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TITLE OF THESIS/TITRE DE LA THÈSE V.S. MALPAUL'S FICTION, 1954-71: FRAGMENTATION & ROOTLESSNESS.

UNIVERSITY/UNIVERSITÉ SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

DEGREE FOR WHICH THESIS WAS PRESENTED/ GRADE POUR LEQUEL CETTE THÈSE FUT PRÉSENTÉE MASTER OF ARTS

YEAR THIS DEGREE CONFERRED/ANNÉE D'OBTENTION DE CE GRADE 1979

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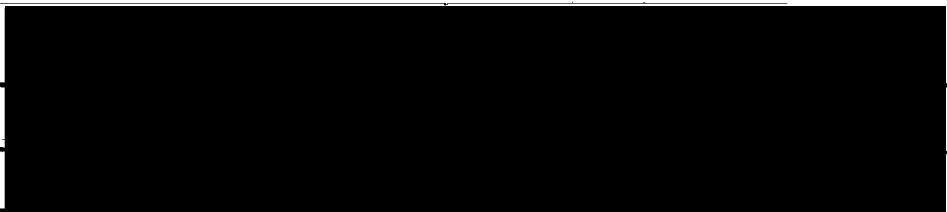
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V.S. NAIPAUL'S FICTION, 1954-71:

FRAGMENTATION AND ROOTLESSNESS

by

Rovindradat Deodat

B.A., University of Guyana, 1975

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department

of

English

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March 1979

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APPROVAL

NAME: Rovindrada DEODAT

DEGREE: Master of Arts

TITLE OF THESIS:

From Fragmentation to Rootlessness: The Development  
of a Theme in V.S. Naipaul's Fiction.

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## ABSTRACT

At a cursory reading, Naipaul's fiction appears no more than random, bitter outpourings of a writer disenchanted with his past and his native background. Such a reading, however, misses an important, underlying strand which gives purpose and direction to his writing. The major concern of this thesis is to highlight this strand or theme showing how it develops in Naipaul's early fiction and enlarges in his later novels. Six of Naipaul's nine works of fiction are closely examined in this study and the process from fragmentation to rootlessness is shown as a consistent, determining factor in the quality of life of the individual and his society.

Chapter I supplies the historical, social and psychological background against which Naipaul's fiction emerges. The Middle Passage, An Area of Darkness and a number of personal interviews reveal Naipaul's attitude towards this background and permit a look at his personal relationship with his environment. Chapter II presents a critical examination of his early books, Miguel Street, The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira, illustrating the disordered, rootless West Indian society which generates insecure, fragmented personalities such as Ganesh, Harbans, Biswas and Singh. Chapter III looks at rootlessness as it affects groups and individuals. In A House for Mr. Biswas, the protagonist's painful struggle for accommodation and wholeness is at the centre of this chapter. Chapter IV examines a more sophisticated and deliberate search for roots and integrity in The Mimic Men. In this book, Naipaul seems to have exhausted his West Indian viewpoint and

worked his theme of rootlessness to its ultimate point--total detachment from nationality and cause. But In A Free State adds a new and universal dimension to his old theme. The culmination is a progressively enlarged vision which addresses the general confusion which modern man faces as he witnesses the disappearance of the chambered, homogeneous societies and the safety and integrity they provide.

DEDICATION

For Rookie



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to Malcolm Page, Bruce Nesbitt and John Mills whose help was always more than academic. For typing, proof-reading, patience and a dozen other chores in completing this thesis a simple thanks to my wife will have to suffice.

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## Introduction

One of the biggest geographical blunders in history gave the West Indies its name. When Columbus stumbled onto the necklace of islands off the Central American Coast, he optimistically thought he had reached the "Spice Islands" in the East, the Indies. The misnomer has survived to the present day. The West Indies have therefore never been seen as part of South, Central or North America, but a displaced portion of the colonial endeavour. By a remarkable coincidence the islands were populated by groups of people, especially from Africa and India, who were equally displaced in this European-oriented labour camp. Their descendants, who make up the many tiny "nations" in the Caribbean Sea, have been deeply affected by their racial and cultural dislocation.

In his West Indian novels, V.S. Naipaul has focussed on the plight of these offspring with particular reference to the East Indian segment of the population. The underlying theme of each of his works is the disorder and despair which fragmentation and rootlessness have spawned.

Fragmentation and rootlessness are viewed in this thesis as stages of a single process. One stage is symptomatic of the other.

The fragmented society demonstrates a disorder which originates from within. It is only after one begins to study individual members of the society that the inner cause becomes apparent. The person who can no longer identify with a cultural heritage loses the assurance and integrity which the indwelling racial ancestor provides. Cultural and psychological rootlessness are inextricable. In addition, the harsh conditions of colonialism have left the West Indian crippling burdens of poverty and ignorance. Because psychological and physical conditions correspond so closely, the unhoused, poverty-stricken West Indian is often culturally and spiritually dispossessed as well. His only alternative is to strive after the culture of his ex-colonial masters even though he is unable to identify with their traditions and values. His attempt can only end in mimicry.

