless.

In this chapter one notices that Anand is growing up. His ransacking of Shama's dressing table drawers can be compared to Naipaul's reference to the contents of the drawers of his own father's desk. One can discern a growing sense of detachment in Anand, an unwillingness to conform, traits that Naipaul often associates with himself.

3.4 AMONG THE READERS AND LEARNERS

"Among the Readers and Learner" opens with another move by Mr Biswas, this time to Port of Spain. Mrs Tulsi's house there had fallen vacant and he was offered two rooms in it. He had to share the house with the Tuttles, Govind's family and Basdai, a widow. Two items of furniture had been acquired – the Slumberking bed and Théophile's bookcase, symbols of material possessions, but Mr Biswas was still without a house of his own, and by implication, far from settled in life.

The lack of privacy, the clutter, the impermanence about their life in the house in general did not deter Shama from trying to make it a home. The glass cabinet ordered by her suggests a pathetic yearning for elegance which was doomed from the beginning. Life in this overcrowded house was far from smooth. Without Mrs Tulsi's harmonizing presence, there were squabbles and petty jealousies among the sisters. In this hostile atmosphere, Mr Biswas' indigestion started bothering him again and the children were afflicted by various nervous ailments. Mr Biswas managed to establish some rapport with his children as he spoke to them of his own childhood. He was disgruntled with everything, as Naipaul's father would have been with his creativity thwarted and no appreciation or encouragement from his colleagues or family.

The chapter hints at a changing social order in which some people managed to make a lot of money while others became poorer. The means was not always honest. Govind made a lot of money driving a taxi and his son Vidiadhar said at school that his father worked for the Americans. The value system was changing and those who had recently acquired money were reluctant to reveal their methods in an attempt to appear more respectable. Mr Biswas did not join the rat race but slowly he acquired

power and status in the *Sentinel*. He became the paper's special investigator and his recommendations entitled persons to be treated as "Deserving Destitutes" to benefit from a fund set up by the *Sentinel* management. You will notice in this a record of the growing power of the English language press in a developing country. Quite evidently the written word was treated with high respect.

You should also note in this chapter a complex relationship developing between the two cousins Anand and Vidiadhar. Since Naipaul won the Trinidad government scholarship to study abroad, one can deduce that there was envy and heartburn in the family, feelings of rivalry among cousins of the same age. Anand was the more sensitive of the two and it is easy to see the young Naipaul in him, keen to succeed and get out of Trinidad. However, one need not stretch the similarities between the two; Anand is also the stereotypical second generation young immigrant who has no attachment to the country of his parents' origin or the country they migrated to under some pressure, but dreams of affluence in another country. The exhibition examination in the novel brings out the desperation of such dreams, not just among the young but their parents as well.

The mention of the death of Bipti, Mr Biswas' mother, in this chapter, brings to one's mind the death of Raghu his father, earlier in the novel. There is no personal grief, only dutiful mourning and mechanical observance of funeral rites. Note the key sentence: "He (Mr Biswas) might have been attending the funeral of a stranger ... He longed to feel grief. He was surprised only by jealousy." (p.480) One is reminded of Meursault, the protagonist of Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (1942) whose sense of alienation makes him react to his mother's death in much the same way. What hurt Mr. Biswas deeply was the disrespect shown by the doctor to Bipti's body before issuing the death certificate. One can visualize a similar scene in an Indian village or small town, sometimes even big hospitals in metropolitan cities when relatives of the dead are not assertive or affluent.

As has been said before, Mr Biswas's literary aspirations like those of Seepersad Naipaul, remained unfulfilled, something that he possibly mentioned to his son. As Mr Biswas tried to create a story from his present circumstances, Naipaul churned his Caribbean memory in his first three books of fiction, falling back on Hat and Bogart who were his neighbours in Port of Spain. The chapter marks the end of a phase in Anand's life as he joins college, something that his parents had always dreamed of.

3.5 THE VOID

As you start reading this chapter entitled "The Void", you gradually become aware of Mr Biswas's unconsciously restrictive presence in Anand's life, not allowing him to enjoy the freedom that comes with admission in college.

The metaphor of the house with its elusive promise of security and stability continues, though Mr Biswas's conscious distancing of himself from houses ["he had grown to look upon houses as things that concerned other people" (p.494)] indicated a recognition that he could never own a house. The loss of such a personal vision took away something vital from his life. "He sank into despair as into the void which, in his imagining, had always stood for the life he had yet to live." (p.495) In short without a house or hope of acquiring one, life did not seem worth living.

His "revivification" to borrow a word from the text, came with a job as the Community Welfare Officer that gave him a high salary and fair amount of power. The mood continued as Mr Biswas went for a holiday to the seaside at Sans Souci with his family in his colleague Miss Logie's car. He had a nice time there despite Miss Logie's condescending attitude, and the holiday acquired a dreamlike quality

when recalled later in their present congested and unfriendly environs. Mr Biswas was slowly getting to be a gentleman and had a suit made in keeping with his newly acquired status. They bought a new car, much to the chargin of the other Tulsi daughters and their families. As Naipaul describes the trip to Balandra undertaken by Mr Biswas and his family in their own car, he conveys the idea that the lanscape did not interest the family as much as the ownership of a car and the novelty of travelling in it.

Disruptive forces had become a part of Mr Biswas' life and they overtook him again when his preoccupations with new acquisitions had made him almost forget them. Owad, Mrs Tulsi's younger son was returning from England and room had to be made for him. The house had to be renovated as well. So, Mr Biswas was shunted off to a room in a tenement, a dislocation he resented and balmed Mrs Tulsi for.

The alternative accomodation with its unpainted, grey-black, rotting wooden walls and the "naked galvanized roof" without a proper ceiling was like the barracks which provided shelter to indentured immigrants when they first came to work on the plantations. To add insult to injury there was no electricity. Mr Biswas fell into confusion and dismay. 'Where would the furniture go? Where would they sleep, cook, wash? Where would the children study?' The answers did not matter; there was no choice. The immigrant status of the protagonist reflects the irony of the situation. As in the case of the other houses in the novel, the room in the tenement is described in detail, emphasizing the demeaning nature of the accomodation offered. Mr Biswas had saved some money in anticipation of a crisis but six hundred and twenty dollars would not help him buy a house.

Ultimately they were allowed to move back to the old house after the renovations were over and more importantly, Owad had come. However, Mr Biswas was given only one room for himself, his family and furniture. This action makes Mrs Tulsi the prototype of the colonizer/planter who could shift dependents when and where convenient.

Towards the end of the chapter changes in the social set up of Trinidad are hinted at. The description of the Tulsi store suggests degeneration and after talking about Seth's wildness and the punishment, Naipaul states clearly, "neither Seth nor the Tulsis were as important in Arwacas as they had been." (p.530) The Sindhis who had taken over the shop next door, were definitely not indentured immigrants. They were petty traders who might have migrated recently from India, something that is hinted at by the way they played "mournful Indian film songs" (p. 530) as if to remind themselves of the mother country. Mr Biswas had survived another move though the prospect of having his own house now seemed even more remote.

3.6 THE REVOLUTION

This chapter "The Revolution" starts with a festive mood pervading the house where Mrs Tulsi was living, in anticipation of Owad's homecoming. "It was like an old Hanuman house festival." (p.533) Naipaul tells the reader that there had been nothing like it since Owad's departure for England. One way of reading the effusive welcome is treating it as a tribute to colonial education, specially a professional one, in the former colonies. Over the years the adulation has waned but in the fifties and sixties it was at its peak. Also, to be noted is the boost that it gave to the status of the Tulsi family which had been steadily going down as other families made more money and asserted themselves like the Sindhi family next door.

