A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS: THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

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Abstract: A House for Mr. Biswas documents the struggles for independence that marked the lives of most colonials in the decades after the Second World War. Its protagonist, Mohun Biswas, modeled after Naipaul's own father, Seepersad Naipaul a journalist working for The Trinidad Guardian struggles to achieve material independence for him and his family. Disfavoured by circumstances; the effort to escape the whirlpools of history into a safe and peaceful haven nearly destroys him. Like the heroes of his favourite Samuel Smiles' books, Mr. Biswas has to undergo terrible ordeals and to put in considerable effort in order to improve his condition. Compared with his trials and tribulations, the final acquisition of the house in Sikkim Street seems a minor achievement. Yet the general tone of the novel seems to endow Mr. Biswas' rather modest achievement with a heroic dimension, transforming him into a self-made man who conquers difficulties and achieves success "through failures".

Keywords: colonialism, colonial societies, colonial subject, positive and negative freedom

> It is a mistake to suppose that men succeed through success; they much oftener succeed through failures. Precept, study, advice, and example could never have taught them so well as failure has done.
> (Samuel Smiles)

Published in 1961, just one year before Trinidad achieved independence within the British Commonwealth, *A House for Mr. Biswas* recounts the struggles for independence that marked the lives of most colonials in the decades after the Second World War. Its protagonist, Mohun Biswas, was partially modeled after Naipaul's own father, Seepersad Naipaul[1], a journalist working for *The Trinidad Guardian*. Apparently echoing Fredric Jameson's claim that all Third World literature can be read as a national allegory (69), Biswas' struggle to achieve financial independence for him and his family mirrors the efforts of colonial Trinidad on the road to autonomy and self-administration. This effort often leads to despair, due to the fragmented and chaotic colonial society: Naipaul admits that he undertook the writing of *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a therapeutic means to makes sense of the disordered world in which he had spent his childhood:

> At first I looked for this release in humour, but as the horizon of my writing expanded I sought to reconstruct my disintegrated society, to impose order on the world, to seek patterns, to tell myself- this is what happens when people are strong; this is what happens when people are weak. I had to find that degree of intellectual comfort, or I would have gone mad. (Rowe-Evans 59)

[1] In 1976 V.S.Naipaul published posthumously his father's book *The Adventures of Gurudeva, and Other Stories*, whose main themes, as in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, are entrapment and escape.

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Mr. Biswas' search for order and meaning is simultaneously a discovery of the open possibilities of colonial Trinidad. Naipaul's ironic edge often seems to imply that opportunities are scarce in the colonial context, and success never amounts to much. A tension is embedded, however, in the fabric of the novel - between the bleak perspective of the narrator and character construction. On the one hand Mr. Biswas' steady development from poor peasant to married shop owner and independent journalist and his final achievement of a house of his own is described as a dangerous and tragic adventure; on the other hand this development is predicated along the positive and optimistic lines of Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* book, the Bible of Victorian liberalism. The book advocates virtues that were central to the social and moral reform of the Victorian era: individualism, independence, self-cultivation and civility and emphasized the value of character, thrift and perseverance. It may be an odd choice of guiding book for a colonial in the 20th century, yet the ghost of Samuel Smiles manages to alter the way Naipaul's novel can be read. For once, the effort that Mr. Biswas invests in living according to such liberal values highlights the conservatism of a part of the Indo-Trinidadian community, reluctant to change and unwilling to admit any such liberal "black sheep" in its bosom; alternatively, it endows Mr. Biswas' rather modest achievement with an heroic dimension, transforming him into a self-made man who conquers difficulties and achieves success "through failures".