All the ingredients for Naipaul's fiction have now been uncovered--dislocation, confusion, disorder, mimicry, despair and utter rootlessness. The first three indicate a preliminary state, fragmentation. The second set, building on the first, leads to an irreversible alienation from all previous ties. From fragmentation to rootlessness can easily be paraphrased, from disorder to a rejection of all order.

Naipaul's West Indian novels do not merely illustrate this movement, but are the very basis for its validity. His three

early novels, Miguel Street, The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira present the chaotic, disordered societies which produce fragmented personalities such as Ganesh, Harbans, Biswas and Singh. A House for Mr. Biswas and The Mimic Men are more intense, individual struggles for accommodation, wholeness, order and roots. Although In A Free State has only a single episode on the West Indian experience, the overall theme and tone of this book make it a natural extension of Naipaul's overriding concern in his West Indian novels. The displaced West Indian finds his lot shared by persons from many different backgrounds and nationalities, each unable to cope with his particular upheaval.

The formerly narrow range of Naipaul's fiction is forced to expand and acknowledge fragmentation and rootlessness on a much wider scale. As capital and communication transform the world into a huge commercial village, old ways, customs and assurances are swept away in the name of almighty Progress. The irony is frightening; the very progress which sanctioned slavery and colonialism; thereby damaging large portions of the world, has now turned on those it was meant to benefit in a less obvious but equally damaging way. In presenting this grim picture, Naipaul does not change his theme but shifts his focus

from an unknown corner of the world onto the world itself. He grows from a regional writer, obsessed by the chaos of his own background, into an international artist challenged by the shifting sands of the human condition. As the writer develops his theme, he in turn is developed by it.

This thesis aims to show how the theme of rootlessness develops and expands--from the mappings of fragmentation in the early novels to deep despair and rootlessness in the later books. The work will consist largely of close analysis of the fiction itself.

The length of the thesis was of major concern in omitting Mr. Stone and the Knight's Companion, A Flag on the Island and Guerillas from this study. In addition, Mr. Stone is not in the mainstream of Naipaul's fiction but represents an experiment by that author to write an "English" novel. A Flag on the Island, his collection of short stories dating from 1954 to 1965, seems superfluous when one realizes that the material used in the thesis adequately covers this period. Guerillas, Naipaul's latest novel, seeks to rework the general sense of rootlessness developed in In a Free State but is neither as convincing nor as successful.

On a personal note, interest in Naipaul and the thesis area grew out of a less academic yet equally compelling urge to view one's native society without racial or regional prejudice. Naipaul's fiction is particularly strong in this regard. It offers the West Indian the brutal but often accurate portrait of his complacent and foolish presumptions. It is a painful but necessary picture. Naipaul's value as a writer lies in his ability to shake this complacency and underline the West Indian's true state--chaotic and without any real foundations.

While such an artistic presentation of any society lacks a complementary vision of hope or redemption, it is a compulsory first stage toward the formulation of this latter vision. Because of his intimate involvement with his writing and the obvious psychological wounds which his personal experience has inflicted on him, Naipaul seems unequipped to go further than state the West Indian "problem". It will take other West Indian artists to provide the healing vision which Naipaul could not find or may yet stumble upon. But he has done his part well and contributed, with steadfast devotion, all that his ability and temperament have allowed. And this has been no slight contribution to "West Indian Literature" or to the West Indian in search of the truth which may possibly set him free.

## Chapter I

Naipaul's West Indian novels cannot be assessed in a vacuum. They must be viewed against the real setting which gave them birth. The economic, psychological and social consequences of over three hundred years of slavery and indentureship must be fully appreciated before one can begin to examine Naipaul's fiction.

The facts of the West Indian past are simple and undisputed. It was a society manufactured purely for the economic benefit of the metropolitan countries--England, France, Holland and Spain. Here is an apt summary of the colonial attitude and its consequences:

Mercantilism, the economic counterpart of nationalism, was from the outset the guiding doctrine of the competing European powers in the West Indies. Colonies were sought and developed for the sole purpose of producing goods and markets useful to the mother country . . . Colonizing policies, relations between master and slave, the intermediate role played by their free coloured off-spring, the struggle for



emancipation and its general failure to alter the social structure, the "creolization" of custom and attitude in all segments of society, including the feeling of not being at home in the Caribbean--these themes are repeated in almost every territory.<sup>1</sup>

Trinidad, the land of Naipaul's birth and the setting for all his West Indian novels, is typical.

