Masculinity under Imperial Stress – Mr Biswas and V S Naipaul

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Abstract:

In *Mr Biswas*, Naipaul creates his most destitute of protagonists. Born into a community of Indian labourers on a sugar estate, in a remote village of Trinidad, Mr Biswas grows to face a life without prospects. Cut off as much from the distant homeland of his ancestors in India, as from the African society around them, the circumstances of Mr Biswas and his people are a direct outcome of colonisation, and Indians in Trinidad are among the twice colonised. Claiming to be of Brahamincal origin yet uneducated, caught in poverty and demeaning labour, East Indians living in West Indies, the circumstances Mr Biswas finds himself in are dire. His efforts to break out of this world to which he is politically and socially confined eventually crystallise into the one desire – to have a house of his own. The ownership of a house for Biswas is fundamental to establishing his identity as a man within the colonial context. This paper examines the impact of colonisation in the construction of masculinity in *Mr Biswas*, and insofar there are biographical parallels, and in Naipaul himself.

1 In V S Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr Biswas*, finding a house for Mr Biswas becomes an undertaking of epic dimensions. In Mr Biswas' desire for a house, Naipaul tells the story of an Indian rural community in Trinidad deriving from indentured labourers . Two facts are important: *A House for Mr Biswas* is a narrative of a male protagonist told by a male author; and it is located in the period of British colonialism. The narrative is therefore also necessarily concerned with the conditions and events which determine Mr Biswas' masculinity.

2 The novel significantly opens with the death of Mr Biswas, and the "Prologue" introduces us to a man whose life has been inconsequential in every way except for the one fact that he dies in a house that he owns:

> And now at the end he found himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of earth. That he should have been responsible for this seemed to him, in these last months, stupendous. (8)

Mr Biswas dies at the height of his achievement which consists of his house and a handful of possessions inside it:

> The kitchen safe. That was more than twenty years old. Shortly after his marriage he had bought it, . . . the typewriter. That had been acquired when, at the age of thirty-three, he had decided to become rich by writing for American and English magazines; . . . the hatrack, its glass now leprous, most of its hooks broken, its woodwork ugly . . . the bookcase had been made at Shorthills by an out-of-work blacksmith . . . And the diningtable: bought cheaply from a Deserving Destitute . . . And the Slumberking bed, where he could no longer sleep because it was upstairs . . . And the glass cabinet: bought to please Shama, still dainty, and still practically empty. And the morris suite: the last acquisition . . . And in the garage outside, the Prefect. But bigger than them all was the house, his house. (12-13)

3 The “Prologue” is an incantation of the word “house”; it occurs 39 times in a text of 2,500 words. Yet for all its invocation, neither the house nor the things it holds are by any means distinctive; on the contrary they are nondescript, broken, damaged and scarred. Yet, precisely for this reason, the house and its objects carry nostalgic memories of a 46 year old, dying man, and define a chronology of how Mr Biswas came to associate the ownership of a house with the rationale for his very existence as a man. In his last days, Mr Biwas appreciates what the house means to him:

> He could not quite believe that he had made that world. He could not see why he should have a place in it. And everything by which he was surrounded was examined and rediscovered, with pleasure, surprise, disbelief. Every relationship, every possession. (12)

These are words of a man who could not take anything for granted, for whom there were no givens – words of a man dispossessed by the colonial encounter. The chapters that follow the “Prologue” narrate the story of Mr Biswas’ life, the gradual unfolding of his adulthood and masculinity in the lowest echelons of a colonial society which lead him to realise that the only way of gaining some little self-worth lies in the ownership of a house. Mr Biswas is not born with the desire to own a house – this aspiration grows, step by step and in fits and bursts, from his experiences as an Indian in colonial Trinidad until it becomes an obsessive drive, shapes his entire being and becomes fundamental to Mr Biswas asserting himself as a man in the colonial system.