To come back to Owad, his homecoming was as dramatic as anticipated. With his Robert Taylor moustache which was possibly the fashion in England at that time and partly an attempt to appear grown up, as well as his hefty appearance, Owad made his presence felt in his family. His behaviour, verging on pompousness, was in keeping with the image that he tried to project and it was evident that he was the new head of the family despite the fact that his elder brother Shekhar was living in the same town. In his new role he could afford to ignore Seth and be casual towards Mr Biswas.

As a discriminating reader, you realize very soon what a fraud Owad was and how parochial he could get. It is not clear whether he was a good doctor or not. What comes across is his boasting about eminent persons he met in England (mainly Indians) and got the better of. He specially targetted Indians from India who were abominable in every way, he felt. Apart from the humorous side of Owad's description of life in England and Indians who had gone there to study, the irony of the situation is to be noted if one takes into account Naipaul's views on Indians as expressed in *An Area of Darkness*.

In the 1930s and 40s communism was fashionable among students in English universities in the wake of the Revolution in Russia. In fact many veteran Marxists in India had first received their initiation in the west. With Owad, Marxism was clearly a fad rather than an ideal or a set of beliefs. This is evident from the way in which Naipaul describes Owad's fascination with everything Russian, starting from the achievements of the Red Army to anything connected with Russia, even a Russian name. This, juxtaposed with Mr Biswas' deliberated mockery of Russian names gives a comic tinge to the hostility expressed in their word slinging. Owad considered Mr Biswas little more than a hanger on, the latter firmly believed that, given the same opportunities, he would have achieved much more.

The inevitability of Anand's encounter with Owad strikes the reader even before it actually takes place. I am sure you feel sorry for Anand after he is humiliated by Owad. Owad is the stereotypical brown sahib who tried to project a patriotic image with standards borrowed from the west. Would you have apologized to Owad if you had been in Anand's place? Possibly not, but times are different now and Mr Biswas' semi-dependent status makes things awkward for his son as well and Shama despite her great anguish had to make her son apologize to Owad as she realized it would be impossible for them to continue living in that house otherwise.

Mr Biswas was humiliated by Owad as well, and when he refused to compromise, Mrs Tulsi gave him notice and he had to start looking for another house. The two storeyed house on Sikkim Street that the solicitor's clerk proposed to sell him with its vines of Morning Glory seemed attractive but inaccessible, till a turn of fortune made it possible for him to think of buying it. Shama, who might have noticed the gross flaws in the construction of the house, only had a fleeting glimpse of it from their moving car and the sales deed was finalized. Mr Biswas was firmly convinced that this would be a home without the intrusive presence of the Tulsis. Of course the conviction wore off with each successive visit to the house as necessary repairs had to be undertaken before they could move in. How they settled down in the house on Sikkim Street and got used to its irregularities will be taken up in the next section.

3.7 COMING HOME

What had seemed the ideal house to Mr Biswas at night, revealed itself to be far from it as he took his family to it one afternoon. The elusive ideal house/home was not meant for the wanderer/immigrant, even after a lifetime of searching. Only

something far less, the shadow of a dream. As in the case of the other houses in the novel, this one is described in details, especially the flaws, which surfaced as they started living in it. Some were repaired but it was impossible to correct all of them and soon they decided not to talk about the flaws. Their ancestors had lived in barracks where conditions had been worse. Presumably, they could live in this defective house.

The elderly Indian next door with his solid, well-constructed house does not really serve as a contrast that might be the initial impression. He had not always lived in such a well-built house. The key sentence, "The past lay in the shed at the back of his house, in the ruinous wooden houses in the street." (p.577-8) suggests that the old Indian had risen from humble beginnings and others around them were still struggling. It implies that Mr Biswas should not have any regrets about the house, there was still a future to look forward to.

Over a period of time Mr Biswas and his family not only got used to the house on Sikkim Street but started appreciating it as relatives from the extended Tulsi family like the Tuttles visited them and approved of the house. Such approval added value to the house and ironically, "Soon it seemed to the children that they had never lived anywhere but in the tall square house in Sikkim Street." (p.581) The sentence that follows is even more ironical. To quote, "From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent." (p.581) This statement is contradicted by what Naipaul says about his own childhood in "Prologue to an Autobiography";

Disorder within, disorder without. Only my school life was ordered; anything that had happened there I could date at once. But my family life – my life at home or my life in the house, in the street was jumbled, without sequence.

(Naipaul, *Finding the Centre*, 40-1)

This is one of the instances of contradiction that you will find throughout Naipaul's work and should learn to recognize as characteristic of his style.

The chapter ends on a positive note, indicating the human capacity to adjust to adverse circumstances and making life bearable, even happy. Slowly Mr Biswas settled down in the house on Sikkim Street, specially after he had called the solicitor's clerk all the names he wanted to and got the the bitterness out of his system. The discovery of the extra space in the deed that was twelve feet away from the fence made him feel that the deal had been worthwhile and his love for gardening was once again reawakened. The laburnum tree planted by him "... gave the house a romantic aura, softened the tall graceless lines, and provided some shelter from the afternoon sun." (p.584) This was the closest Mr Biswas could get to his dream house and he made the best of it. This was the right house for Mr Biswas. It had put an end to his wanderings and granted stability to his life. The immigrant had finally came "home".

3.8 THE EPILOGUE

The Epilogue, short when compared to the chapter preceding it, attempts to round off the happenings in the novel, tying up loose ends. You get to know what Owad and Shekhar were doing though you might just be casually interested in their affairs. You learn that after the abolition of the Social Welfare Department Mr Biswas went back to the *Sentinel*. Was that a comedown for him? Monetarily yes, but Mr Biswas found it stimulating to work as a journalist and the only thing that depressed him was the debt of four thousand dollars that he had incurred because of the house, specially in the nights when he brooded over it, feeling that time was flying by and disaster was looming over him, "devouring his life" (p.586)

The description of his life and career makes it clear that both were on the decline, and the first heart attack came as a surprise to him though the reader had expected something of the sort.

If you are reading the book from the psychoanalytical angle, the Epilogue will provide clues about Naipaul's relationship with his own father who died when he was studying in England. One detects traces of guilt in the way Naipaul talks of Anand's cold response to his father's letters, specially Shama's letter informing him of the seriousness of Mr Biswas' illness. The difference in the ways in which Anand and Savi react to Shama's letter, emphasizes the point. To quote ;

She wrote to Anand and Savi. Savi answered in about a fortnight. She was returning as soon as possible. Anand wrote a strange, maudlin, useless letter. (p.588)

Savi's return and her new job at a big salary made Mr Biswas' last days happy so that the novel, though it ends with Mrs Biswas' death, suggests continuity through the daughter rather than the son, a point which should be of interest to feminist critics. On the whole the women in the novel, Mrs Tulsi, Shama and Savi among others, are more resilient and stronger than the men, something possibly based on Naipaul's observations in his own family when his father did not have a job but his mother managed to run the family.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, I gave you a chapter-wise analysis of the second part of the novel, including the Epilogue. Autobiographical parallels and contradictions were also pointed out. The chapter by chapter analysis of the text in this unit and the preceding one should not be treated as exhaustive. Read in conjunction with the novel it should trigger off your own line of thinking and help you to critique the text, something that would be helped by the broad guidelines in the next two units.

3.10 GLOSSARY

Narratorial skill:	Devices used by an author to enhance the structure and content of a narrative or mode of presentation.
Racial memory:	Deep rooted memory, generally of a traumatic experience, of a group of people, that is transmitted to the generations to come and finds a voice in literature/art produced by them.