The emancipation of the slaves in 1833 made little difference to the British colonial policy. Indentureship was introduced and, "Simply stated, the incoming East Indian indentured labourers were required to replace the former slaves in the plantation social system."<sup>2</sup> Their culture, however, was not as deliberately of blatantly fractured as those of the negroes, since it was to the advantage of the plantation owners to keep the East Indians as a distinct group from the ex-slaves who might infect these indentured labourers with their reluctance to work on the estates after emancipation. In addition, the East Indians had come to Trinidad on contract and their expectations were different from those of the negroes who had come as slaves:

The slave, in his circumstances, had to learn that there was no possibility of return, but the indentured labourer could dream of going home some day or of otherwise living again according to the patterns of his original culture.<sup>3</sup>

A small number was repatriated but the majority did not realize their ambitions of earning enough to return rich. They remained on the plantations for a second and third five-year term, viewing each extension as the last. By degrees, they began to amend their thought of temporary residence, recreating as far as West Indian colonial conditions allowed, little Indian villages:

Here [in Trinidad] the Indians established themselves in much the same way as in India. They built the same type of houses, wore the same type of clothes, spoke the same language and worshipped the same Gods in the same kind of temples.<sup>4</sup>

But the incontestable fact remained that this was not India. Daily they were compelled to venture out into a strange creole<sup>5</sup> society which they had no wish to join, but which they could not deny. They deliberately resisted integration into this creole world because they felt superior to it: "In the eyes of the East Indians, 'Creole' life lacked stability, social virtues, and morality."<sup>6</sup> The Negroes, on the other hand, were suspicious of the East Indians from the time of their introduction into the plantation system. They viewed the newcomers as both rivals and inferiors, "who took up jobs which Negroes refused to carry on after their emancipation."<sup>7</sup> While both groups felt contempt for each other, they were forced to acknowledge the

superior position of the plantation owners and overseers, and by extension, the superiority of the metropolitan culture and values. The Negroes had already lost a sense of their past; the East Indians were slowly losing a grasp of theirs. Negro and East Indian began imitating the culture of their rulers. The results are evident to this day: "The white community sets fashions and patterns of social living which are eagerly copied by Negroes and East Indians."<sup>8</sup>

West Indian sociologists, historians and politicians come to similar conclusions on the devastating effects of Colonialism:

A too-long history of colonialism seems to have crippled Caribbean self-confidence and Caribbean self-reliance, and a vicious circle has been set up: psychological dependence leads to an ever-growing economic and cultural dependence on the outside world. Fragmentation is intensified in the process. And the greater degree of dependence and fragmentation further reduces local self-confidence.<sup>9</sup>

A "vicious circle" it was indeed: colonialism demanded abject dependence; dependence required the uprooting of the labourer's source of dignity; rootlessness bred psychological and cultural dependence. The end of colonialism could not and did not end this cycle. The Trinidadian Prime Minister is forced to admit: "V.S. Naipaul's description of West Indians as 'mimic men' is harsh but true."<sup>10</sup>

The inhabitants of Trinidad, like the inhabitants of all the ex-colonies in the West Indies, were foreigners in a foreign land. They were not immigrants or settlers as in Canada or Australia; they had no sense of regaining their homeland as in India or parts of Africa at the end of colonialism. They were primarily transient labourers who found themselves suddenly alone in the abandoned labour camp. The masters and overseers had returned to England. The Negroes, East Indians and a sprinkling of other races who failed as labourers but remained as businessmen, were told to be independent and enjoy their new home. But they were neither psychologically prepared nor administratively trained for such a development. In addition, the single crop agriculture-based economy was at its simplest level. Industrialization, to any degree, was deliberately withheld from the colonies, since the "mother" country needed the market for her industrialized goods. This then was the new state of the West Indian, a repressed and ignorant working class in a drained and primitive economy. Progress was impossible; petty jealousies, suspicions, inefficiency, frustration and further fragmentation were inevitable. Worst of all, however, was the psychic disorientation of all segments of the population.

In Trinidad, the negroes could not remember Africa and felt little affinity to it. In its political and social institutions, Trinidad was a crude copy of England. For the Negroes, improvement could only be had through a constant striving after "Englishness". West Indian psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, sees the black man's plight in this way:

Every colonized people--in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality--finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle.<sup>11</sup>

The black man's chief impediment becomes himself.

The East Indian's position is no less paradoxical and confusing. He longs to maintain his Asian lifestyle and identity, yet recognises and seeks the benefits of "westernization" or "modernity"; however, "westernization does not mean the acceptance of the 'Creole' moral values or ways of living".<sup>12</sup> The East Indian in the West Indies does not want to be a West Indian; he holds on to a decaying, diluted Eastern culture while wantonly imitating the ways of the West.

His identity is as ambiguous and undefined as the negro's.

A quest for identity has been the great theme in West Indian literature. Many West Indian writers have attempted to deal with the damaging past and its many lingering effects on the West Indian personality. Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul has been the most prolific and successful.