4 The impact of colonisation is everywhere in the novel. The family of labourers on a sugar-estates to which Mr Biswas is born, are there directly as a consequence of the colonial enterprise. Much of Naipaul’s novel is given to depicting the groups of Indian people in Trinidad, cut off from the land of their ancestors on the one hand, and their immediate social and political environment on the other, ceaselessly caught in the struggles for basic survival. It is an insulated world but not one of fairy tales and magic, but exactly the opposite: it is a perverted world of abject poverty and hardship, where almost everybody toils in inhuman conditions to scrape a living. In such a precarious way of life, traditions and rituals as well as spirituality understandably lose their efficacy and are reduced to absurd superstitions. The birth of Mr Biswas releases all kinds of negative currents. Shortly before his birth, Mr Biswas’ mother leaves the tyranny of his father with three other children and walks to the equally miserable conditions of her parents’ hut. His grandmother makes all the preparations for his birth that she is able to – call a midwife, gather cactus leaves in the middle of the night and hang them over every opening in the hut and organises a pundit to secure the baby’s

future (15-16). But in every detail he fills in, Naipaul builds a sense of inadequacy and desolation – the cactus leaves are overdone and a substitute for the mango leaves that are used by Hindus in India, the midwife is ignorant and the priest somewhat of a fake. The absurdity of the situation is highlighted further in the person of the new born baby which has six fingers and comes out the wrong way. The pundit, on his side, predicts that the newborn will be a liar, a lecher and a spendthrift, will have an unlucky sneeze and bring evil to his family. The scene is thus set to delineate the life of Mr Biswas amongst his community of inferior, doubly colonised people, without comprehensive rights or prospects.

5 In "The Birth of Mr Biswas", Bruce Macdonald describes how Naipaul reworked materials from his father's story "They Named Him Mohun" into his novel with the effect that reverence with which Naipaul's father drew the pundit and the Hindu scriptures and traditions are replaced by satire. Macdonald notes that in his father's story "Identity by name came first ... and was almost a way of making the child whole and giving him a place in the scheme of things":

> In the novel the identity of the child is lost in a welter of magic, and the name which is given to Mr. Biswas, Mohun, is hardly ever used. He has no place in this land of exile or in the cosmic order, and suitable even his name is forgotten at the naming ceremony. The contrast between the early 'They Named him Mohun' and the later adaptation for the first part of *A House for Mr. Biswas* highlights the tone which V. S. Naipaul establishes at the beginning of his novel. The conception of society has changed radically and we are prepared in advance by this scene for a world where there is no social order and where the individual no longer has a place defined for him in the world. All the old ceremonies and beliefs have been emptied of human significance and have become mere trivial forms. Even the powerful Hindu sense of Fate, of *karma*, becomes something to get around with non-sensical detail. The decay which follows in the novel is decay of the religion that has lost its meaning. (Macdonald 52-53)

Macdonald's comments are relevant except that he neutralises the political context of *A House of Mr Biswas* by using phrases such as "land of exile" or "cosmic order"; Mr Biswas' family are not exiles but colonial subjects and the cosmic order to which they have been assigned is controlled by colonial powers. The difference between Naipaul's perceptions and that of his father is not simply generational but also political; Naipaul's views are already coloured by his colonial education and from the British perspective of the time, Hindu traditions are degraded and seen to be incompatible with western values.

6 The family structures and social customs of the Indians in Trinidad must indeed be seen in relation to the wider political situation. The people among which Mr Biswas is born are disempowered and trapped in hopeless conditions. Their desperate position makes them

withdraw inwards and cling to traditions and rituals they bought with them for momentary acts of self-assertion and validation. The wider colonial system, with its securities and dominance represents rationalism, culture, civilisation and prosperity against which is posited the Indian family and community structure as weak, unchanging and inferior, deprived and thereby depraved. It is Mr Biswas' predicament to be caught between these two systems where each undermines the other, but both act to oppress him within their hierarchies. In moving between these two antagonistic worlds without belonging to either, Mr Biswas' masculinity is fractured. Hence Mr Biswas ends up defining his masculinity in the only terms allowed to him – materially and specifically in the form of ownership of a house.

