IN SEARCH OF A HOUSE

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Abstract: A House for Mr Biswas is V.S. Naipaul's finest metaphor of 'unhousing': the main character is, like many of today's immigrants, in a continous search for a place he may warmly call home. Nevertheless, the world he inhabits proves to be hostile for the formerly colonial subject. The present paper will thus analyze the possibilities a postcolonial has in a society which is not yet ready to accommodate misguided identities or innerly torn individuals.

Keywords: colonialism/postcolonialism; inner vs outer quest; the order of new things.

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is not what one would call a typical writer, enjoying the fame of his books and a tranquil space of creation. He was born in Trinidad to an Indian family who had moved (or was rather shipped) there in the late 1890s, as indentured laborers and stayed. Naipaul himself grew up in a very crowded household - later depicted in a fictionalized manner in *A House for Mr Biswas* -, waiting for the promises of the New World to be fulfilled. At seventeen, he left Trinidad for England and thus began his continual quest for a place of his own and a type of writing that would reflect his complex personality.

Naipaul can hardly be labeled as either a 'colonial' or a 'postcolonial writer', as that he started writing at a time when "postcolonial literature had yet to be invented as a genre or as a profitable business, and his work remained an anomaly" (French, 2009: 200). The topics of his novels and travel writing do not fit the postcolonial definition as such: one will rarely encounter people celebrating multiculturalism, enjoying the privileges of several languages or embracing hybridity as their ultimate feature. On the other hand, all of Naipaul's characters will be drifting, looking for a place they can claim as their own and for a final parting with their colonial bondage.

More than reflecting postcolonial identity, Naipaul's writings focus on the decolonization process and what it has involved along the way, as well as on the idea that, one way or another, imperialism still shapes people's views. This is the main reason for which I would situate V.S. Naipaul at the very border between colonialism and postcolonialism, seen as timelines rather than ideological constructs. A colonial product himself, he very distinctively captures the 'Third World' topics (though he would virulently reject the term), exposing not only the postcolonial glory, but also its decay. I believe it is extremely important to read his writings in this line and not be misled by the postcolonial discursive traps, which would not best highlight his complex world.

A House for Mr Biswas is and is not fiction. One of Naipaul's major first novels, it is the account of Mr Biswas' life, following him from an early age and until his death. Born 'in the wrong way" (that is, at midnight), having an unlucky sneeze (which will finally lead to his father's death) and an extra finger (which will simply come off one night), he will be continuously searching for a place and a job that could define him. However, everything he starts proves a wrong choice: as a young child, he drives a neighbor's calves, which drown due to his negligence. He is taken as an apprentice by a pundit but finally (and indirectly) defecates on the holy tree, whose flowers should have been used for doing the puja. He takes up sign writing, and his own writing will lead to a marriage he does not wish for and a wife whom he both respects and hates. He serves as a kind of colonial ruler on his new relatives' land, but his house will be set on fire and his dog

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killed. He eventually becomes a journalist only to be sent as a reporter to dull events. He leaves this job and takes on a governmental position, to see his department dissolved and return to the paper he gets fired from at the end of his life.

His many jobs overlap with the houses he tries to build for his family, which also have tragic endings: they are burnt down, collapse, will not be erected or will prove to be scams. The novel thus traces his full-of-comic-events tragic life, which could rather pass for a Greek tragedy. Mr Biswas (so called throughout the novel, even as a baby) stands as the symbol of an entire generation who, like Naipaul himself, was looking for a place of its own due to the fact that its colonial heritage could not provide one. It is his strong belief that a house of his own could offer solidity to a rather vacillating identity.

Fatherless from a very young age, Mr Biswas refuses the help of his mother's family (after several altercations) and becomes a sign-painter, ironically ornating all the Hindu Trinidad shops with Christmas decorations, as a sign that colonial rule has left deep marks on the local population's tradition. As Elleke Boehmer has noticed, "the British Empire at its height required mobilizing symbols" (Boehmer, 2005: 23) and which one was more appropriate to be imported than the birth of Jesus? It is during these Christmas proceedings that he starts painting the shop of the Tulsis, a large family with colonial attitudes due to their wealth and lifestyle. There he sees Shama, one of the family's unmarried daughters, and starts liking her. After leaving an apparently harmless note on the desk, he is quickly trapped by the family into marrying her, although he does not want to get married and even refuses to sleep with his newly-acquired wife at first.

His designated place from then on will be the Hanuman House, a mansion which could easily deceive the viewer not looking closer at its faults and misconstructions. The whole novel revolves, in fact, around the idea of examining, or rather *not* examining things, from a closer perspective. First impressions can, indeed, be deceiving, as it happens to Mr. Biswas' own mother, Bipti, upon paying the first and the last visit to the Tulsi house:

> She described a house he hardly knew. She spoke of a drawing room with two tall throne-like mahogany chairs, potted palms and ferns in huge brass vases on marble topped tables, religious paintings, and many pieces of Hindu sculpture. She spoke of a prayer-room above that, which, with its slender columns, was like a temple: a low, cool, white room, empty except for the shrine in the centre. She had seen only the upper floors of the concrete or rather, clay-brick, building. He didn't tell her that that part of the house was reserved for visitors, Mrs Tulsi, Seth and Mrs Tulsi's two younger sons. And he thought it better to keep silent about the old wooden house which the family called 'the old barracks' (Naipaul, 2002: 100).