Naipaul's grandparents came to Trinidad as indentured labourers from India. They were strict Hindus of the prestigious Brahmin caste who maintained their traditional mode of life in spite of their transference. Even their house was a faithful copy of an Eastern Uttar Pradesh structure. They did not acknowledge the reality of Trinidad nor their place in it. Yet they were aware that India was far away and maybe even lost to them. V.S. Naipaul himself was impressed by this remarkable paradox which his grandfather placidly accommodated: "He had abandoned India; and . . . he denied Trinidad . . . nothing had forced him out of himself; he carried his village with him."<sup>13</sup> But while these elders could live in a landscape of the mind, their children were forced to accept the society about them. These younger ones were certainly not part of that society but through it, they became aware of their own distinctiveness:

The child simply understood that what was outside that large clan [his Hindu circle] was somehow not "it": it was outside, it was something else, the food would be different, the manners would be different. That was all--a sense of a great difference. 14

V.S. Naipaul was born into just such a "clan" in 1932 and was infected by this "difference" between his Brahmin world and the non-Brahmin society of Trinidad. He traced "a horror of the unclean" back to a "vaguer sense of caste" acquired during the first stages of his life. He broke early with the traditions of his family and was an "unbeliever" in spite of the abundance of pundits within his large family group. He was never instructed in Hinduism, but was expected to instinctively grasp the significance of the prayers (in Hindi) and the rituals. He understood very little. What he inherited from this orthodox Hindu background was "a certain supporting philosophy" and a "sense of the difference of people".<sup>15</sup> Naipaul could not share the exclusive world of the East Indian in Trinidad, but, because of a fundamental grounding in this world, became isolated from other segments of the Trinidad society. He was neither an "East Indian" nor a "West Indian".

His estrangement from his native society surfaced long before he was able to examine and rationalize the deficiencies of his background. At eleven, his plans were firmly made: "I wrote a vow on the endpaper of my Kennedy's Revised Latin Primer to leave (Trinidad) within five years. I left after six."<sup>16</sup> The facts of his subsequent life read like the successful escape story of one of his protagonists. After earning a scholarship in Trinidad, he attended Oxford University where he read English. On his graduation, he married an English girl and started writing novels at the age of twenty-three. Since then, he has published nine works of fiction (six of which have received literary awards) and five works of non-fiction. He continues to write and live in England and, at the age of forty-six, is a recognised artist throughout the English-speaking world.

These facts, however, are extremely superficial and do not give a fair impression of Naipaul's life, attitude or achievement. In his non-fiction and a number of personal interviews, he has given, with characteristic bluntness and honesty, his impression of his Indian and West Indian background and a persuasive interpretation of the overall West Indian experience. His thoughts on the West Indian personality are based on his sense of the West Indian past:




These Caribbean territories are not like those in Africa or Asia, with their own internal reverences, that have been returned to themselves after a period of colonial rule. They are manufactured societies, labour camps, creations of empire; and for long they were dependent on empire for law, language, institutions, culture, even officials. Nothing was generated locally; dependence became a habit.<sup>17</sup>

This is the real West Indian futility that Naipaul grapples with. It is impossible for him to view a society so haphazardly created as whole. In Trinidad, for instance, "there was no community. We were of various races, religions, sets and cliques; and we had somehow found ourselves on the same small island. Nothing bound us together except this common residence."<sup>18</sup> In addition to the lack of national feeling or pride, there is the burning rivalry between East Indians and Negroes, the two largest groups in Trinidad. Naipaul recognises the attitude which produces such fierce antipathy:

The Negroe has a deep contempt . . .  
for all that is not white; his  
values are the values of white  
imperialism at its most bigoted.  
The Indian despises the Negro for  
not being an Indian; he has, in  
addition, taken over all the white  
prejudices against the Negro . . . .  
They despise one another by  
reference to the whites.<sup>19</sup>

The irony is apparent.



Naipaul's analysis of the West Indian Negro and East Indian is marked by a deliberate detachment from his own racial stock as well as from his native background. His observations on the psychology of colonialism and its effects on the two major races in Trinidad coincide significantly with those of experts in this field. He writes, "This was the greatest damage done to the Negro by slavery. It taught him self-contempt. It set him the ideals of white civilization and made him despise every other."<sup>20</sup> Frantz Fanon comes to the same conclusion: "For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white."<sup>21</sup> Colour and culture are insidiously blended and deepen the anomaly of the black man's position as he trudges "the weary road to whiteness."<sup>22</sup> The East Indian, according to Naipaul, has been spared this self-contempt because of the retention of his religion, but he has suffered an equally stultifying psychological blow because he has been cut off from the roots of his culture. As a result, he is left with a "religion reduced to rites without philosophy, set in a materialist colonial society"; he is "protected and imprisoned" in "a static world, awaiting decay".<sup>23</sup> The "materialistic colonial" environment has a telling effect on the East Indian group turning them into "A peasant-minded, money-minded community . . .

the complete colonial, even more philistine than the white."<sup>24</sup> Those in the middle class and those converted to Christianity are "more liberal and adaptable in every way but following far behind the Negro on the weary road to whiteness" yet they are "more insecure".<sup>25</sup> He sees all classes of East Indians equally damaged by their West Indian experience. Indeed, in what he considers "a deliberately created inferior society",<sup>26</sup> the inhabitants generally cannot help but be influenced by the psychology which governed their immediate history.