Starting with his birth, Mohun Biswas[2] seems to be at odds with his social environment, eliciting prophecies of doom from the midwife. Born "six-fingered and in the wrong way" (11), at the inauspicious hour of midnight, he is foretold by the superstitious midwife to "eat up his own mother and father" (12). The prophecy comes true and Biswas' father dies in an attempt to recover his boy's inexistent corpse, but its fulfillment is ironically construed as the result of heeding superstition: the village pundit advises his parents to keep him away from water, and when Mohun is late one evening, his father, almost certain that he had drowned in the pond, dives for his son's body and drowns. In the meantime, the unlucky child had witnessed the parents' conversation from under the bed, where he had hidden for fear of punishment: the calf under his care had been lost. The absence of his father, on the other hand, becomes a true catastrophe, as Mohun's family is deprived of its only source of protection inside the backward rural Indian community, where the status of women (especially widows) and children is very low. The family is fractured and crumbles: Mohun's elder brothers Pratap and Prasad are "sent to a distant relation at Felicity, in the heart of the sugar-estates; they were already broken into estate work and were too old to learn anything else"(38), his sister Dehuti is taken by their aunt Tara to serve in the household (in exchange she was to be provided with a suitable dowry for marriage), while he and his mother live on the 'back trace' at Pagotes on Tara's generosity. His dependence on distant relatives and the sense of homelessness that haunts him while he is shunted from the back trace to pundit Jairam and Bhandat's rumshop and then back to Pagotes contribute to his longing for the independence and stability that a house and a family of his own would afford. Furthermore, the fact that the family's survival depends on the system of extended kinship suggests that the

[2] In the novel he is always referred to as Mr. Biswas. This can be interpreted, on the author's part, as a gesture of respect and acknowledgement of the dignity that circumstances seem to deny him.

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absence of adequate social institutions in Trinidad makes poor people reliant on ancient customs and contributes to the reproduction of inequalities inside the rural Indian community.

The loss of his father and the subsequent disintegration of his family come across as a misfortune again when the land that his mother had sold almost for nothing turned out to have been rich in oil. Circumstances seem to act against Mr. Biswas from his early life: the ominous prophecy that kills his father, the dissolution of his family, the shoving and the moving around from one familial unit to another. Yet in the course of all his wanderings, he acquires the basics of his education and comes into contact with the ideas and the books that will prompt him to begin his career as a journalist. He is educated at the Canadian Mission school, where, together with the usual cruel treatment of poor children, he is offered extensive knowledge on "geysers, rift valleys, watersheds, currents, The Gulf Stream, and a number of deserts" (44), oases, igloos and the First World War. Although in one sense a distinct mark of imperial hegemony and utterly unnecessary, the knowledge of history and geography will prove an occasion for Mr. Biswas to affirm his independence at Hanuman House. At pundit Jairam he is introduced to the Hindu scriptures and instructed in the traditional rituals, which would again serve as a basis for his friendship with Misir and his activity as an Aryan reformer. While employed in Bhandat's rumshop, Mr. Biswas is driven to spend his weekends at Tara's. His uncle Ajodha had purchased from an American traveling salesman "twenty tall black volumes of the *Book of Comprehensive Knowledge*" (61) and after Biswas finished with the mandatory task of reading aloud for his uncle *That Body of Yours* column, he was free to explore the encyclopedia. The hours of reading provide him with the vocabulary he later uses in his articles. At the back trace he takes up reading Samuel Smiles, which develops his longing for individual improvement and achievement and fuel his ambition[3]:

He stayed at the back trace and read Samuel Smiles. He had bought one of his books in the belief that it was a novel, and had become an addict. Samuel Smiles was as romantic and satisfying as any other novelist, and Mr Biswas saw himself in many Samuel Smiles heroes: he was young, he was poor, and he fancied he was struggling. But there always came a point where resemblance ceased. The heroes had rigid ambitions and lived in countries where ambitions could be pursued and had a meaning. He had no ambition, and in this hot land, apart from opening a shop or buying a motorbus, what could he do? What could he invent?" (78)

The bovarism of Mr. Biswas' situation is not accidental: it points to the incompatibility between the protagonist's romantic identifications and the social structure of colonial Trinidad, incapable of accommodating the grand dream of individual achievement. The colonial society breeds alienation just as the bourgeois. The colonial subject is not "hailed" by its native society to pursue any worthwhile ambition - his life projects remain insignificant, but in tune with the actual geographical and historical conditions. The interpellation into individuality occurs, as in Flaubert's novel, from the side of books and the imagination. The subsequent path of Mr Biswas' development can thus be read first and foremost as an aesthetic achievement - an idea that Landeg White partly subscribes to in his

[3] If for Biswas ambition means the achievement of something, for Shama and the conservative Tulsis ambition is defined in entirely negative form: "not to be unmarried, not to be childless, not to be an undutiful daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow." (165)

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observation that the real meaning of Mr Biswas' achievement lies in the creation of a coherent and ordered world that he bequeaths to his children. (14) The idea of order points to Naipaul's stated reason for writing the book, the desire to make sense of the world of his childhood. Fiction is seen primarily as a means of understanding and ordering experience, and Mr. Biswas shares with his creator the desire to write in order to give meaning and shape to his life.