The house is the projection of imperialist architecture on the island; rather than a wood and dirt construction, it is a Victorian mansion projecting the success of colonialism. The family's lifestyle as such is colonial, as they own numberless lands and laborers who are treated like slaves. In fact, one of Mr. Biswas' jobs is to live in barracks in the fields, so as to discourage a revolt from the oppressed peasants' part. Seth, Mrs. Tulsis' brother, is the very definition of the colonial ruler, walking his fields stick in hand in order to see if his laborers obey. Like many of Naipaul's characters, he forgets that he is a former colonial subject himself and becomes a ruler, behaving in the manner of the imperialists in India.

The entire family is actually organized in a hierarchical way, each member obeying another and being invested with various degrees of power: "Though Hanuman House had at first seemed chaotic, it was not long before Mr Biswas had seen that in reality it was ordered, with degrees of precedence all the way down, with Chinta below Padma, Shama below Chinta, Savi below Shama, and himself far below Savi [*his eldest daughter*]" (Naipaul, 2002: 195). This precise structuring of the family is obviously not a haphazard event, but the exact replica of a system they

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had witnessed as functioning and decided to freely borrow. David Cannadine has also mentioned this rather ironic hierarchy which was typical of India: "mules, horses and elephants obeyed their drivers, who in turn obeyed their sergeants, who obeyed their lieutenants, who obeyed their captains, who obeyed their majors, who obeyed their colonels, who obeyed their brigadiers, who obeyed their generals, who obeyed their viceroy" (Cannadine, 2001: 43).

Unfortunately for Mr. Biswas, this system does not appear to include him. In fact, Hanuman House contains within its walls the entire life of colonial Trinidad and Biswas is not ready to submit. This micro-universe - screaming children of all ages, wives who love each other or hate one another just as deeply, widows neglected and forgotten, husbands who either beat their wives or ignore them -, is the projection of the larger island itself. At first, Biswas decides to be rebellious, to defend himself by verbal aggression, but as Shama begins having his children, he realizes that he needs a house of his own. It is the beginning of his long quest.

At first they move to The Chase, a remote village where Seth owns a small shop and the little house attached to it. Yet, instead of feeling relieved for the first time in his adult life, he cannot enjoy the privacy this new place offers, nor can he sincerely love his wife. Instead, they start acquiring pieces of furniture; with every new house they inhabit, they will purchase a new and useless item to accompany them through life. These objects will be the only palpable items to define their identity, their past and present:

> She spread out the Japanese coffee-set on one shelf. The other shelves remained empty, and the glass cabinet, for which she had committed herself to many months of debt, became another of her possessions which were regarded as jokes, like her sewingmachine, her cow, the coffee-set. It was placed in the front room, which was already choked with the Slumberking, Theophile's bookcase, the hatrack, the kitchen table and the rocking chair (Naipaul, 2002: 461).

Mr Biswas will be accompanied by these items throughout his entire life, while perpetually house-hunting. He will leave The Chase, going back to Hanuman House, determined, however, to look for a place of his own. Strangely enough, the Tulsi residence will be his only stable residence, along with the family's house in Port of Spain. He will return to this old order every time he fails, denying the fact that the old imperial settlement might define him, as a person torn between old rules and new views upon life. He will try to build a house in Green Vale, on Seth's land; even though he wishes for it to be 'modern', his standards lower as he sees that he has no money. The house will burn down, so that he goes back to Hanuman House. He will once more try to build a house near the barracks, which will share the imminent fate. Yet, all Mr. Biswas wants is a house:

> 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 (Naipaul, 2002: 219).

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Michael Gorra rightfully states that *A House for Mr Biswas* is "Naipaul's richest evocation of 'unhousing'" (Gorra, 1997: 64). Even if the novel revolves around the houses he inhabits, it also revolves around the houses which fail him, focusing on his quest. It is not that he could not build a solid house, but that everything around him is extremely loose by definition. The Tulsis' goals are rather simple: they want to earn as much money as possible, rule over several areas of the island and send their children to be educated abroad. Thus, a whole competition of prune eating and milk drinking takes over the household, the mothers firmly believing that such natural ingredients would resurrect their offspring's inborn intelligence.

It is interesting to see that, even from an educational perspective, the Tulsis go back to colonial ideas about proper schools. Their use of English is as confused as their lives: Mr. Biswas uses it when addressing Shama's family, but also when talking to the wife he regrets marrying: "Having trapped him in the mood, she removed her hand, blew her nose and dried her eyes. [*Mrs Tulsi*] 'Whatever happens, you keep on living. Whatever happens. Until the Lord sees fit to take you away'. The last sentence was in English; it took him aback, and broke the spell" (Naipaul, 2002: 171). The Tulsi household thus embodies the perfect definition of "an education in western ways for minorities of all kinds" (Hobsbawm, 1989: 79), who have acquired a language which they cannot master.