3.11 QUESTIONS

1. Why did Mr Biswas choose to visit Dehuti and Ramchand rather than his brothers or Ajodha and Tara when he left Hanuman House?
2. How did he get a job with the *Trinidad Sentinel*? What difference did it make to his status in the family? How far can this be compared to Seepersad Naipaul's journalistic career ?

3. Do you think that the house on Sikkim Street is the ideal house Mr Biswas had been looking for? Give reasons for your answer.

**Mr. Biswas and
his Dream House**

3.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

Naipaul, V.S. *The Middle Passage*. Andre Deutsch, 1962

Gusson, Mel "The Enigma of V.S Naipaul's search for himself in writing" *New York Times*, 25 April 1987. P3, 29-30.

UNIT 4 WHY DID MR. BISWAS WANT A HOUSE?

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Diasporic Novel
- 4.2 Socio – political chronicle
- 4.3 Irony and Humour
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Glossary
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying the conditions that provided a backdrop to Naipaul's creativity and after critiquing the text of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, you are sure to have formed your own opinion about the novel. The objective of this unit is to answer a few questions on the novel in an attempt to find out why and to what extent it is of interest to the postcolonial reader. This is done under three heads: *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a diasporic novel or diasporic allegory, the novel as a chronicle of the changing political and social order and the use of irony and humour in the novel. However this should not be taken as a comprehensive assessment of the novel but as an indication of some of the ways in which it can be approached.

4.1 DIASPORIC NOVEL

The diasporic sensibility is valuable for attempting to bridge cultures through a widening of experience. Experience might be widened but bridging cultures, especially for one who has been away from the mother country and generally not in touch with it, is almost impossible. In the process, the diasporan suffers from a sense of loss and unhappiness.

A postcolonial reconstruction of *A House for Mr. Biswas* reveals this unhappiness. Despite the statement made in the title, Mr. Biswas did not find a house in keeping with his expectations. He accepted the shortcomings of the house on Sikkim Street in his last days, to the extent that at times it gave the illusion of being the ideal house in the soothing shade of the laburnum tree. But you know that it is the quest that engaged the seeker, not the particular object that he sought.

A key text that should help your reading of diasporic history is *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* by Paul Gilroy (Harvard University Press, 1993). Gilroy juxtaposes the metaphors of "root" and "route" in his study of diasporic literature. The "root" metaphor reconstructs memorially a pristine, pure, uncontaminated homeland to which the first generation immigrant dreamt of returning. In the novel one reads about Pundit Tulsi's dream of returning to India, a dream that became meaningless after his death. In *Finding the Centre* Naipaul talks about his grandfather who died on his way back to his native village near Gorakhpur. The "route" metaphor suggests the journey and the historical interactions between

masters and indentured immigrants little better than slaves, which have forever “contaminated” the diasporic ethos and memory. Vijay Mishra in his “(B) ordering Naipaul : Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics” locates the “route” metaphor in two geographical spaces : the ship and the plantation barracks. Of the first Mishra says:

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The ship ... is the first of the cultural units in which social relations are re-sited and renegotiated. For the old, exclusivist Indian diaspora, the ship produced a site in which caste purities were largely lost (after all the crossing of the dark ocean, the *kalapani*, signified the loss of caste) as well as a new form of socialization that went by the name of *jahaji-bhai* (ship-brotherhood). Social interactions during these lengthy sea voyages began a process that led to the remaking of cultural and ethnic identities, to a critical self-reflexivity of the kind missing from the stratified and less mobile institutions of the homeland. (Mishra, 195)

For most of these immigrants who had rarely travelled out of their villages, prior to this voyage, it took time to comprehend the restrictive implications of indenture. When it did, these people, most of whom carried the *Ramcharit manas* and the *Gita* with them as talisman, the experience of indenture was likened to a long exile similar to Rama's *vanavasa*, out of which they would emerge purer than before.

In the barracks, also known as coolie lines, both because the labourers lived in them and they were lines of thirty or forty rooms constructed back to back, each family was allotted a room with no place for cooking, no bathrooms or toilets. To quote from “Tota's Tale” a poem by Satendra Nandan, a Fijian Indian poet, critic and statesman now living in Australia:

An empty line of twenty-four rooms :
Eight feet by twelve feet.
Once it housed native workers
Eight died : others fled
Who would live among the dead?
Homeless I had come in search of paradise
This house of hell was now all mine.
(Nandan, *Lines Across Black Waters*, 11-12)

It was Mr. Biswas's experience in the barracks of Green Vale that triggered off his desire to own a house. Another Fijian Indian writer Totaram Sanadhya, referred to those dark, monotonous and menacing lines/ barracks as “*bhut len*” (lines of ghosts / devils) and titled his book of poems “*Bhut len ki Katha*” (Saraswati Press, 1994). Thus an indentured labourer lured by promises of a life more comfortable than what he had led in his village plus a reasonably high pay, was for all practical purposes a slave, imprisoned on his master's estate with considerable limits set upon freedom. The working hours were long and arduous – twelve to sixteen hours at a stretch and wages which remained unchanged throughout the ninety years of indenture, a mere pittance, about twenty five cents per day from which over one third was deducted for rations supplied. Sharing rations was considered an offence. Possibly a racial memory of this prompted V.S. Naipaul to write:

Growing up in Trinidad, I had never wanted to be employed. I had always wanted to be a free man. This was partly the effect of my peasant Indian background and the colonial agricultural society of Trinidad. And though it had not been easy in the beginning, I had remained a free man.
(Naipaul, *A Turn in the South*, 261)

In the passage just cited, Naipaul does not mention the unequal power relations in the plantations and the politics of the desire for independence on the part of the

descendants of indentured immigrants. By essentializing this desire and presenting this as an act of pure will, people in the space of the plantation are erased and the experience becomes part of the diasporan aesthetics.

Struggle for space in barrack life was replicated in Hanuman House where no one got enough space except for Mrs. Tulsi the matriarch, her two privileged sons Shekhar and Owad and her sister's husband Seth who managed her estate. Everything had to be shared – space, lives and valuables, there was no privacy, no exclusivity. That was why the doll's house was broken up by Shama, it had been bought only for Savi, not all the children and such a thing could not be allowed within the domain of Hanuman House.

Yet it was Hanuman House, the warmth and reassurance of the Blue room in it, which healed Mr. Biswas after the traumatic experience of the stormy night. The name of Hanuman as a source of physical and spiritual strength, is often invoked when one is afraid. The analogy is clear. The indentured immigrants or 'girmitiyas' as they called themselves, considered themselves banished from their mother country for a specific period like Rama and hoped to return to it in glory like him, some day. You might find such analogizing very simplistic but that is because your thinking and conditioning is urban, possibly secular, unlike theirs. During the long and traumatic voyage and in the alien land *Ramcharit Manas* and to an extent the *Gita* gave them the needed solace and became part of their lives. A reading of the text in this light reveals many things. Hanuman House presided over by Mrs. Tulsi with Seth's help was a tower of strength, emphasizing the significance of the trading class along with their religious beliefs; the three families to which Mr. Biswas was related by blood or marriage were called the Raghu family, the Ajodha family and the Tulsi family.

Putting the names of the family this way, an inter-text, that of Tulsi's *Ramcharit Manas*, reveals itself with certain modifications. To quote Vijay Mishra, "The real genealogy of the people...gets overlaid by an earlier memory of the vernacular epic; which is then symbolized through the inhabitants of the space of houses and barracks. Any departure from the world order so constructed, and the equal spaces occupied by most people...leads to swift revenge and spiteful action." (Mishra, 218) So the house had to be broken up by Shama as a ritualistic gesture to retain the prevailing order.