7 From the beginning Naipaul shows Mr Biswas to be dislocated. Cursed to stay away from water and suffering from eczema, he is kept away from his father and brothers and spends his childhood with his mother and playing with his sister. While his brothers join gangs of other boys working on the sugar-estates, like their father, and thus make an easy transition into adulthood, the same path is denied to Mr Biswas. He is marked by a curse and relegated to the lowest of labourers, not to the group of strong men but "the boys and girls of the grass-gang" who on the sugar-estates "were easy objects of ridicule". Mr Biswas contemplates the career charted out for him in the colonial society of Trinidad, which was a typical career available to most Indian labourers in Trinidad at that time:

> And it was to be the grass-gang for Mr Biswas. Later he would move to the cane fields, to weed and clean the plant and reap; he wold be paid by the task and his tasks would be measured out by a driver with a long bamboo rod. And there he would remain. He would never become a driver or a weigher because he wouldn't be able to read. Perhaps, after many, years, he might save enough to rent or buy a few acres where he would plant his own canes, which he would sell to the estate at a price fixed by them. But he would achieve this only if he had the strength and optimism of his brother Pratap. For that was what Pratap did. And Pratap, illiterate all his days, was to become richer than Mr Biswas; he was to have a house of his own, a large, strong, well-built house, years before Mr Biswas. (23)

The passage demonstrates the rigidity, the pre-determinedness and the limited prospects of the colonial system for the Indians living there. The maintenance of certain rituals and attitudes and behaviour of the Indian folk in the novel occur against the backdrop of this social and political situation and are invariably influenced by it.

8 The vulnerability of the Indian family structure in a colonial setting becomes clear when Mr Biswas' father dies. Without the male head, Mr Biswas' mother and all her children are driven from the land and exposed to the charity of their relatives. The break of the family is due to social, economic and political reasons; they seem not to have any political rights and

their claim to the place where they live is so tenuous that they can be easily removed from their house. With his father's death, Mr Biswas is thrown off the track designated for him and in the novel, his internal experiences of disorientation are highlighted by his physical rootlessness. Mr Biswas, together with his mother and the other children, are driven from their house by other villagers and without recourse to any viable options or support:

> And so Mr Biswas came to leave the only house to which he had some right. For the next thirty-five years he was to be a wanderer with no place he could call his own, with no family except that which he was to attempt to create out of the engulfing world of the Tulsis. For with his mother's parents dead, his father dead, his brothers on the estate at Felicity, Dehuti as a servant in Tara's house, and himself rapidly growing away from Bipti who, broken, became increasingly useless and impenetrable, it seemed to him that he was really quite alone. (40)

This is a formative moment of Mr Biswas' life and from here on the connection between his outer and inner fragmentation is complete and each reflects the other. Once cut loose from his assigned place in the world of labourers, Mr Biswas steps into the world outside to find himself at a loose end. The rest of the narrative renders Mr Biswas' efforts to inhabit this other world, the society beyond the mores of the Indian migrant community; he is henceforth exposed to the conflicting claims and restrictions of the Hindu and the non-Hindu worlds, the hostile structures of the colonisers and the colonised.

9 These tensions are further demonstrated in that as a fatherless boy, he is taken into the Canadian Mission school where he receives anglicised education, but before the process is complete, his relatives pull him out of school in order that he fulfil his destiny as a Brahmin and send him to learn to be a pundit. It is Mr Biswas' predicament to fail on both fronts. Being ejected from the two main systems he knows, Mr Biswas considers his options, and these consist of a series of low level occupations or small-time enterprises, that form the next rung in the ladder after labourers. Also, as cultural and familial ties disintegrate, Mr Biswas begins to define his masculinity in impersonal and material terms. Left entirely to his own resources, Mr Biswas resolves, "I am going to get a job on my own. And I am going to get my own house too", and then he contemplates the kinds of jobs that await him:

> On Monday morning he set about looking for a job. How did one look for a job? He supposed that one looked. He walked up and down the Main Road, looking. He passed a tailor and tried to picture himself cutting khaki cloth, tacking, and operating a sewing-machine. He passed a barber and tried to picture himself stropping a razor; his mind wandered off to devise elaborate protections for his left thumb. But he didn't like the tailor he saw, a fat man sulkily sewing in a dingy shop; and as for barbers, he had never liked those who cut his own hair; he thought too how it would disgust Pundit Jairam to learn that his former pupil had taken up barbering, a profession immemorially low. He walked on. (67)

The other possibilities include a caretaker's or a grocer's shop or producing rum or running buses as some of his better off relatives do.