Naipaul's novels, then, deal with the dislocated, dispossessed, fragmented colonial, robbed of his past, confused about his present and in despair of his future. Naipaul does not sentimentalize this plight but confirms it. He realises that only an honest and detached examination of the limitations the past has placed on the colonial can actively work to break down these very constrictions.

The writer's role in the West Indies, as Naipaul sees it, is to hold up the mirror unflinchingly to his fellows:

Living in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands. Here the West Indian writers have failed. Most

have so far only reflected and flattered the prejudices of their race or colour groups.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear that his works consciously aim at avoiding such errors. The irony and satire of his early books (Miguel Street, The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira) together with the harsh reality of his later ones (A House for Mr. Biswas, The Mimic Men and In A Free State) are united by a single purpose--the hope of regeneration:

I think I do like to look for the seeds of regeneration in a situation; I long to find what is good and hopeful and really do hope that by the most brutal sort of analysis one is possibly opening up the situation to some sort of action; an action which is not based on self-deception. <sup>28</sup>

Rigid detachment becomes his guard against "self-deception" and it is this stance which is regarded by some of his readers, especially West Indians, as contempt for his subjects or evidence of the snobbishness of a writer "ashamed of his cultural background and striving like mad to prove himself through promotion to the peaks of a 'superior' (English) culture".<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that Naipaul has a personal problem of identity which sometimes over-spills into his writing. He often speaks of his rootlessness.

London, for him, is little more than a hotel room to write in. In 1958 he records, "after eight years here (England) I find I have, without effort, achieved the Buddhist ideal of non-attachment."<sup>30</sup> His reaction to his native Trinidad is more neurotic, hence, more complicated. As his ship docks and Naipaul views the land of his birth after ten years' absence, he openly panics: "I begin to feel all my old fear of Trinidad. I did not want to stay. I had left the security of the ship and had no assurance that I would ever leave the island again."<sup>31</sup> Even India, the land of his ancestors, of myths and legends, loses its hold on him after he experiences the unbelievable poverty, ignorance and filth which he records in An Area of Darkness. Naipaul shares with many of his fictional characters the very feeling of dislocation and homelessness: "London was not the centre of my world. I had been misled; but there was nowhere else to go."<sup>32</sup> His acute sensitivity, lucid vision and personal suffering, however, eminently qualify him to articulate the cause of this suffering in his compatriots. And he does so with unswerving honesty and dedication.

Footnotes - Chapter I

1  
Lambros Comitas & David Lowenthal, eds., Introduction, Slaves, Free Men, Citizens--West Indian Perspectives (New York: Anchor Press, 1973), pp. xiv-xv.

2  
Morton Klass, Introduction, East Indians in Trinidad (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 17.

3  
Klass, p. 20.

4  
Klass, p. 22.

5  
Creole, at first, simply referred to the whites born in the West Indies. Later it became a distinctly degrading epithet implying crudeness and miscegenation. By the time of indentureship (1840 onwards) it referred almost exclusively to the haphazard lifestyle of the Negro segment of the population.

6  
Yogendra K. Malik, East Indians in Trinidad (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 21.

7  
Malik, p. 22.

8  
Malik, p. 22.

9  
Eric Williams, From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492-1969 (Evanston, England: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 502.

10  
Williams, p. 502.

11  
Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Masks, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1968), p. 18.

12  
Malik, p. 21.

- 13 V.S. Naipaul, An Area of Darkness (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), p. 30.
- 14 Nigel Bingham, "The novelist V.S. Naipaul talks to Nigel Bingham about his childhood in Trinidad," The Listener, 7 September, 1972, p. 306.
- 15 Naipaul, Area of Darkness, p. 32.
- 16 V.S. Naipaul, The Middle Passage (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), p. 43.
- 17 V.S. Naipaul, The Overcrowded Barracoon and other articles (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1972), p. 254.
- 18 Naipaul, Middle Passage, p. 45.
- 19 Naipaul, Middle Passage, pp. 86-87.
- 20 Naipaul, Middle Passage, p. 71.
- 21 Fanon, p. 12.
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- 23 Naipaul, Middle Passage, pp. 88-89.
- 24 Naipaul, Middle Passage, p. 89.
- 25 Naipaul, Middle Passage, p. 88.
- 26 Israel Shenker, "V.S. Naipaul, Man Without a Society," New York Times Book Review, 17 October, 1971.
- 27 Naipaul, Middle Passage, p. 73.

28

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29

George Lamming, The Pleasures of Exile (London, England: Michael Joseph, 1960), p. 225.