Reading Samuel Smiles prompts him to take his life in his hands and look for a job. A casual acquaintance from school had led him to become a sign painter, and he is offered a job in Arwacas, at Hanuman House. In his romantic mood he falls in love with Shama Tulsi and even attempts to write her a love letter. The letter is intercepted by Seth, who in league with Mrs Tulsi gives Mr. Biswas to understand that his gesture might have compromised Shama and that it is his responsibility to marry her. When Mr. Biswas enters Hanuman House and understands its rigid stratification, he realizes that "They had married Shama to him simply because he was of the proper caste, just as they had married the daughter called C to an illiterate coconut-seller." (99) Faced with the prospect of becoming part of the Tulsi organization and surrendering his individuality, Mr. Biswas has the courage to resist: "Mr. Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsi. At once he rebelled." (99) His situation is, however, extremely precarious: on the one hand, his dreams of emancipation are discouraged and unsupported by the colonial society he belongs to; on the other, by rebelling, he renounces the protection offered by the Indian familial system. He never openly acknowledges the dangers of his situation, and the repressed fears place a terrible burden on his unconscious - his nervous breakdown at the Chase, the depressions and spells of bad temper that he often falls prey to are symptoms of a strained psyche.

Initially, his rebellion against the Tulsis takes the form of childish pranks: he invents nicknames for Mrs. Tulsi ('the old queen', 'the old cow', 'the old hen'), her two sons ('the little gods') and Hari ('the constipated holy man'). After he meets Misir, the journalist, his campaign against the Tulsis takes a more definite form: he enrolls in the Aryan movement. The Aryans were a group of progressive Hindus concerned with the reform of their religion: they argued that "idols were an insult to the human intelligence and to God" (119) and played down the importance of caste[4]: "birth was unimportant; a man's caste should be determined only by his actions." Spurred by Misir, the Aryans "passed resolutions that education was important, that child marriage should be abolished, that young people should choose their own spouses." (123) Trying to win first Govind, then Harri on his side, Mr. Biswas engages in propaganda for the Aryan movement. His ideas are first met with indifference, and then with anger. His brothers-in-law report him to Seth, who asks incredulously "you want girl children learning to read and write and picking up boy-friends?" and then rebukes him: "This house is like a republic already." (126) Mr. Biswas' offensive behaviour and his breezy remarks on idol-worship, arranged marriages (which Misir aptly calls 'cat-in-bag' marriages) and girl education arouse the hostility of the Tulsi members. So when Mr. Biswas spills his food on Owad by mistake, his gesture is misapprehended by Govind, who throws himself on him, kicking and punching violently. The result is that Mr. Biswas is given a modicum of

[4] Caste was responsible for the reproduction of inequality and oppression among the Indo- Trinidadians.

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independence: Mrs Tulsi allows him to leave the house and establish himself as a shop owner at the Chase, one of the properties belonging to the Tulsi organization.