10 For a while, Mr Biswas contents himself with books by British authors and scientists such as people in the colonies can gain access to, but the more he reads the more intensely he becomes aware of the gap between the colonial education and his own real situation:

> Mr. Biswas saw himself in many Samuel Smiles heroes: he was young, he was poor, and he fancied he was struggling. But there always came a point when resemblance ceased. The heroes had rigid ambitions and lived in countries where ambitions could be pursued and had a meaning. He had no ambition, and in this hot land, apart from opening a shop or buying a motorbus, what could he do? What could he invent? Dutifully, however, he tried. He bought elementary manuals of science and read them; nothing happened; he only became addicted to elementary manuals of science. He bought the seven expensive volumes of Hawkins' Electrical Guide (…)

Alongside the efforts to improve his mind, Mr Biswas takes on the unstable, status-less occupation of the painter of signs. With his masculine identity still quite fluid, or rather confused, and all kinds of different factors playing his destiny, he is just at the right stage to be swallowed up by the elaborate machinations of the Tulsi family.

11 The Tulsi household, though based on the family structure, functions as an institution. The Tulsis have made a name for themselves in Arwacas; they are part of the small migrant landowning elite and are engaged in several commercial activities which make them economically independent. They constitute a Hindu world within the colonial world of Trinidad, but one that stands aloof from and defies the wider society. Armed against the encroachments of the western and African societies, the Tulsis are a law unto themselves; they run an ultra-Hindu system and perpetuate their way of life by constantly adding to their numbers. No wonder then that to Mr Biswas, "Hanuman House stood like an alien white fortress. The concrete walls looked as thick as they were, and when the narrow doors of the Tulsi Store on the ground floor were closed the House became bulky, impregnable and blank. The side walls were windowless, and on the upper two floors the windows were mere slits in the façade" (80). It is also unsurprising that Naipaul uses phrases such as the "Tulsi organisation", "the Tulsi establishment", the "Tulsi contingent" or the "Tulsi patronage" to magnify them into something larger than a usual family unit. Mr Biswas enters the Tulsi clan by virtue of his upper caste and through marriage, hoping thereby to gain some stability and status. But his hopes are dashed as he realises he must be a small wheel in the gigantic Tulsi operation.

12 The Tulsi family are a Hindu version of a commune, where everybody is accorded a place and must contribute towards the greater good of the many, in return for which their

basic survival is ensured. Mrs Tulsi is the matriarchal head of this outfit and runs it together with her brother to whom she has delegated some of her powers. There is no scope for individualism in this set up. He exchanges the insecurities of his life for the overcrowded indifference of the Tulsi extended family. Befitting his minor position in the house, Mr Biswas is relegated to one of the inconspicuous corners of the house, to one small part of the long room: "His share of it was short and narrow: the long room, originally a verandah, had been enclosed and split up into bedrooms" (103). Forced to live within these narrow confines, Mr Biswas rebels by calling the people around him names, taunting them, spitting on them, spurning the food of the house. The others return his insults and openly humiliate him; they mock his notion of independence. Mr Biswas declares to one of his brothers-in-law, "My motto is: paddle your own canoe" (107) and thereafter he is nicknamed "the paddler" in the Tulsi family. Living in an enclosed world in order to avoid deracination has its price. Living in Hanuman House is reduced to the minimal form of existence; because of their economic dependence on Mrs Tulsi, the men in the household are emasculated. They spend most of their time being fed and mothered by their wives and periodically affirm their masculinity by abusing and beating their wives. The women take pride in being abused and beaten, for in the absence of other things, it is a sign of their husbands' latent masculinity. The energies and frustrations of the people living within the four walls find an outlet either in waging constant wars with one another or flogging their children at the slightest pretext. It is a society based on fear, mistrust and paranoia, a group of people who are hemmed in and therefore prey on one another. It is part of their herd instinct that in times of crisis they rally together. With time, Mr Biswas' attitude to the Hanuman House mellows:

> The House was a world, ... everything beyond its gates was foreign and unimportant and could be ignored. He needed such a sanctuary. And in time the House became to him what Tara's had been when he was a boy. He could go to Hanuman House whenever he wished and become lost in the crowd, since he was treated with indifference rather than hostility. And he went there more often, held his tongue and tried to win favour. It was an effort, and even at times of great festivity, when everyone worked with energy and joy, enthusiasm reacting upon enthusiasm, in himself he remained aloof. Indifference turned to acceptance, and he was pleased and surprised to find that because of his past behaviour he, like the girl contortionist, now being groomed for marriage, had a certain licence. On occasion pungent remarks were invited from him, and then almost anything he said raised a laugh. (188)

13 The disconnect between the Tulsis and the larger society they live in is nowhere so evidently presented as when they move, in large scale, to a house in Shorthills. The surroundings are idyllic, and Naipaul in great detail recounts every feature of the lush landscape:

> In the grounds of the estate house there was a cricket field and a swimming pool; the drive was lined with orange trees and gri-gri palms with slender white trunks, red berries and dark green leaves. The land itself was a wonder. The saman trees had lianas so strong and supple that one could swing on them. All day the immortelle trees dropped their red and yellow bird-shaped flowers through which one could whistle like a bird. Cocoa trees grew in the shade of the immortelles, coffee in the shade of the cocoa, and the hills were covered with tonka bean. Fruit trees, mango, orange, avocado pear, were so plentiful as to seem wild. And there were nutmeg trees, as well as cedar, poui, and the bois-canot which was light yet so springy and strong it made you a better cricket bat than the willow. The sisters spoke of the hills, the sweet springs and hidden waterfalls with all the excitement of people who had known only the hot, open plain, the flat acres of sugarcane and the muddy ricelands. Even if one didn't have a way with land, as they had, if one did nothing, life could be rich at Shorthills. There was talk of dairy fanning; there was talk of growing grapefruit. More particularly, there was talk of rearing sheep, and of an idyllic project of giving one sheep to every child as his very own, the foundation, it was made to appear, of fabulous wealth. And there were horses on the estate: the children would learn to ride. (391-392)

As the Tulsi people swoop into the region, "The solitude and silence of Shorthills was violated" (399). The bands of Tulsi children intrude upon romancing couples in the orchards, various family members plunder the gardens for their fruit, the swimming pool and the cricket field are levelled, the bamboos are destroyed and trees cut down to start a furniture factory. The Tulsi's deplete the countryside they neither understand nor relate to, with the mentality of opportunistic sojourners and leave the place ravaged with few qualms. Naipaul depicts the Tulsis as alienated from their environment despite having lived in Trinidad for two or three generations:

> Despite the solidity of their establishment the Tulsis had never considered themselves settled in Arwacas or even Trinidad. It was no more than a stage in the journey that had begun when Pundit Tulsi left India. Only the death of Pundit Tulsi had prevented them from going back to India; and ever since they had talked, though less often than the old men who gathered in the arcade every evening, of moving on, to India, Demerara, Surinam. Mr. Biswas didn't take such talk seriously. The old men would never see India again. And he could not imagine the Tulsis anywhere else except at Arwacas. Separate from their house, and lands, they would be separate from the labourers, tenants and friends who respected them for their piety and the memory of Pundit Tulsi; their Hindu status would be worthless and, as had happened during their descent on the house in Port of Spain, they would be only exotic. (390)

The presence of the Tulsis in Trinidad and their struggles for survival there are due to political forces beyond their control; they consider themselves temporarily planted there as part of some bigger project, but do not see themselves as natural occupants of the place.