30

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31

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32

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## Chapter II

Naipaul's first three books, Miguel Street (the first to be written but the third to be published), The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira supply the fictional Trinidadian environment which his bigger and more serious works, A House for Mr. Biswas and The Mimic Men, take for granted. These early books are all comic in tone and depict both urban and rural Trinidad in the thirties, forties and early fifties. While all three are light, funny and farcical, they also reflect Naipaul's early reaction to his chaotic and fragmented background. In 1958 he warns against overestimating the purely fictional quality of these novels:

The social comedies I write can be fully appreciated only by someone who knows the region I write about. Without that knowledge it is easy for my books to be dismissed as farces and my characters as eccentrics.<sup>1</sup>

Humour and irony thinly cover the real disorder which pervades each of these works. The residents of "Miguel Street" subscribe to a set of inverted values where imprisonment or wife-beating is a badge of masculinity and honour. In The Mystic Masseur, shameless mimicry is the most outstanding

feature, while ignorance, superstition and greed make a complete farce of the elections in The Suffrage of Elvira. All the characters are influenced and motivated by their anarchic background which in turn further reinforces the anarchy.

Miguel Street is light yet profound; funny yet peircingly distressing; fictional but superbly realistic. In this collection of vignettes the boy-narrator is describing the world around him and the people who inhabit it. It tells of the eccentricities of a second-rate society. but more importantly it relays, through the vision and imagination of a product of the society, the essence of this world, the glories and humiliations of chaotic yet passionate lives. The artists and dreamer; the drunkards and wife-beaters; the loving and loveless; the heroes and the cowards; the frustrated and the insane all strive after a fulfillment which is immediately recognisable--"to be a man among men". The women are no less intent on proving their worth. The characters' disappointment, failures and mimicry have to be assessed against the backdrop of an intense striving for recognition and integrity.

The book informs on two levels. It gives the flavour and rhythm of the West Indian environment by following the

individual lives of a typical Trinidadian street gang and it subtly reveals the psychological development of a junior member of this street gang.

A complete cross-section of Trinidadian family life and relationship is revealed in a number of episodes. One of its most cruel aspects and the one which lays the foundation for a fragmented, insecure family life is wife-beating. Hat, the street sage, declares, "Is a good thing for a man to beat his woman every now and then."<sup>2</sup> The sullen, bovine-featured George continually beats his wife, daughter and son. He appears to have very little cause for his brutality and simply seems to be working off his own frustrations or enjoying a perverted type of power. When his son becomes too old, "George beat his daughter and his wife more than ever"<sup>3</sup> as if to make up for the boy's absence. It is easy to imagine what George's son would deduce as the first duty of a husband and father. George is not the only "beater" or the most severe. Toni, who elopes with an upper-class married woman and lives in Miguel Street for a short while, ends up beating the woman so viciously that she has to escape simply to avoid further injuries. The grim irony of this episode is apparent in its title: "Love, Love, Love, Alone."

Even Hat and his gang disapprove of the excesses of

George and Toni, but no one objects to Uncle Bhakou's practices, not even the victim, his wife. Bhakou performs his "duty" dispassionately and even "experimented with rods for beating his wife, and I wouldn't swear that it wasn't Hat who suggested a cricket bat. . . . The strangest thing about this was that Mrs. Bhakou herself kept the bat clean and well-oiled."<sup>4</sup> The humour does not conceal the final perversion--the institutionalising of wife-beating. It is not only part of urban Trinidadian life, but accepted by the rural Hindu family as well. In The Mystic Masseur, Ganesh's first assertion of manhood on his wedding night is to beat his wife: "It was their first beating, a formal affair done without anger on Ganesh's part or resentment on Leela's. . . it meant much to both of them. It meant that they had grown up and become independent."<sup>5</sup> The educational aspects of this practice are stressed once again in Biswas' "wife-beating society" where a wife talks "with pride" of the beating she received and indeed regards them "as a necessary part of her training".<sup>6</sup> Negroes and Indians, rural and urban, are united in their approval of such barbarism proclaiming it a mark of distinction for both the beater and the beaten. The tendency as it appears in Miguel Street and Naipaul's other West Indian novels is not an accidental quirk, but a defining characteristic of this

particular society. Men who have never been trained for responsibility or shown that power could be exercised in any other but a violent fashion become brutal tyrants when thrust into a position of authority as husbands and fathers. The brandishing, in this way, of the only real power they may ever exercise is as much a cover-up for their inability to lead their households successfully, as it is a frantic kind of compensation for their own insecurities. The child can only draw from all this a great sense of wrong, since he must also share the beatings of his mother without the absurd social recognition she can claim. Unfortunately, his consolation will be rooted in the fact that some day he also will be able to wield such power, and thereby right old wrongs:

Everyday Big Foot father, the  
policeman, giving Big Foot blows.  
Like medicine. Three times a day  
after meals. And hear Big Foot  
talk afterwards. He used to say,  
"When I get big and have children,  
I go beat them, beat them."

I didn't say it then, because  
I was ashamed; but I had often felt  
the same way when my mother beat me.

Thus the distressing abuse and disintegration of the family perpetuate themselves.