Before discussing Mr. Biswas' failed enterprise at the Chase, it might be useful to see what the concept of freedom entails. An understanding of the concept of freedom is necessary if we want to appraise the scope of the colonial subject's agency. One of the most famous discussions of freedom can be found in Isaiah Berlin's lecture "Two Concepts of Liberty". The political philosopher distinguishes between two kinds of freedom: negative and positive. Negative freedom can be defined as the absence of constraints. The freedoms of speech, of religion and of movement are explained in negative terms, as the lack of any limitations on the individual's right to choose. Positive freedom[5], on the other hand, presupposes the individual's self-realization: the agent must live in a society, collectivity, group, able to offer him a positive choice among valuable life projects. Mr. Biswas' quest for independence can be seen as an attempt to gain both negative and positive freedom. His revolt and subsequent campaign against the Tulsis highlight his need for negative freedom: he wants to evade from the rigid order of the Hanuman House. Yet the novel seems to emphasize that not negative, but positive freedom is fundamental to the human being's dignity. Mr. Biswas' escape from Hanuman House is not difficult to achieve. What proves a real challenge in the colonial context is the achievement of positive freedom, because colonial society is ill-equipped to offer its subjects any positive content for identifications: as Mr. Biswas remarked earlier, the prospects he was offered for emancipation and self-advancement were very poor. The failures at the Chase and Green Vale occur as an upshot of Mr. Biswas' incapacity to define any worthwhile purpose for his life. His personal aim, articulated during the campaign against the Tulsis was the possession of a house of his own, a personal private space that will provide a sense of security and shelter. However, positive freedom requires the articulation of significant purposes within a collective frame, as it views the individual as an acting and meaning-creating unit inside a collectivity. Significantly, Mr. Biswas is able to fulfill that personal dream only after he is given the opportunity, in Port of Spain, to become a journalist involved in the social and political issues of the island. With his job as a reporter, he even manages to earn the respect of Mrs. Tulsi and her favours. The repeated failures he has to face are a sign that Mr. Biswas has not yet found his life project and is not able to embark on a quest for positive freedom and self-fulfillment. Thus the novel dramatizes the centrality of positive freedom[6]. This difference is essential, as it points to the specificities of colonial societies. In Western societies the centrality of positive freedom is played down because of a long liberal humanist tradition, with its roots in Christianity, which insisted on the importance of the individual/person and made a major contribution to the creation of democratic social and political institutions. As the task of defining life-projects was gradually, during a long process of modernization, consigned to individual agents, it is no wonder that a return to the former institutional and state authority should be regarded with suspicion. Too much

[5] In Berlin's view, positive freedom can be dangerous, as it leads to authoritarianism. Together with Karl Popper he believed that the concept of positive liberty could be used to justify authoritarian or totalitarian rule, like Stalin's in the Soviet Union, which allowed its subjects too little negative freedom.

[6] In Western philosophy, the concept of positive freedom was defended by various thinkers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Hegel and Karl Marx.

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insistence on positive freedom in societies which are highly individualized is indicative of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. But the situation is different in colonial societies like Trinidad. Because they were constructed with the sole aim of financial gain, they lack proper social institutions and traditions that should ensure a minimum social cohesion. Without such institutions whose role is to provide a general orientation for life projects, the society remains highly chaotic. Individuals lack the very basis for the construction of subjectivity, as institutions cannot be depended on. The construction of social and political institutions capable of outlining some content for positive freedom becomes a priority in colonial societies. Accordingly, Mr. Biswas' success is largely due to his involvement in journalism - a recently established institution in Trinidad.

Biswas' stays at The Chase and Green Vale are both failed attempts to reach an independent state. At first sight a significant victory in his struggle for independence, the establishment at the Chase reveals to Biswas the insufficiency of negative freedom. It is located in a rural area similar to his native village, and it reminds him of the sense of limitation experienced as a child:" it was like returning to the village where he had spent his early years. […] He knew what lay beyond the sugarcane fields and where the roads went. They went to villages which were just like the Chase; they went to ramshackle towns" (145) His marriage to Shama had taken place as a result of his desire to escape the constraining conditions of his early life- and it had led to another kind of slavery and imprisonment. The dilapidated shop and his inability to identify with the role of shop owner (he is bad at keeping accounts, sells too much on credit, falls easy prey to schemers that want to squeeze money out of him) prevent him from assuming full responsibility for the venture: "that was what Mr. Biswas continued to feel about the venture: that it was temporary and not quite real, and it didn't matter how it was arranged. […] Real life was to begin for them soon, and elsewhere. The Chase was a pause, a preparation." (151) The incompatibility between his Samuel Smiles dreams and his role as shop owner is revealed by his feelings: "After every sale in those early days, he felt he had pulled off a deep confidence trick, and had difficulty in hiding his exultation." (151) Haunted by a sense of his own inadequacy, he once asks Shama "What you would say I was?" (164) Shama's inability to respond draws from him the acknowledgement: "That is the whole blasted trouble […] I don't look like anything at all. Shopkeeper, lawyer, doctor, labourer, overseer- I don't look like any of them." (165) His subjectivity is not defined by any of his current roles, of husband or shopkeeper, as Mr. Biswas does not personally identify with any of them.