Debates between the Sanatanists and Arya Samajists often became open conflicts and generated a lot of bitterness among people of the old Indian diaspora wherever they had settled down. Even now in Fiji there is a clear divide between the two sects. A student from Fiji told me of her family's refusal to cremate her father in a crematorium owned by an uncle who was an Arya Samajist. Naipaul's maternal uncle Simbhoonath Capildeo, one of the two "gods" in the novel, was a staunch Sanatanist and Naipaul's father, like Mr. Biswas became a member of the Arya Samaj for a brief period, possibly to defy the dominance of his wife's family. In a letter to Richard Forbes the West Indian critic who asked Naipaul about his father's pamphlet "Religion: Pandit Ayodhya Prasad and Trinidad", Naipaul wrote:

My father did write the pamphlet and published it too. I remember it as a very slim red covered booklet in our bookcase. I believe my father said that (a certain relative) had bought the stock and destroyed it – but I do not know whether I really heard this or whether I have made this up...My father at one stage read parts of the pamphlet to me...The booklet was later lost or destroyed.

(Cited by Vijay Mishra, 231)

As a self-proclaimed agnostic (another paradox, as you will find traces of Brahmanic arrogance in him) Naipaul finds it easier to empathise with Mr. Biswas's preference for the Arya Samaj. However, others who made long speeches and considered

themselves reformist leaders, exposed themselves when scrutinized. Naipaul consciously makes fun of any kind of religiosity whether it is the “heavy and ugly” statues of Hindu gods in the Tulsi drawing room or the long winded speeches made by Arya Samajists. This is a departure from the stereotypical diasporic sensibility which considers religion some sort of talisman, a link with the country of origin, to be cherished and suitable rites to be observed though often in modified form.

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However, you should be wary of oversimplifying Naipaul’s cultural prejudices and locating him simply in the narrative of exile and loss, for then you would miss the complex counternarrative in his writing, something that can be traced back to Naipaul’s own father and the predicament in which the latter was placed circumstantially. To quote:

My father rejecting one world, came into contact with another. In him was played out the whole tragic drama of an ancient civilization coming into contact with a hideous colonial mimicry of another civilization.

(V.S.Naipaul, Archive 1:1.3 Cited by Vijay Mishra, 194)

Mishra rightly points out that this mimicry is “... a forced aesthetic intervention when writing is really the pursuit of signs without any real understanding of their referents”. (Mishra, 194) Mishra gives the example of daffodils from the essay ‘Jasmine’ in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* which is identified as a sign but its referent cannot be conceptualized. “A pretty little flower, no doubt; but we had never seen it. Could the poem have any meaning for us?” (*The Overcrowded Barracoon*, p.24) Your reading of *A House for Mr. Biswas* would reveal many such signs.

Interestingly, Naipaul never uses the word “diaspora” but it is clear from his works that the diasporic experience – that of displacement and migrancy along with a yearning for an imagined homeland which they cannot go back to gives his writing “... the rawness of nerves, the neurosis that gives his prose the special quality of panic.” (Mishra, 225) This turns into a creative hysteria when confronted with the vast physicality of India. The last unit attempts a comparative study of *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a diasporic novel with strong expressions of the displaced sensibility.

4.2 SOCIO-POLITICAL CHRONICLE

A House for Mr. Biswas can be read as a chronicle of socio-political changes that swept over Trinidad in the early years of this century, giving a new direction to the second and third generation immigrants who had no plans of going back to India. Occasional trips to India in search of roots, and in case of older persons, to revive racial memory, were common. What this section of the unit proposes to do is to critique Trinidad society as depicted in the novel, as it moved towards post-coloniality, with a view to identifying the specific changes that contributed to this socio-cultural shift.

Ironically titled “Pastoral”, the first chapter in Part One looks at first generation “girimtiyas” who had finished their indenture and had decided to stay on in the colonies, working as farm labourers and straining to make both ends meet. The social set up was colonial and the clerk and the overseer in the farm jointly calculating and disbursing salary were immediate representatives of the colonizer.

Mr. Biswas with his aspirations of getting a job and a house on his own was something of an anomaly in this society where power equations were gradually changing with money and success being prioritized. People such as Tara, Ajodha and Mrs. Tulsi emerged as decision makers. However, their importance dwindled even as Trinidad established contacts with the west wherein persons like Miss Logie became

synonymous with power and authority. Even Mr. Biswas gained status, first as a media person and later as the Community Welfare Officer. The respect for the written word and the power that is associated with journalism is conveyed effectively. Mr. Biswas's stint with the Community Welfare Office can be read today as a job with a well established NGO, wielding considerable power in a postcolonial society.

Mr. Biswas anticipated changes in Trinidad society. Like Seepersad Naipaul, he was contemptuous of old icons, statues of Hindu gods that Pundit Tulsi had brought home from his Indian visits. His contempt for Mrs. Tulsi's younger son who tried to dominate the household can be read as a colonizer-colonized relationship in a newly independent society where neo-colonialism often replaced the old order.

In keeping with these changes, western education gained importance. While the English medium school in Trinidad with its scruffy looking teacher and students in ragged clothes; is a caricature of western education as it was imparted in colonies for a specific purpose, it was clearly the ambition of every immigrant parent to try and send children abroad for higher studies. The situation in India in the fifties and sixties was much the same. This can be contrasted with the earlier part of the novel where no parent, except someone well off like Mrs. Tulsi could think of sending children abroad to study. Mr. Biswas had to make do with whatever rudimentary education he could avail of locally and did not cost too much only because he was supposed to train as a Pundit. His brothers had no such privilege; they worked as farm labourers. He, on the other hand, educated all his children; Savi and Anand got scholarships to study abroad. The importance attached to the scholarship examination which Anand cleared, reminds one of the zeal and hard work which young people put into their preparations for examinations/interviews, which if cleared successfully, enable them to study abroad on scholarships and get well paid jobs there. While Mr. Biswas' generation did not send daughters to study abroad, preferring to spend money on their marriage and their sons-in-law, the focus shifts with Savi getting a scholarship to study abroad even before her elder brother Anand does.

The indentured immigrant had little or no contact with the world outside his plantation. In *A House for Mr. Biswas* you will find his world enlarging as he attempted to find an identity for himself in the opportunities available outside the plantation. You will notice this in Mr. Biswas' progress through life, his struggles to get away from farming or working under the Tulsis, his achievements and failures as well as the aspirations that he passed on to his son, Anand. With each new house that Mr. Biswas moved to, his personal world gained a little more space. Correspondingly, the houses improved and the last one enhanced by the labrunum tree, seemed to resemble to some extent, the house that Mr. Biswas had always dreamt of.

Architectural changes in the houses described minutely are indicative of changes that swept over Trinidad. I will cite a few examples and you can work out the rest. The "crumbling mud hut in the swamplands"(p. 15) in which Mr. Biswas was born, belonged to his mother's father, drained of life and energy by hard work on the sugar plantation. His father Raghu lived in a similar hut.

Pundit Jairam lives in a "...bare, spacious, unpainted wooden house smelling of blue soap and incense...its cleanliness and sanctity maintained by regulation awkward to everyone except himself."(p.50). As an apprentice here Mr. Biswas lived in brahmanic exclusivity and severity. When you examine the detailed descriptions of houses in the novel, reading between the lines will help you in your attempt to trace the changes in Trinidad society as well as the evolving attitude of the characters who built or bought the house. A house was more than a home to the immigrant, it was an anchorage, to an extent it still is. I'm sure you have read in recent news-papers the extent to which Salman Rushdie went to reclaim an old house in Solan in Himachal Pradesh through law courts, an act that can be read as a successful reclamation of his Indian roots.