But the natural parental tendency to desire more of a

child than one would demand of oneself both inspires and confuses the child in "Miguel Street". George, who has offered his son, Elias, no other training but random beltings is nevertheless very proud of the boy's bid for education and seriously expects his son to become a great scholar. Elias, on the other hand, seeks to escape at a single bound his father's inadequate world--he fervently aims to be a doctor; but the limited education his society provides makes this impossible. He is caught in a double bind. As he repeatedly fails various examinations, he progressively loses faith in himself until his ambition ceases to motivate any further effort. He admits defeat in a typical Miguel Street fashion: "I afraid exams and things, you know. I ain't have any luck with them."<sup>8</sup> and is duly rewarded for his early scholastic promise, "For Elias had become one of the street aristocrats. He was driving the scavenging carts."<sup>9</sup> The humour is wry and Elias' tale quite sad, but far less tragic than the conflict between Laura and her daughter, Lorna.

The vivacious, fecund and promiscuous Laura has had eight children by seven fathers. She is neither embarrassed by this fact nor criticised by her society where illegitimacy and brief common-law marriages are very common,

especially for the lower-class negro woman. Laura is content with her lot until her eldest daughter, Lorna, reports that she is about to have her first illegitimate child. Laura breaks down and "for the first time I hear Laura crying. It wasn't ordinary crying. She seemed to be crying all the cry she had saved up since she was born."<sup>10</sup> The elder members of Miguel Street understand Laura's disappointment, for when Hat's young nephew, Boyee, pusslingly observes, "'I don't see why she so mad about that. She does do the same.' Hat got so annoyed that he took off his leather belt and beat Boyee."<sup>11</sup> She had really lived in the hope that her children, especially her daughter, would have a better life than her own; to see the eldest starting on the same beaten, broken road that she had travelled wounds her deeply. But how could her daughter have done any better? Whom would she emulate but her single parent, her mother? Lorna is deeply affected by her mother's distress. After her child is born, she drowns herself-- suicide, the ultimate admission of worthlessness. When informed of her daughter's death, Laura concludes, "It better that way."<sup>12</sup> Her acceptance of life's futility is as total as her dead daughter's.

It is significant that a large number of characters in

Miguel Street unconsciously share this view. Bogart, the tailor who never sewed, loses himself in the imitation of American actors, hence the irony of his name. Popo, the carpenter, who talks of making "the thing without a name" eventually abandons even this solitary dream of creativity. B. Wordsworth, who sets out to write "the greatest poem in the world" never composes more than a single line. The stories of Man-Man, the mad evangelist, who could not bear his own crucifixion, and Morgan, the unsuccessful comedian whose first big laugh utterly breaks him are more humorous but equally dark.

Their individual and collective defeat originates from the barren soil, their society, upon which their aspirations and ambitions eventually wither and die. A distorted family life leading to an equally uncertain personal existence is both the result of and results in a fragmented community without defined values or worthwhile goals. While the colour and ebullience of this society are attractive, it is in the end wasted energy which produces very little. To remain in a society such as this is simply to stagnate as the narrator finally realises.

The boy is at once an observer and a character in this book. He shares a distinctive intimacy with the people he



describes because he is one of their number--a member of the "Junior Miguel Street Club" who "squatted on the pavement, talking, like Hat and Bogart and the others, about things like life and cricket and football."<sup>13</sup>

Initially, he is as impressed by the strength and wisdom of Hat or the coveted profession of Eddoes, the scavenger cart-driver, as any of his other friends. But he is also uniquely affected by his relationship with a number of other characters in the book.

From Popo and ~~B.~~ Wordsworth, he learns of the bitter disappointment which those who live on pure fantasy must someday face. He discovers with amazement and discomfort that behind Big Foot's gigantic size and strength hides a timid man afraid of the dark. Laura's deep hurt causes him to feel "that the world was a stupid, sad place, and I almost began crying with Laura."<sup>14</sup> Toni's cruelty he can overlook because he intuits from this man's yellow, thin, wrinkled hands the personal agony the drunkard himself must endure. Greatest of all his lessons is a growing awareness of his environment and its shortcomings. As he emerges from his adolescence, he "Looked critically at the people around me. I no longer wanted to be like Eddoes. He was so weak and thin, and I hadn't realized he was so small. Titus Hoyt was

stupid and boring, and not funny at all. Everything had changed."<sup>15</sup> And indeed it has.

Each member of the street gang has had to surrender his posture to more immediate demands of life. When Hat, the undisputed leader and the gang's symbol of vitality, is imprisoned for four years, the inevitable becomes apparent: "The Club was dead."<sup>16</sup> Miguel Street loses the only bond that held it together. True, the club primarily indulged each man's fantasy of "being a man among men" ("man" here implies and achieved integrity), yet the loss of even this framework can only relegate these lives to a greater drabness and disorder. In such a society fragmentation is continual.