After the failure at the Chase and the "insuranburn" scheme pulled off by Seth, Biswas accepts the job of driver and overseer on the Tulsi estate at Green Vale. Driven to despair by his failed venture and fear of depending on the Tulsis for the rest of his life, he decides "that the time had come for him to build his own house." (214) The vision of his house crystallizes for the first time:

He had thought deeply about his 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 roots. He wanted wooden walls, all tongue-and-groove. He wanted a galvanized iron roof and a wooden ceiling. […] The house would

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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." (219)

Mr. Biswas imagines his ideal house as the opposite of any makeshift structure. It is not what Robinson Crusoe would have built on his exotic island. Tree branches, earth, mud or grass do not stand for the natural and the eternal, as in Defoe's novel, but for penury, lowliness and under-achievement. The longing for a real house epitomizes the colonial subject's yearning for a solid societal structure that can accommodate his dreams of self-realization. A solid society is not the makeshift variety, half-made from mock-materials. It should be set up on a firm institutional basis ('stand on tall concrete pillars') which can pave the road forward for individual self-fulfillment ('the way would be left open for future development').

The enormous gap between Biswas' ideal of a society and the local conditions is revealed when he attempts to implement his plan. The house - his first house - is simply hideous. Only one room is finished. The house stands on crapaud[7] pillars, and the children from the neighbouring barracks come and nail nails into the cedar floors; the asphalt on the roof melts under the heat of the sun and changes into "a legion of slim, black, growing snakes" (275) Biswas' failed attempt at building his own house is due both to his lack of means - he borrows the money to build the house from Ayodha and rents the land from the Tulsis - and his dependence on the familial Hindu system. The fact that the house is not able to withstand natural hazards - its roof leaks during rain and turns into asphalt snakes in heat - indicates the precariousness of the colonial subject's situation, caught between a past he rejects and a future he cannot control. Fawzia Mustafa, commenting on the struggles of the colonial subject, contends that:

Naipaul's use of the building metaphor and the asphalt snakes as a frame within which to explore questions of authority between individual and community concerns has the double duty of representing the struggles of an individual trying to break away from one system into another, as well as those of one generation embarking upon the construction of a new and ascendant history. The marked signature of failure that accompanies Biswas' efforts throughout the novel strongly reiterates the suggestion that familial and colonial dependency breeds circumstances in which it is far more difficult to sever relations between the old and the new, or the past and the present, than a simple desire to do so may imply. (70)

The enormous gap between his ideal and the actual house takes its toll on Biswas, who falls prey to despair and finally to a nervous breakdown. His bout of insanity leads Mr. Biswas back to Hanuman House. The unacknowledged precariousness of his life, mirrored in the condition of the house at Green Vale had tormented him secretly. By contrast, the solidity and resilience of Hanuman House appear providential:" He welcomed the warmth and reassurance of the room. Every wall was solid; the sound of the rain was deadened […] the jealousied window, set in a deep embrasure, was unrattled by wind and rain." (308)

After his recovery, Mr. Biswas leaves Shama and the children to Hanuman House and heeds for Port-of Spain. His third attempt at soaring above his circumstances proves successful: he is now on his own, unencumbered by wife and children, and all his past

[7] Crapaud is the French word for toads. Toads and snakes are commonly associated with black magic, sorcery and the devil.

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education, the books he has read come to fruition in his newly acquired job as reporter. Although he looks on the years spent at the Chase as barren, and is still haunted by snapshots of his previous nerve jarring experience at Green Vale, these periods have also been times of accumulation and preparation. At the Chase he takes up reading Hindu religion as well as philosophy: Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus; he earns the respect of a book-seller in Arwacas "by buying an old and stained copy of *The Supersensual Life"*[8] and he also "began to dabble in Christianity, acquiring a volume, written mostly in capital letters, called *Arise and Walk*." (189) At Green Vales, he reads the stories in the newspapers on the wall, and he reads to Savi, his daughter, from novels, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus and buys some Reader's Library cheap editions.

