UNIT 4 WHY DID MR. BISWAS WANT A HOUSE?

Structure

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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 memoriably a pristine, pure, uncontaminated homeland to which the first generation immigrant dreamt of returning. In the novel one reads about Pandit 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 geographcal spaces: the ship and the plantation barracks. Of the first Mishra says:

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 startified 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 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 Simbhoo Nath Capiled, 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.

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 counter-narrative 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 Barracoons 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 Barracoons. 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 “girmitiyas” 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 Why did Mr. Biswas want a House?
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 Tulis, 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 laburnum 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 Armaas 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 girmityas) 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 forerunner 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 sutificatc” 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.

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