The house on Sikkim Street where Mr. Biswas spent the last few years of his life was different from the other houses described in the book. For one thing there was nothing about it that would remind the occupants of their indenture or Indian origin. The garden with its rose trees, anthurium lilies and breadfruit tree, indicates a desire to adapt to the new environs, borrowing from the west only to bring order in their lives ("From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent." p.58) The immigrant had arrived at last and there was nothing enigmatic about this arrival. Sudha Rai considers this attitude typical of expatriate sensibility. She says: "The expatriate finds that childhood connects with India, but adulthood with its burden of reality (seeing) and reason, separates... The criticism and rejection of modern India defends the painfully developed expatriate self. As a result, the two halves of the expatriate identity – reality and fantasy, can never be fitted together." (Rai, 19)

You cannot discuss the changes that came into the field of trade and commerce without bringing in the change in the status of the Tulsis, "neither Seth nor the Tulsis were as important in Arwacas as they had been." (p.530) Even the store now was not wholly owned by them as this remark made by the author, suggests. "In the store the Tulsi name had been replaced by the Scottish name of a Port of Spain firm, and this name had been spoken for long so that it now fully belonged and no one was aware of any incongruity." (p.530)

The Sindhis "who had taken over the shop next door" (p.530) seemed to have migrated to the Caribbeans much later for business purposes, and had stronger links with India as the Indian songs played on their gramophone and the "strange" (to the descendants of the girmitiyas) smells of their food suggested. There does not seem to be any interaction between the two. Most immigrants who went later to these colonial outposts were semi-skilled or had business interests along with the capital to further them. Since monetary success is the yardstick by which immigrants like to judge themselves and others, there is an insurmountable barrier between those who have succeeded and those who have not.

Blacks are not mentioned in the first part of the novel. The black solicitor's clerk from whom Mr. Biswas bought the house on Sikkim Street, is deliberately referred to as a "negro" and dismissed as "...an illegal immigrant from one of the smaller islands." (p.566) Predictably he overcharged Mr. Biswas for the house though the extra space of twelve feet inside the boundary indicated in the deed, seemed a victory of sorts. Except for Brathwaite in recent years, not many Caribbean writers have projected the multicultural, multi-ethnic character of society in their writing.

The changes that one reads about in *A House for Mr. Biswas* are both sweeping and subtle. From being mainly agricultural at the beginning of the novel, society evolved into a more complex web. If you read carefully you will notice that priorities changed in the course of the novel, values became money-based and slowly individuals came into their own, shedding their group based identity. The society in which Mr. Biswas spent the last few years of his life, was definitely a fore-runner to postcolonial society in the former colonies though its postcoloniality had yet to acquire a definite shape. The women in the novel were more resilient and accepted the changes in their stride while Mr. Biswas took time to adapt to them, as a result of which his relationship with his son Anand was often conflictual. As you glance through the text and pass on to other samples of post-colonial condition, it is time to examine another aspect of the text, its use of irony and humour.

4.3 IRONY AND HUMOUR

Any discussion on the use of irony and humour in *A House for Mr. Biswas* would start with a look at the title and what it signifies. The title of the story by Seepersad Naipaul on which it is based, is "They Called Him Mohun", much more informal with a touch of closeness/intimacy, conveyed in the use of the first name.

Though Mr. Biswas was named Mohun Biswas, the author never refers to him by his first name, not even when he was a baby. This by itself is ludicrous and you read about the superstitions associated with him like his "unlucky sneeze" because he was born at the inauspicious hour of midnight (no one knew the exact time; Bissoondaye and the midwife had assumed it was midnight) and had six fingers on one hand. Ironically, he was indirectly responsible for his father's drowning and his notoriety as a harbinger of bad luck grew.

That he did not have a "buth suttficate" did not disturb Mr. Biswas unduly till he went to the Canadian Mission School and the ragged looking teacher demanded one. The way in which he acquired one is a humorous dig at the way in which the law was executed in a colonial society, it appeared absurd though the original purpose had been rational. The system of education which made a mockery of knowledge served no purpose except to train petty clerks. It had no relation to their daily lives and was therefore unconvincing. Even the teacher who taught them, did not believe in it. "The history Lal taught he regarded as simply a school subject, a discipline, as unreal as the geography." (p.46)

You must have observed that the nature of humour in the novel varies. Sometimes it borders on pathos as when describing the education system. Sometimes there is a black edge to it as in the passages describing the way in which Mr. Biswas and Shama get married. At times it is light hearted with just a trace of resentment at being patronized. Mr. Biswas' resentment at being sucked into the Tulsi household found an outlet in the absurd names that he made up for the prominent members of the family. Mrs. Tulsi was the "old hen"/ "old cow"/ "old queen" and her sons the "little dogs" and Seth was "Big Boss". Predictably confronted by Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, Mr. Biswas had no way of defending himself and when pushed into a corner, lost his temper and shouted at everyone. Even a humorous situation can become awkward if not handled properly.

Quite a bit of the humour in the novel is generated by Mr. Biswas' ineffectual railing against members of his wife's family, ineffectual because he was dependant on them financially as well as emotionally, a situation that he tried to get out of but could not. One suspects that V.S. Naipaul was trying to undo the hurt of situations which held painful memory. Humour was the best literary device for gaining control over a hapless past.

While dealing with Mr. Biswas, Naipaul often uses the technique of the caricaturist, blowing a trait out of proportion till the situation acquires a comic exaggeration. While Mr. Biswas' apprehensions at the sugarcane plantation might have been justified, the precautions taken by him, were amusing. As if sleeping with a cutlass and *poui* stick (that had belonged to his father) were not enough, he kept a dog and called it Tarzan, hoping that would make it fearsome. Ironically "....Tarzan turned out to be friendly and inquisitive, and a terror only to the poultry." (p.263) His profound conversations with the dog amuse, at the same time convey the pathetic mind set of someone who could not communicate with anyone else. Even the therapeutic presence of the dog did not soothe his fears.

Mr. Biswas is not the only one in the novel to contribute to the irony and humour. Authorial comments, sometimes on the most unlikely subjects, are laced with it. Talking about the beggars who had made their home on Woodford Square and cooked, ate and slept there, Naipaul says, "They worried no one, and they all had excellent physiques, and one or two were reputed to be millionaires" (p.317). It is possible that Salman Rushdie was inspired by this when he wrote a story about the theft of the relic from the Hazrat Bal Mosque in Srinagar which was accidentally touched by a crippled beggar who had become a millionaire. Touching the relic made him whole again and his lucrative source of income was gone. Though black humour was perfected by Rushdie, there is a blackness about Naipaul's humour too.

Why did Mr. Biswas want a House?

Among other characters who amuse the reader in the novel, is Ramchand, Mr. Biswas' brother-in-law. His job in a lunatic asylum gave him a sense of security, even cockiness, to the extent he believed that the place was created for the likes of him. Also, when he came to see Mr. Biswas after the latter had a nervous breakdown, he behaved as if his brother-in-law was a certified lunatic. In terms of worldly success, Ramchand was a winner, but the question that disturbs one is, did he deserve the success that came his way? In other words, the novelist suggests that though success was something everyone aimed at, in the colonial set up, it was not necessarily attained by the most deserving candidate.

I have drawn your attention to examples of irony and humour in the novel on a broad basis. You should read it carefully for more references. Look out for the nuances of language which capture the ethos of a people who thought in one language, spoke in another, altogether trying to grow out of their girmitiya background and occupations. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the most humorous of Naipaul's novels and you should be able to enjoy it as such.