Fawzia Mustafa construes Biswas' journalistic achievement as the consequence of a typical Naipaulian gesture of privileging writing and literacy. Biswas' "discernible independence and authority" are provided "by a faithful adherence in the belief of literacy and writing." (73) While the role books play in Mr. Biswas' emancipation cannot be denied, Mustafa loses sight of the larger social picture. Mr. Biswas' achievement reflects the emergent possibilities of change that first become visible in the urban circles of colonial Trinidad. My contention is that both Biswas' move to Port of Spain (an urban, more diverse and more challenging area) and his co-optation into the local mass-media are instrumental in ensuring his success. Mr. Biswas' first encounter with the world of Port of Spain draws from him an ecstatic response to its variety:

The organization of the city fascinated Mr.Biswas: the street lamps going on at the same time, the streets swept in the middle of the night, the rubbish collected by the scavenging carts early in the morning […] the newsboys, really men; the bread van, the milk that came, not from cows, but in rum bottles stopped with brown paper. (328)

Because "Mr. Biswas' name appeared every day in the Sentinel […] it seemed he had suddenly became famous and rich." (345) His new status will allow him an attempt to reconcile with the Tulsis and recover his family "without indignity". The former returns to Hanuman House had been due to his economic dependence on the Tulsis and had convinced Shama that the security offered by the extended family system was preferable to the vulnerability of the dream of independence nurtured by her husband. The children, Anand and Savi, are lured to come to Port of Spain by the promise of two extraordinary luxuries: Coca-Cola and real ice cream. The transition from the feudal domestic economy to capitalist consumerism is illustrated by the perceived value of "real" versus "home-made" ice cream:" To the children of Hanuman House home-made was not a word of commendation. Home-made icecream was the flavourless (officially coconut) congelation churned out by Chinta" (352) This is contrasted with the elaborate ritual of consuming real ice-cream:

On a high red stool, a revelation and luxury in itself, Anand sat at the counter, and the icecream came. In a cardboard tub, frosted, cold to the touch. With a wooden spoon. The cover had to be taken off and licked; the icecream, light pink and spotted with red, steamed; one preparatory delight after another. (353)

Mr. Biswas and his family are invited by Mrs. Tulsi to share her house in Port of Spain. Although their possessions are scattered about the house, Mr. Biswas does not mind it

[8] A book written by the philosopher Jacob Bohme, a mixture of philosophy and mysticism.

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too much, as he feels himself suddenly transformed from visitor into dweller:" It was an experience, so new he could not yet savour it, to find himself turned all at once from a visitor into a dweller, in a house that was solid and finished […] with […] straight concrete walls" (350). The change from visitor into dweller is representative, in a larger sense, not only of the desire to escape transience and reach durability, but also of a newly achieved independence. Throughout the novel, the need for order and durability is closely associated with the desire for independence and emancipation, and this seems to suggest that in the colonial context these two may be conflated. As transience is an effect of colonial dependencies, so durability is a sign of independence. But durability itself may be quite precarious or illusory, as the move to Shorthills proves. Biswas' stay in the Tulsi home in Port of Spain is conditioned first by Owad's college education in the city and by his return. In a sense, although he is now respected by Mrs. Tulsi, he is still financially dependent on his wife's family. The acquisition of the house in Sikkim Street is the result of his intense saving during his work for *The Trinidad Sentinel* and the income accumulated from his job as Community Welfare Officer.