14 The Tulsis, with a logic of their own and effortlessly, prevail over Mr Biswas' life, even deciding the names of his children and cause innumerable rifts between him and his

wife and children. The static, nondescript life among the Tulsis denies Mr Biswas every small chance of self- assertion or fulfilment. They neutralise him and render him ineffective; they constantly remind him of his own superfluity. Mr Biswas thinks, “He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him!” (131). Of all the people he had lived with, “In none of these places he was being missed because in none of these places had he ever been more than a visitor, an upsetter of routine” (132). His own life appears to be “a void. There was nothing to speak of him” (132). The only mode of resistance and escape he can devise against such annihilation is to have a house of his own. Mr Biswas’ desperation to break away from the Tulsi control and his determination not to be eliminated unacknowledged articulates itself in the desire for a house, a space he can claim as his own, “the place where he not only lived, but had status without having to assert his rights or explain his worth” (169). Living with his wife’s family, he is intellectually emaciated and experiences “a blankness, a void like those in dreams, into which, past tomorrow and next week and next year, he was falling” (190). So he attempts twice to build a house despite, or even because of, his meagre finances, and both ventures are pathetic failures, and return him to the Tulsi family more subjugated and even lesser of a man than he was before. Making of a house is such a severe affront and an act of individualism against the Tulsi system that when Mr Biswas buys his little daughter a doll’s house as a present, his wife and daughter are relentlessly persecuted until his wife smashes the toy house and throws it out. The dream for a house is thus an act of subversion of the society in which Mr Biswas is born, it’s the desire for the forbidden and the unattainable, cast not in romantic but ruthlessly material terms of a colonial society.

15 As Mr Biswas is sent to the labourers’ barracks as a driver on the Tulsi estate in Green Vale, it breaks him down completely. The Tulsi mission lands him exactly in the place designated for him in the colonial society and which he had sought to escape all his life. Mr Biswas cherishes a definite vision of the house he would own:

> He had thought deeply about this house, and knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted, in the first place, a real house, made with real materials. He didn’t want mud for walls, earth for floor, tree branches for rafters and grass for roof. He wanted wooden walls, all tongue-and-groove. He wanted a galvanized iron roof and a wooden ceiling. He would walk up concrete steps into a small verandah; through doors with coloured panes into a small drawingroom; from there into a small bedroom, then another small bedroom, then back into the small verandah. The house would stand on tall concrete pillars so that he would get two floors instead of one, and the way would be left open for future development. The kitchen would be a shed in the yard; a neat shed, connected to the house by a covered way. And his house would be painted. The

> roof would be red, the outside walls ochre with chocolate facings, and the windows white. (210-211)

Far removed from this dream, Mr Biswas works to turn out labourers from the estate; he reviles his job and he starts to live in mortal fear of his fellow labourers. His peace of mind is utterly destroyed,

> Every man and woman he saw, even at a distance, gave him a twist of panic. But he had already grown used to that; it had become part of the pain of living. Then, as he cycled, he discovered a new depth to this pain. Every object he had not seen for twenty-four hours was part of his whole and happy past. Everything he now saw became sullied by his fear, every field, every house, every tree, every turn in the road, every bump and subsidence. So that, by merely looking at the world, he was progressively destroying his present and his past. (269-270)

Anxiety and stress make him ill and poison his relations with his family. Once he recovers from the trauma of belonging to the Tulsi tribe, he leaves the rural society of Trinidad to go to Port of Spain.

16 The city is organised differently to the villages and lets in lower caste people like Ramchand, who "Ostracized from the community into which he was born, he had shown the futility of its sanctions. He had simply gone outside it" (312). Here rural norms and taboos have no efficacy and Mr Biswas encounters diverse lifestyles. His colonial education, that had been such an obstacle to him during his village years, gives him credibility in this wider society. Mr Biswas rattles off the names of the authors he has read to impress the editor of *Trinidad Sentinel*, "Hall Caine, Marie Corelli, Jacob Boehme, Mark Twain. Hall Caine, Mark Twain," and "Samuel Smiles" (320-321). It is a colonial subject's burden, and not the coloniser's, to prove their knowledge. Mr Burnett does not need to have read any of these texts to be the editor of the *Sentinel*. He offers Mr Biswas an opportunity to write for the paper and trains him to eliminate the colonialisms in his language and make it sound more commonplace for English readers. Mr Biswas' fortunes change for the better once he joins the ranks of professionals, "Mr. Biswas's name appeared almost every day in the *Sentinel*, so that it seemed he had suddenly become famous and rich" (328), The rural hierarchies of caste and class are replaced by urban, economic divisions of class, and here Mr Biswas as a member of the aspiring middle-class acquires a new dignity. A regular, decent income allow him to fulfil some of his long-standing desires – of living together with his family under one roof, of education for his children, of a car, and eventually also that of a house. Mr Biswas crosses over from the native to the formal, organised world of the colonial society and the transformation is not just social but also physical. He discards his native dress and manners:

> Encouraged by Shama, he took an increasing interest in his personal appearance. In his silk suit and tie he had never ceased to surprise her by his elegance and respectability; . . . Sometimes, while he was dressing, he would make an inventory of all the things he was wearing and think, with wonder, that he was then worth one hundred and fifty dollars. Once on the bicycle, he was worth about one hundred and eighty. (346-347)

17 His altered circumstances enable him to redefine his masculinity. He returns victorious to people in the village, makes contact with his brothers and mother and other acquaintances, heals his relationship with the Tulsis and develops a new intimacy with his wife, Shama, who not only takes care of the household but also takes over new duties of looking after his paper and book-keeping. From an over-crowded extended family, with innumerable hangers-on, Mr Biswas sets up his nuclear family and the talk of Coca Cola and industrially manufactured ice-cream enters the talk with his children. And finally the two-storeyed house in the upwardly mobile neighbourhood of the city – Mr Biswas is finally ensconced in the initial stages of a career in the colonial system.

18 The change embodied by Mr Biswas begins gradually to permeate all sections of society. Whereas previously Mr Biswas has been overcome by a sense of stasis and inertia, he starts to notice movement: “Change followed change. At Pagotes Tara and Ajodha were decorating their new house. In Port of Spain new lampposts, painted silver, went up in the main streets and there was talk of replacing the diesel buses by trolley-buses” (367). Mrs Tulsi’s older son, Shekhar marries a modern educated woman of Presbyterian denomination, who wears frocks. The younger son, for his part, goes to Cambridge to study medicine. The rowdy children of the Tulsi household, constantly flogged by the adults, turn into “readers and learners”. The archaic Hindu traditions cannot withstand of Western influence and the Tulsi household is gradually dissipated, “The widows were now almost frantic to have their children educated. There was no longer a Hanuman House to protect them; everyone had to fight for himself in a new world, the world Owad and Shekhar had entered, where education was the only protection” (436). When Mr Biswas’s son, Anand, sits for the exhibition examinations, one of his Tulsi cousins is also among the candidates as there are a huge number of other boys; the triumph of colonial education is evident in “the numbers of students who were leaving the colony every week to study medicine in England, America, Canada and India” (524). In the days before his death, Mr Biswas counts as one of his achievements that two of his four children are studying abroad on scholarships.

19 However, Mr Biswas’ inclusion into the world of economic progress is tenuous and does not lead to personal fulfilment. As a journalist he dislikes the assignments he is given,

which confirm his inferior position in the hierarchy. He is sent out on a colonial mission to interview his kind of people – the destitutes of Trinidad. He gives up journalism to take up a government job as a Community Welfare Officer, secure in the belief that he cannot be sacked from a government job and with this he begins to "feel that he was at last getting at the wealth of the colony" (508). But his sense of security is false and he does lose his government job and has to return to journalism. He is sacked by the newspaper when he falls ill. Life for Mr Biswas is equally fraught in the colonial and the Hindu systems, although they are otherwise presented as contradictory. Thus Mr Biswas is able to affirm his masculinity neither through personal relations or social and religious sanctions, nor through professional, class status but rather through a material, albeit modest ambition to own a house.