4.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit I have attempted to look at the novel from three angles. There are possibly more ways of approaching *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Make your own observations, and draw your own conclusions. The vast dimensions of the novel allow different readings at socio-political and cultural / economic levels, exploring and commenting on different aspects of life led by the girmitiyas and their descendants in a society changing from colonial to post-colonial. Naipaul wrote many works of fiction and non-fiction after *A House for Mr. Biswas* but none so multi-layered or so open to different interpretations. A comparative study of the novel, in juxtaposition to the texts that came before it and in conjunction with Naipaul's books on India in the next section, would bring out aspects of the novel hitherto untouched, yet another proof of its rich textual fabric.

4.5 GLOSSARY

Postcolonial reconstruction: A reading of the text from the postcolonial viewpoint, means adding new meaning and significance to it, also reading between the lines to look for hidden meanings, deliberate omissions/inclusions overlooked earlier.

Counternarrative: A narrative that counters the main one and can be traced to autobiographical parallels or racial memory, something deeply entrenched in the writer's psyche.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Examine *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a diasporic novel.
2. Write a note on the use of irony and humour in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

4.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Mishra, Vijay. “(B) ordering Naipaul : Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics”, *Diaspora* 5:21, 1996 p. 196-236

UNIT 5 PUTTING *A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS* IN PERSPECTIVE

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Naipaul's early works : *The Mystic Masseur*
- 5.2 *Miguel Street*
- 5.3 *The Suffrage of Elvira*
- 5.4 *Middle Passage*
- 5.5 Naipaul and India : *An Area of Darkness*
- 5.6 *India : A Million Mutinies Now*
- 5.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.8 Glossary
- 5.9 Questions
- 5.10 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

What more is there to know about *A House for Mr Biswas*? I can see the question forming in your minds. You have studied the background of the novel, glanced at biographical material on V.S Naipaul, read the text in an attempt to reconstruct it and looked at some critical approaches to the novel.

But, as postgraduate students you would know that you cannot study a work of fiction in isolation. Apart from the background and all that went into the making of this particular novel, you should know about other related works of the novelist so as to put the text prescribed for you in a literary context.

By implication, you would comprehend *A House for Mr Biswas* better if you compare it with Naipaul's Caribbean novels, *The Mystic Masseur*, the *The Suffrage of Elvira* and *Miguel Street* and his impression of colonial society in the West Indies in *The Middle Passage*. This would enable you to look at the ways in which Naipaul has worked and reworked the same material into the increasing complexities of more self sustaining narratives. The first part of this unit guides you through the comparisons.

Naipaul's strange relationship with India is shaped by his double diasporic psyche. This would be explored in the second part of this unit by locating *A House for Mr Biswas* in the context of Naipaul's three books on India – *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilization* and *India : A Million Mutinies Now*. I would also bring in some relevant interviews given by him to the media. All of this is essential. A proper perspective on Naipaul is a difficult task to achieve when one considers the writer's elusive and contradictory remarks, yet nothing can eclipse the brilliance of his writings, though you may not agree with many of his opinions.

5.1 NAIPAUL'S EARLY WORKS: *THE MYSTIC MASSEUR*

The transformation of Ganesh Ramsumair, from a masseur to a mystic to the impeccably dressed G.R. Muir Esq., MBE is clearly a trope for the socio-cultural and political changes on the island even as the colonizer tried to strengthen his position by involving more and more local individuals in governance.

Ganesh was a successful person. Named after the god who proffers *siddhi* or success to the hard working, Ganesh would be considered lucky in more ways than one. He and Mr Biswas complement each other, the former moved from success to success in a planned, careful sort of way, whereas the latter tired his hand at practically everything though he rarely met with success. Wealth was an important yardstick in measuring social status in early twentieth century Trinidad. After all, the immigrants had crossed the *kala pani* in their quest for money and position. So, someone who could attain both without apparently compromising his ideals or tarnishing his public image was held in awe, almost like Ganesh who epitomizes success in the Hindu pantheon.

The Mystic Masseur is Naipaul's first novel and it has the simplistic approach of most first novels. The language is direct with hints of irony and humour that Naipaul was to perfect in *A House for Mr Biswas*. The first page of *The Mystic Masseur* offers an example of the use of humour in Naipaul's early works. I quote: 'I know the sort of doctors they have in Trinidad', my mother used to say, 'They think nothing of killing two three people before breakfast.' (p.11) In *A House for Mr Biswas* the doctor was a disliked person, always fleecing poor people like Mr Biswas' brothers and being rude to them. The masseur who could heal people by his magic touch and chants provided an alternative medicine held in high esteem by many, mostly in rural areas. Even today, if someone breaks a bone in the old city or rural areas of India, he may go to a masseur for a therapeutic massage and bandaging rather than to an orthopaedic in a hospital.

Mr Biswas loses his parents in the novel but the deaths do not cause much grief as has already been pointed out in an earlier section. Ganesh's response to his father's death is much the same. He fulfils the ritual tasks as commanded by the pundit, Ramlogan and his own aunt, without asking questions. "He remembered having to walk round the body of his father, remembered applying the last caste marks to the old man's forehead, and doing many more things until it seemed that ritual had replaced grief." (p.30)

A newly evolved feeling of respect for the written word and respect for an author who has garnered a reputation runs through Naipaul's early writing. Trinidad did not look upon writing as a profession and offered no encouragement to a writer until he made money. Naipaul's father had not been successful and he himself was a struggling writer in London when he wrote his early novels. Ganesh did not write novels, he wrote philosophical books with titles like *The Road to Happiness*, *The Soul as I see It* and others which made his name in Trinidad. But his ultimate success came when he became president of the Hindu Association, Trinidad and Tobago, and after that Member of the Legislative Council. While his early political career was modelled on Gandhi's, he slowly became more and more westernized, an MBE tilting the balance towards westernization so that at the end of the novel he was very much the picture of an English gentleman except in appearance.

As for the format of the two novels, *The Mystic Masseur* strikes the reader with its direct appeal. When compared to *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Mystic Masseur* is almost schematic. The multi-layered narrative that has made *A House for Mr Biswas* a favourite with the post colonial reader, has replaced a simply structured novel with some irony and humour. There is one major innovation. At a time when dialect-dominated novels had not yet come into vogue, Naipaul uses the dialect spoken by Indian immigrants in Trinidad in an authentic way, something that gives the novel a contemporaneous crispness. This technique has been perfected by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*.

The stories collected in *Miguel Street* have a much more definite approach. They were written before *The Mystic Masseur* though published later. The opening lines of the first story titled "Bogart" had been in the writer's mind for a long time. It was a conversation, the first part sifted from memory and the second created by imagination. To quote the conversation:

Every morning when he got up Hat would sit on the banister of his back verandah and shout across, 'What happening there, Bogart?'
Bogart would turn in his bed and mumble softly, so that no one heard, 'What happening there Hat?'
(Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, p. 9)

If you read *Miguel Street* and *The Mystic Masseur* together you will find that many characters as well as situations overlap, some of which have been taken up and honed to perfection in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Bogart used to live in the same house as Naipaul for quite sometime. It is possibly this close bond that made the narrator gloss over his act of bigamy, even valorize it.

A very close bond existed between all those who lived on *Miguel Street*, a kinship that can be traced back to the *jahazi* brotherhood. Even when Popo the carpenter was caught for stealing, his friends on *Miguel Street* agreed that his stupidity had led to the arrest. The feeling of the community are reflected in words such as these ".... We felt deep inside ourselves that Popo was really a man, perhaps a bigger man than any of us". (Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, p. 20) In *A House for Mr Biswas* there was no such kinship, only jostling for space where no act of creativity could find encouragement.

