UNIT 5  PUTTING A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS IN PERSPECTIVE

Structure

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

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

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

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

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

5.1 NAIPUAL’S EARLY WORKS: THE MYSTIC MASSEUR

The transformation of Ganesh Ramsumair, from a masseur to a mystic to the impeccably dressed G.R. Muir Esq., MBE is clearly a trope for the socio-cultural and political changes on the island even as the colonizer tried to strengthen his position by involving more and more local individuals in governance.
Ganesh was a successful person. Named after the god who proffers *siddhi* or success to the hard working, Ganesh would be considered lucky in more ways than one. He and Mr Biswas complement each other, the former moved from success to success in a planned, careful sort of way, whereas the latter tired his hand at practically everything though he rarely met with success. Wealth was an important yardstick in measuring social status in early twentieth century Trinidad. After all, the immigrants had crossed the *kala pani* in their quest for money and position. So, someone who could attain both without apparently compromising his ideals or tarnishing his public image was held in awe, almost like Ganesh who epitomizes success in the Hindu pantheon.

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

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

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

As for the format of the two novels, *The Mystic Masseur* strikes the reader with its direct appeal. When compared to *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Mystic Masseur* is almost schematic. The multi-layered narrative that has made *A House for Mr Biswas* a favourite with the post colonial reader, has replaced a simply structured novel with some irony and humour. There is one major innovation. At a time when dialect-dominated novels had not yet come into vogue, Naipaul uses the dialect spoken by Indian immigrants in Trinidad in an authentic way, something that gives the novel a contemporaneous crispness. This technique has been perfected by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight’s Children*. 
The stories collected in Miguel Street have a much more definite approach. They were written before The Mystic Masseur though published later. The opening lines of the first story titled “Bogart” had been in the writer’s mind for a long time. It was a conversation, the first part sifted from memory and the second created by imagination. To quote the conversation:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs Bhakcu clapped her hands. ‘ Is a first class idea. Hindu pundits making a lot of money these days.’
So Bhakcu became a pundit.
(Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 126-7)
The concluding sentence of the story, "I was haunted by thoughts of the dhoti-clad Bhakcu crawling under a car, attending to a crank-shaft, while poor Hindus waited for him to attend to their souls." (Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, 127) is an instance of humour in Naipaul’s earliest work. Bhakcu was one of his favourite characters and in real life, it was he who drove the narrator to the airport when he was going abroad to study.

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

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

5.3 THE SUFFRAGE OF ELVIRA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.5 NAIPAUL AND INDIA: AN AREA OF DARKNESS

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

Among post-1947 travellers to India, Naipaul has a special place because of his curious-love-hate relationship with this country. It is a strange predicament, mainly a tension trying to balance between a desire to remain detached from the mainstream tradition of the country visited and not quite succeeding, out of which is born some sensitive travel writing, impressionistic, emotional and in the first book on India,
rather controversial. In this section I will attempt to establish links between *A House for Mr Biswas* and Naipaul’s three books on India, starting with *An Area of Darkness*.

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

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

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

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

Closely related with this is Naipaul’s brahmanic arrogance and a conscious effort to subvert his brahmanism, albeit unsuccessfully. Caste and religion were institutional for descendants of indentured immigrants, which provided them with security and protected their identity. Naipaul’s attempts to disparage the caste system, his refusal to go through the *janawa* (the sacred thread) ceremony were not really rebellions against the caste system; they were nothing more than token gestures as he always defended his exclusivity, an attitude common to diasporans. The ambivalence or paradox was to become a part of his style, helping him to maintain that “too close yet too far” attitude towards India.
This explains his use of the word “pilgrimage” for a visit to the Amarnath Cave, a trip which he enjoyed as much as his trip to Kashmir. To quote from his reminiscences:

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


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

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

5.6 INDIA: A MILLION MUTINIES NOW

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

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

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

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

5.7 LET US SUM UP

You would have, by now formed your own opinion on V.S.Naipaul. Let me warn you he is paradoxical and often changes views expressed on an earlier occasion. An example: after declaring to a journalist last year that the novel was extinct, when
Tarun Tejpal of *Outlook* asked him whether he was serious about writing another novel, his answer was, "I’m being pressed, you know. I’m being pressed although I feel I’ve moved away from the form and read very few novels now and I thought that the kind of work I have to do should be a little bit in the nature of my last four books. But I’m pressed and I might do something like a political fairy tale." (*Outlook*, 88 March 23, 1998)

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

### 5.8 GLOSSARY

**Self-sustained narrative:** A narrative that can stand on its own.

**Multi-layered narrative:** A narrative that is open to different levels of reading and interpretation.

### 5.9 QUESTIONS

1. Naipaul’s ambivalence towards India originates from his diasporic status. Comment with a comparatist study of *A House for Mr Biswas* and Naipaul’s three books on India.

2. In *A House for Mr Biswas* Naipaul works and reworks the same material used in his earlier fiction. Comment with examples from the relevant texts.

### 5.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Naipaul, V.S. *The Mystic Masseur* 1957. Andre Deutsch

*The Suffrage of Elvira* 1958. Andre Deutsch

*Miguel Street* 1959, Andre Deutsch

*An Area of Darkness*, 1964, Andre Deutsch


Interview with Tarun Tejpal. *Outlook* March 23, 1998
