UNIT 2 MR. BISWAS AND THE TULSIS

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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 ‘gurmit’ 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.
Mr. Biswas

and the Tulsis

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 Sanatani 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 Tulis 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 Tulis, 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 stall 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.

While reading this chapter you would notice Shama’s insistence on the house-blessing ceremony which turned out to be a Tulsi 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 complains 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 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’ 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 unbroken 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
**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