The limited world of the *girmitiya* which Mr Biswas tries to transcend, make him an oddity in the eyes of his family as well as others. The camaraderie and an acceptance of one another's failings is possible only if space is shared willingly. Mr Biswas was compelled to share his space with the Tulsi family. As has been pointed out earlier this sharing made him resentful, though at the same time the Tulsi household provided a security which he could not experience on his own. This appears paradoxical, till one looks closely at Mr Biswas's relationship with the Tulsis which oscillates between dependence and resentment.

The *Ramcharitmanas* and the *Gita* were important to the immigrant. Apart from providing a link with India, these texts also gave them a socio-religious anchorage. In *Miguel Street* there is an attitude of defiance towards them, something that was voiced by Mrs Morgan towards a person called Bhakcu who was fond of reading the *Ramcharitmanas* in a doleful singsong voice, lying on his stomach on the bed. Her railings are addressed to Mrs Bhakcu, "Why don't you get your big-belly husband to go and fix some more motor-car, and stop singing" (*Miguel Street*, p. 65). In colonial Trinidad the *Ramcharitmanas* had ceased to be a talisman along with the *Gita* after the indenture period was over. So Bhakcu's knowledge of the *Ramcharitmanas* was not respected till the money making possibilities were suggested to his wife. To quote from "The Mechanical Genius":

My mother said, 'Well, it easy, easy. He is a Brahmin, he know the *Ramayana*, and he have a car. It easy for him to become a pundit, a real, proper pundit.'

Mrs Bhakcu clapped her hands. 'Is a first class idea. Hindu pundits making a lot of money these days.'
So Bhakcu became a pundit.
(Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, p. 126-7)

The concluding sentence of the story, "I was haunted by thoughts of the dhoti-clad Bhakcu crawling under a car, attending to a crank-shaft, while poor Hindus waited for him to attend to their souls." (Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, 127) is an instance of humour in Naipaul's earliest work. Bhakcu was one of his favourite characters and in real life, it was he who drove the narrator to the airport when he was going abroad to study.

Mr Titus Hoyt, who was never called Titus or Mr Hoyt but Mr Titus Hoyt by all those who knew him, reminds one strongly of Mr Biswas who was never referred to as Mohun by the author, always Mr Biswas. Titus Hoyt's photograph in the newspaper along with a letter from one of his young students anonymously contributing to the *Guardian's* "Neediest Cases Fund" was developed into two incidents in *A House for Mr Biswas*. The first was Mr Biswas' attempts to pose as Scarlet Pimpernel for his readers early in his journalistic career, a gimmick that failed miserably and showed the absurdity of his aspirations. The "Neediest Cases Fund" can be identified as the precursor to the Deserving Destitutes Fund that provides many humorous situations in *A House for Mr Biswas*.

Naipaul's first collection of stories compares favourably with *A House for Mr Biswas*. There is a freshness about its humour and a liveliness about the characters and the pace at which the stories move. *Miguel Street* was published at a time when English literature had not acquired a multiracial, multiethnic identity as it has today. The book may now receive a wider readership from those interested in the postcolonial subject.

5.3 THE SUFFRAGE OF ELVIRA

The Suffrage of Elvira was Naipaul's first political novel written at a time when any liaison between politics and literature was distrusted. The title is ironical, the word "suffrage" meaning general elections, at the same time hinting at the suffering/inconveniences caused by the elections. Interestingly, Naipaul did not show much interest in the political scene in India in his first novel located in the country. In *A House for Mr Biswas* there is hardly any mention of the political scene in Arwacas, the principal site of the novel.

The Suffrage of Elvira reminds an Indian reader of the way in which general elections were conducted in India in the fifties. Surujput Harbans with his professed secularism, low self esteem despite a sound financial background, could easily pass off as the stereotypical political candidate, not very sure of the votes he controlled. Through him Naipaul makes fun of the elections conducted in former colonies by showing how vote banks were identified and how they were nurtured.

Characters like Ganesh Pundit hovered briefly in the background conveying the idea that Naipaul was working and reworking the same material – his experience in Trinidad. The autobiographical parallels were not so pronounced at this stage as they later became in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Writing about the political situation was an experiment of sorts, later taken up on a large scale in his non fiction as he became a self-appointed spokesperson for several developing nations.

Naipaul often prioritized the situation and not the characters. In *Suffrage of Elvira* the dog named Tiger reminds one of Tarzan in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Like *Miguel Street*, *The Suffrage of Elvira* is quite simplistic, descriptive rather than analytical, presenting a slice of life from the Caribbeans, rather than going into the depths of social organisation. Naipaul was clearly looking for a theme which would serve as a metaphor of the life of the immigrants.

Middle Passage, a collection of six long essays, collaging travel impressions in Trinidad, British Guiana, Surinam, Martinique and Jamaica, came after *A House for Mr Biswas* and the opening sentence indicated the colonial thrust of the discourse. To quote, "There was such a crowd of immigrant-type west Indians on the boat-train platform at Waterloo that I was glad I was travelling first class to the West Indies". (Naipaul *Middle Passage*, p.11) The descendants of indentured immigrants were trying to sever links with working class immigrants to England and adopted a supercilious attitude towards them. Coming back to Trinidad for a visit was not a homecoming at all for Naipaul. It could not provide a house to a later day Mr Biswas and he associated it with his father's failure. Predictably the judgement passed by Naipaul on Trinidad is harsh and reflects his wish to dissociate himself altogether from the country to which his forefathers migrated. I will quote from it at length as it will help you to link *A House for Mr Biswas* as with Naipaul's books on India which will be taken up in the concluding section of this unit. He says in *Middle Passage* :

Trinidad was and remains a materialist immigrant society, continually growing and changing, never settling into any pattern, always retaining the atmosphere of the camp; unique in the West Indies in the absence of a history; yet not an expanding society but a colonial society, ruled autocratically if benevolently, with the further limitations of its small size and remoteness. All this has combined to give it its special character, its ebullience and irresponsibility. And more : a tolerance which is more than tolerance and indifference to virtue as well as to vice; The Land of the Calypso is not a copy-writers phrase. It is one side of the truth, and it was this gaiety, so inexplicable to the tourist who sees the shacks of Shanty Town and the corbeaux patrolling the highway, and inexplicable to me who had remembered it as the land of failures, which now, on my return, assuaged me. (Naipaul, *Middle Passage*, p. 54)

Clearly Naipaul had made up his mind to assume the persona of the exile, made easier by his double diasporic status. This helps one to understand his attitude to India and compare it to the novel under study that the next part of this unit will undertake.

5.5 NAIPAUL AND INDIA : AN AREA OF DARKNESS

Naipaul has yet to write a novel with India as its locale. If one were to go by his vehement condemnation of the novel as a genre in an interview with Ahmed Rashid in Lahore, one would not expect such a novel, or, for that matter any novel. To quote : "I hate the word novel. I can no longer understand why it is important to write or read invented stories. I don't need those extravaganzas". (Interview in *The Observer Review*, p. 16) However, his paradoxical nature and a remark made in India in a television interview in 1998 to the effect that he was being pressurized (by his wife Nadira ?) to write a novel based in India, makes one hope that such a novel may yet be forthcoming.

Among post-1947 travellers to India, Naipaul has a special place because of his curious-love-hate relationship with this country. It is a strange predicament, mainly a tension trying to balance between a desire to remain detached from the mainstream tradition of the country visited and not quite succeeding, out of which is born some sensitive travel writing, impressionistic, emotional and in the first book on India,

rather controversial. In this section I will attempt to establish links between *A House for Mr Biswas* and Naipaul's three books on India, starting with *An Area of Darkness*.