20 Some aspects of Mr Biswas' life have parallels in Naipaul's experience. Naipaul too is marked by hybridity, "He was an East Indian West Indian who had been pulled out of his own society by a superior British education leaving him a double exile, a deracinated colonial who was legally prevented from migrating inside the new Commonwealth" (French 138). The tensions implicit in this statement are unfathomable. Patrick French's biography describes that Naipaul's grandparents claimed to have come from the Brahmin caste, although the pride and purpose arising out of this identity are undermined by the indignity of being a common labourer on a colonial estate. The Brahmanical culture in Naipaul's life was to remain nebulous, never proven and always indefinite as Naipaul alternated between vegetarianism and eating meat.

21 Naipaul's father desired him to be a writer as a way out of their lowly background, and like Mr Biswas' aspiration for a house, the desire to be a writer appears to be, at first sight, something universal or trans-cultural. On closer observation it turns out to be one of identification with the dominant, colonial system. Naipaul too underwent colonial education and was steeped in British literature and put all his energies into getting a scholarship to Oxford. Later he was to assert his superiority by saying, "I was too well prepared for Oxford, I suppose" (79). Much of Naipaul's life and works deal with the problematics of being caught in three-way bind between the colonised Indian-and-Trinidadian cultures and the imperialistic British culture, with the Indian identity and values undermining the reality of Trinidad and Trinidad being a source of resentment against the British. It is Naipaul's predicament to aspire to be recognised by a system that is oppressive towards him and to which he does not belong. Naipaul's determination to carve a place as a writer in a system which stands in a relation of imperialism to him, is fundamentally damaging and puts his masculinity under stress.

22 While Naipaul has managed to be a success in Britain, it is both ironic and inevitable that he should have got there on British terms and by following a somewhat typical colonial path – via scholarship to Oxford, on account of a tutor who is interested in India, working for the BBC radio programme *Caribbean Voices*, writing for British newspapers, supported by other British writers, writing on colonial subjects like India and the Caribbean primarily for the British readership, winning British literary prizes – right up to the ultimate British honour of knighthood.

23 However, nothing came naturally but had to be earned and had a price because Naipaul was in a relationship of the colonised to the coloniser. Peter Bayley, his tutor at Oxford is recorded to have said, "He wanted to be an Englishman" (75). This is endorsed by Naipaul himself, "'I want to come up top of my group. I have got to show these people that I can beat them at their own language'" (78). But statements such as these give him away as a colonial subject trying hard to be in favour of the superior power. In the same way, his expectations of Oxford are too unnatural to be met; it is not the amazing world he holds it to be nor does it open several doors for him. It is a period of extreme hardship and Naipaul is disappointed that Oxford functions differently for him than for the British students, but it was to be expected.

24 Naipaul's first few years in Britain are crisis ridden and he is forced to confront his limitations. As Patrick French suggests, at Oxford "Literature meant English, or at least British literature: the canon of dead white male poets, playwrights and novelists from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century" (115) The Oxford norms exclude Naipaul and drive him to despair: "'The future is black as ever. Nobody loves me, nobody wants me. In England I am not English, in India I am not Indian. I am chained to the 1000 sq. miles that is Trinidad; but I will evade that fate yet'" (115-116). Feeling rejected in England generates insecurities in him that he never experienced in Trinidad, "I find writing very difficult & sometimes I fear that I may lose my grasp of English altogether and be left languageless!" (130) Naipaul's exposure to England is very harsh and causes his nervous breakdown.

25 Naipaul's situation throughout is that of one standing at an intersection, and therefore of dislocation and not belonging; every perspective he takes is immediately undermined by others and he suffers as an author and a man. His masculinity comes under stress – while in England, he feels inadequate as an Indian son who ought to take responsibility for his parents. This guilt weighs on him heavily as he is not even there when his father dies. In England he feels inadequate as a writer as a tradition to which he can relate is lacking. Like Mr Biswas, Naipaul gives an outlet to the inadequacies in his masculinity by abusing women.

Considering Naipaul's position in British literature, one wonders whether the celebration of post-colonialism might not have been a little hasty and premature, for Naipaul needs to make a minor criticism of E M Forster or Jane Austen, and the chasm between the colonisers and the colonised opens again[1].

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[1] Amy Fallon, "VS Naipaul finds no woman writer his literary match – not even Jane Austen", *The Guardian*, 2 June 2011.