Even if the women in the household speak only in Hindi, this language cannot aid them when talking about medical or judicial issues, and thus they are forced to speak English to each other:

> Friendly sisters exchanged stories of their husbands' disabilities, the names of illnesses and remedies forcing such discussions to be in English. 'He got one backache these days.' 'You must use hartshorn. He did have backache too. He try Dodd's Kidney Pills and Beecham's and Carter's Little Liver Pills and a hundred and one other little pills. But hartshorn did cure him.' 'He don't like hartshorn. He prefer Sloan's Liniment and Canadian Healing Oil.' 'And he don't like Sloan's Liniment' (Naipaul, 2002: 107).

Even if Hindi is the language used in a familiar context, Biswas' children do not seem to understand it. It is this new generation, forgetful of oppressive histories, that he fights for. At first disappointed in his son, Anand, he will project in him all his fatherly ambitions, determined to send him to a proper school in England. Once he gets there, he will, indeed, gradually leave his family behind, rarely answer letters and not come back for his father's funeral. To the young man, old ties must be forgotten in order for him to see a different kind of future.

Nevertheless, life is not only miserable to Mr. Biswas. When leaving his wife and heading for Port of Spain, he becomes a journalist, seeing his name in print over and over again and enjoying his job for the first time in his life. Moreover, he secretly toys with the idea of becoming a novelist:

> ESCAPE By M. Biswas At the age of thirty-three, when he was already the father of four children … Here he often stopped. Sometimes he went on to the end of the page; sometimes, but rarely, he typed frenziedly for page after page. Sometimes his hero had a Hindi name; then he was short and unattractive and poor, and surrounded by ugliness, which was anatomized in bitter detail. Sometimes his hero had a Western name; he was then faceless, but tall and broad-shouldered; he was a reporter and moved in a world derived from the novels Mr Biswas had read and the films he had seen. None of these stories was finished, and their theme was always the same. The hero, trapped into marriage, burdened with a family, his youth gone, meets a young girl. She is slim, almost thin, and dressed in white. She is fresh, tender, unkissed; and she is unable to bear children. Beyond the meeting the stories never went (Naipaul, 2002: 362-3).

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In this fictional account, Biswas allows all his fantasies and frustrations to come to light. To him, there are two versions of reality: one is identified with the black man, depicted as "unattractive and poor", while the other is the reality of the white male, always robust and charming. The world Mr. Biswas inhabits feeds itself on such stereotypes, as a remnant of the imperial period. Homi Bhabha has also discussed the issue of the skin as one of the main stereotypes, the "most visible [of] fetishes, recognized as 'common knowledge'" (Bhabha, 2002: 78) and a very public element in the game of power. Thus, there can only be these two faces to the world: one corresponding with reality and the other, dreamlike one. Eventually, even Mr Biswas' dream seems to come true: he starts working for the government, buys a car which he highly praises and even a real house (which he will owe money for to his relatives, until the end of his life). To Biswas, however, a dream can easily turn into a nightmare: the house he buys dearly proves to be a scam, erected out of used materials and full of traps:

> He has seen the house like a guest under heavy obligation to his host. If it had not been raining he might have walked around the small yard and seen the absurd shape of the house. He would have seen where the celotex panels on the eaves had fallen away […] He would have seen that the house had no back door at all. […] The landing pillars had rotted because they stood next to a tap […] Then they discovered that the yard had no drainage of any sort. […] They discovered that none of the windows downstairs would close. Some grated on the concrete sill; others had been so warped by the sun that their bolts could no longer make contact with the grooves (Naipaul, 2002: 598; 606).

Thus, the house in Sikkim Street, his last station on his long journey, cannot provide the feeling of coziness that he was looking for. The house's shortcomings somehow overlap with his own life's, his continual quest and its remaining marks. For Mr. Biswas there can be no other end. Although he resembles a colonial subject, his inner wanderings are signs of his postcolonial existence, which influences his choices. Like other postcolonial figures, he will be doomed to this incessant quest, to this back and forth, to these drifts between periphery and centre. Having reached the centre, though not feeling fulfilled, he is so relieved that he can die and leave behind a generation who will, hopefully, be entirely the product of the New World.

Seen by most critics as a 'comic masterpiece', *A House for Mr. Biswas* is rather the personal tragedy of the individual in search of a place of his own, which should define him. Because of the world he lives in, somewhere at the borderline between colonialism and postcolonialism, Biswas cannot find this specific place, no matter how many times he settles down. He is destined to continually look for himself and this new place in the world.

Rather than just reflecting Mr Biswas' life, the novel will also mirror the very wanderings of Naipaul himself, most of the time in a quest for a place of his own, never really satisfied and always ready to leave once more and search further. This is one of the burdens that the postcolonial must bear through life, never really sure about the whereabouts of place and language.

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