Naipaul's first visit to India was undertaken in 1962, a year after the publication of *A House for Mr Biswas*, ostensibly as a quest for his roots in the country from where his ancestors had migrated to Trinidad. Yet, the name and exact location of his grandfather's village, close to "... this town in eastern Uttar Pradesh, not even graced by a ruin, celebrated only for its connections with the Buddha and its backwardness" (*An Area of Darkness*, p. 266), is not mentioned. The town referred to is possibly Gorakhpur in eastern Uttar Pradesh, near Kapilavastu, Buddha's birthplace.

A visit to this village of Dubeys and Tiwaris with an IAS officer was not a satisfying experience for Naipaul. Two things about his childhood influenced his reaction to the village of the Dubeys in general and his Indian relative Ramchandra in particular. He was disappointed by the absence of community living in his ancestral house, the sort he had experienced in Chaguanas and later in Port of Spain as part of an extended family on his mother's side (fictionally represented as the Tulsi household in Hanuman House). The second was more complex. He had possibly expected his grandfather's branch of the family to be prosperous like others in the village. The poverty that he saw, along with Ranchandra Dubey's tendency to cling to him and make use of him, put an end to his wish to be identified with the Indian branch of his family in any way. Poverty and failure reminded him of his own father.

Naipaul could cut off his connections with the village of the Dubeys and be dismissive about them but he could not sever his Indian connections altogether as his later visits to this country, followed by books that present a semifictional account of his experience, signify. In fact, Naipaul's quest for India had started much earlier, in his childhood. As a boy he associated the old lady in Trinidad who spoke only Hindi and whom everybody called Gold Teeth Nanee, with India. She once drank a glass full of blanco fluid, mistaking it for coconut water and fell seriously ill. "So one India crashed; and as we got older, living now in the town, Gold Teeth dwindled to a rustic oddity with whom there could be no converse" (Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, p. 30) Gold Teeth Nanee clearly a first generation immigrant as she spoke only Hindi could easily fit into the Tulsi household or live on *Miguel Street* or cast her vote in favour of Harbans in the General Election held in Elvira.

Another aspect of India that Naipaul encountered early in life was the caste system and the Hindu-Muslim divide in Trinidad society. F.Z.Ghany the pompous "solicitor conveyancer and a commissioner of oaths" (*A House for Mr Biswas*, p. 42) made most of his money from Hindus but distrusted them as a Muslim. Even the way he greeted Tara, Bipti and Mr Biswas indicated a scornful attitude. Such caste loyalties not so obvious normally, erupted violently when the situation was explosive as during the General Elections depicted in *The Suffrage of Elvira*. In *An Area of Darkness* and *A House for Mr Biswas* Naipaul expressed no special preference for politics. Later, during subsequent visits to India, he developed an interest in the political set up here and attempted to analyze it in *India; A Wounded Civilization* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*.

Closely related with this is Naipaul's brahmanic arrogance and a conscious effort to subvert his brahmanism, albeit unsuccessfully. Caste and religion were institutional for descendants of indentured immigrants, which provided them with security and protected their identity. Naipaul's attempts to disparage the caste system, his refusal to go through the *janawa* (the sacred thread) ceremony were not really rebellions against the caste system; they were nothing more than token gestures as he always defended his exclusivity, an attitude common to diasporans. The ambivalence or paradox was to become a part of his style, helping him to maintain a "too close yet too far" attitude towards India.

This explains his use of the word "pilgrimage" for a visit to the Amarnath Cave, a trip which he enjoyed as much as his trip to Kashmir. To quote from his reminiscences :

**Putting *A House*
for Mr. Biswas in
Perspective**

It was the joy of being among the mountains; it was the special joy of being among the Himalayas. I felt linked to them. I liked speaking the name. India, the Himalayas : they went together. In so many of the brightly coloured religious pictures in my grandmother's house I had seen these mountains, cones of white against simple, cold blue. They had become part of the India of my fantasy. It would have astonished me then, in a Trinidad achingly remote from places that seemed worthwhile and real become fully known, to be told that one day I would walk among the originals of those mountains.

(Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, p.176 – 7)

This was one of the few places where the physical India corresponded with the India of Naipaul's dreams and provided a resting place for his imagination.

In the course of his post-1962 visits to India, Naipaul concerned himself with ethnographic analyses of Indians, at the same time keeping a distance from the ordinary person most of the time, talking mainly to those in authority and power, like the IAS officer in Bombay, the commissioner in Rajasthan. As a postcolonial traveller who was unable to establish an Indian identity and had given up the attempt to do so after his first visit to this country, Naipaul predictably held the view that India should sever all connections with the past, as perhaps Mr Biswas had done by finally moving into a house that was more western than Indian in appearance and a contrast to Hanuman house.

5.6 INDIA : A MILLION MUTINIES NOW

One cannot really compare Naipaul's third book on India, *India : A Million Mutinies Now* with *A House for Mr Biswas* but there are certain perceptions which can be traced back to his Trinidad Indian background. For example, his sympathy for minorities in India can be interpreted as a vicarious association with his own past, expressed from a secure position in the west, financially and professionally. So, a visit to the Muslim ghetto on Muhammad Ali Road in Mumbai made him understand the strong bond between the residents.

I felt that if I had been in their position, confined to Bombay, to that area, to that row, I too would have been a passionate Muslim. I had grown up in Trinidad as a member of the Indian community, a member of a minority, and I knew that if you felt that your community was small you could never walk away from it ; the grimmer things became, the more you insisted on being what you were. (Naipaul, *India : A Million Mutinies Now*, p. 31)

The same applies to his perspective on the Punjab problem, which sees resentment against the central government as the root cause.

To some extent you can compare *An Area of Darkness* with *A House for Mr Biswas* but an attempt at analogizing Naipaul's other books on India do not yield too many parallels.

5.7 LET US SUM UP

You would have, by now formed your own opinion on V.S.Naipaul. Let me warn you he is paradoxical and often changes views expressed on an earlier occasion. An example : after declaring to a journalist last year that the novel was extinct, when

Tarun Tejpal of *Outlook* asked him whether he was serious about writing another novel, his answer was, "I'm being pressed, you know. I'm being pressed although I feel I've moved away from the form and read very few novels now and I thought that the kind of work I have to do should be a little bit in the nature of my last four books. But I'm pressed and I might do something like a political fairy tale." (*Outlook*, 88 March 23, 1998)

What you should prioritize in your study of Naipaul is the way he develops his style, striving to make his prose jargon free, more "transparent" to use his words, as he considers words "valuable" and to be used with a lot of thought and care. This, I feel is the reason that makes Naipaul one of the greatest writers of the world though his viewpoints are often controversial.

5.8 GLOSSARY

Self-sustained narrative:	A narrative that can stand on its own.
Multi-layered narrative:	A narrative that is open to different levels of reading and interpretation.

5.9 QUESTIONS

- 1 Naipaul's ambivalence towards India originates from his diasporic status. Comment with a comparatist study of *A House for Mr Biswas* and Naipaul's three books on India.
- 2 In *A House for Mr Biswas* Naipaul works and reworks the same material used in his earlier fiction. Comment with examples from the relevant texts.

5.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Naipaul, V.S. *The Mystic Masseur* 1957. Andre Deutsch
..... *The Suffrage of Elvira* 1958. Andre Deutsch
- - - *Miguel Street* 1959, Andre Deutsch
- - - *An Area of Darkness*, 1964, Andre Deutsch
- - - *India : A Wounded Civilization*, Vikas, 1977
- - - *India : A Million Mutinies Now*, Minerva, 1990
- - - Interview with Tarun Tejpal. *Outlook* March 23, 1998

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