Mr. Biswas' career as a journalist mirrors the changes in the social and political consciousness of colonial Trinidad. At first, under the guidance of Mr. Burnett (the editor) Biswas is a reporter on the lookout for sensational news: his articles range from "Four Children Roasted in Hut Blaze", "White Baby found on Rubbish Dump", "Daddy Comes Home in a Coffin" to the touring of the island as The Sentinel Scarlet Pimpernel[9] secretly giving away prizes. The romanticism of the Scarlet Pimpernel role appeals to the reader of Samuel Smiles, and no one is more upset when Mr. Burnett is replaced by a new regime of facts associated with the seriousness of the war. The regime articulates a new objective role for the island press as a provider of serious coverage of the war events. The new mottos are "Don't be bright, just get it right", "News, not views", "The rightest news is the brightest news". Mr. Biswas has to write about various institutions and organizations like the Lunatic Asylum, Chacachacare Leper Settlement and the Young Offenders' Detention Institution in order to keep in line with the requirements of the official government. Having escaped from the feudal order represented by Hanuman House and its sovereign power, Biswas is now incorporated into the networks of modern disciplinary and panoptic power (the mass media is one of the fundamental ISAs[10] in any society): "It was his duty to praise, to look always beyond the facts to the official figures; for it was part of the Sentinel's new policy of sobriety that this was the best of all worlds and Trinidad's official institutions its most magnificent aspects." (395)

Resigning from *The Sentinel*, he is offered a job as Community Welfare Officer by the head of the Community Welfare Department, Miss Logie. This is the period of his life he enjoys most: he has a high salary and he strikes a friendship with the unusual Miss Logie, an energetic woman whom he finds "neither pompous nor aggressive, as he had found women in authority inclined to be."(524) When Miss Logie invites him and his family for a short holiday at her holiday house on the beach, his life takes on a new meaning and dignity. A

[9] One of the most famous heroic characters in a popular book by Baroness Emma Orczy. Scarlet Pimpernel was a mysterious character who saved aristocrats during the Reign of Terror that followed the French revolution.

[10] Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser), which work by reproducing the fundamental beliefs of a society, making them appear natural and unquestionable.

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holiday was an unexpected luxury for working people, and the children had only dreamed about it in their English compositions. Yet this happy period is suddenly terminated when the department is abolished following the political campaign of one of Trinidad's main parties. The campaign for the abolition of the department is ironically rendered as a substitute for a proper political programme, since the parties are less concerned with the elaboration of an adequate and efficient political platform and more inclined towards empty rhetoric: "The party of Southern businessmen to which Shekar belonged had started a campaign for the abolition of the department: a distinguished cause, long sought, for no party had a programme, though all had the same objective: to make everyone in the colony rich and equal." (539)

Mr. Biswas' acquisition of the house in Sikkim Street is the acme of colonial achievement. It is a real achievement, as it has been gained through serious work and sustained effort; and yet the condition of the house and the debts contracted by Mr. Biswas reveal the limitation of the colonial subject's endeavour. At close inspection, the house proves less solid that it had appeared to Mr. Biswas on his first visit: "The staircase was dangerous; the upper floor sagged; there was no back door; most of the windows didn't close; one door couldn't open; the celotex panels under the eaves had fallen out and left gaps between which bats could enter the attic." (6) The debt Mr. Biswas had incurred remains to be paid by his children, as his health deteriorates and he is unable to work as much as before. Yet the possession of the house brings with it an independence and a dignity which refashion his relationship with Shama: "Since they had moved to the house, Shama had learned a new loyalty, to him and to their children; away from her mother and sisters, she was able to express this without shame, and to Mr. Biswas this was a triumph almost as big as the acquiring of his own house" (2). Even if the condition of the house is a painful reminder of the constrictive colonial circumstances, its possession remains a symbolic token of victory. It is a small, yet rightly won victory, and it gives Mr. Biswas the sense of belonging that Naipaul sees as the fundamental ennobling feature of the human being:

How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating ad indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated.[11] (8)

It seems that for Mr. Biswas the dream of independence has come true, although not through economic or material success, but through hard work and renewed efforts after each failure. The "would have been" of the quotation points, however, to the other possibility, which loomed threatening on the horizon all the time, and which Mr. Biswas escaped by the skin of his teeth. Colonial success becomes thus a matter of personal effort, the changing circumstances after the war and contingency.

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[11] Mr. Biswas's thoughts underline the tragic dimension of the novel, by echoing King Lear's complaint that "unaccommodated man is no more than such a poor, bare,/ forked animal" (927)

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