The actual change added to the boy's altered outlook leads him to reject his society openly. Finally disgusted with his personal abandonment to women and drinks, he complains to his mother: "is not my fault really. Is just Trinidad. What else anybody can do here except drink?"<sup>17</sup> Progress lies abroad. He leaves Miguel Street and Trinidad, but how much they will remain a part of him and colour his attitude towards his future life can only be assumed. Naipaul's remaining West Indian novels are dramatic presentations, from various angles, of this very question.

Miguel Street describes fragments of Trinidadian urban life and hints at their interrelationships; The Mystic Masseur offers a bold and open canvas of rural Trinidad. Hinduism, superstition, Creole life, politics, profit-making and genuine aspirations are all jumbled into the picture, gratuitously connected yet falling into place with remarkable effect.

The Mystic Masseur is undoubtedly satirical. The geniality of tone rarely hides the cryptic satire of the "picaroon" society:

Trinidad has always admired the "sharp character" who, like the sixteenth-century picaroon of Spanish Literature, survives and triumphs by his wits in a place where it is felt that all eminence is arrived at by crookedness.<sup>18</sup>

The mock biographer of Ganesh Ramsumair, in a seemingly naive introduction, proudly announces: "The wider world has not learnt of Ganesh's early struggles, and Trinidad resents this. I myself believe that the history of Ganesh is, in a way, the history of our times."<sup>19</sup> And so it is meant to be. This is a tale of the remarkable success of a "picaroon" hero and the kind of world in which such advancement is possible.

The society in which Ganesh grows up is a typical colonial one, where quakery and incompetence are widespread.

Ganesh's education and his experience as a teacher are open parodies of what learning ought to be. The sweating Headmaster loudly catechises his new teacher:

"What is the purpose of the school?" he asked suddenly.  
"Form--" Ganesh began.  
"Not--" the headmaster encouraged.  
"Inform."  
"You quick, Mr. Ramsumair. You is a man after my own heart. You and me going to get on good good." 20

The headmaster, of course, is the model on which the students are to be "formed". Ganesh's own writing is a travesty of literature. Here are extracts from his first book 101

Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion:

Question Number Forty-Six. Who is the greatest modern Hindu? . . .  
Question Number Forty-Seven. Who is the second greatest modern Hindu? . . .  
Question Number Forty-Eight. Who is the third greatest modern Hindu? 21

His relatives and friends are overwhelmed by his creation. Many other native efforts are equally ridiculous. The religious, labour and political organisations all prove ineffective and corrupt. "The second General Meeting of the Hindu Association,"<sup>22</sup> the labour dispute described near the end of the book<sup>23</sup> and the native politicians grown wealthy on bribery and public fraud are striking examples, yet in all these, the author is painting a very real picture of the colonial

heritage. In The Middle Passage he elaborates:

Again and again one comes back to the main, degrading fact of the colonial society; it never required efficiency, it never required quality, and these things, because unrequired, became undesirable.<sup>24</sup>

It is the common case of a people trained to mediocrity and complaisance eventually becoming blind to their own limitations and degradation.

An aspiring Ganesh Ramsuair has a further encumbrance to deal with, his East Indian heritage. Hinduism is scathingly satirised for its outmoded ceremonies--Ganesh going to Benares to study;<sup>25</sup> its purely ritualistic aspects--the "grief" at the death of Ganesh's father;<sup>26</sup> its loss of direction<sup>27</sup> and its offensive materialism personified by the fat, dirty, bloated figure of Ramlogan, the shopkeeper. Significantly, Ganesh is in constant conflict with Ramlogan. When he tells his wife, "Girl, how you let all your father bad blood run in your veins,"<sup>28</sup> on is immediately reminded of Mr. Biswas and his persistent condemnation of the "Tulsi bad blood". Mr. Biswas' struggle against Hanuman House and all that it stands for is very similar to Ganesh's psychological duels with Ramlogan.

Even as a student, Ganesh finds his Indian past an

embarrassment in a rapidly "modernised" Trinidad, a modernity totally judged by one's ability to ape the metropolitan English culture:

He was so ashamed of his Indian name that for a while he spread a story that he was really called Gareth. This did him little good. He continued to dress badly, he didn't play games, and his accent remained too clearly that of the Indian from the country. 29

The attempt to Anglicize his name foreshadows the end of the novel.

There is little doubt that "G. Ramsay Muir" symbolizes the complete rejection of "Pundit Ganesh Ramsumair" and his cultural past. One is initially tempted to view this rejection as a betrayal, yet nowhere does Ganesh show any belief in Hinduism or its way of life. His use of the Hindu title "Pundit" and the corresponding mode of dress, dhoti and koortah, are adopted as mere appendices to his role as a "mystic".<sup>30</sup> Ganesh's later involvement with the "Hindu Association" is a response to Narayan's opposition of him and is not based on any religious or cultural convictions. When he enters parliament, he ends his career as a mystic and spiritualist and "stopped wearing dhoti and turban altogether."<sup>31</sup>

Ganesh's own description, in his autobiography, of his encounter with religion is described by a critic as "a sort of spiritual thriller, handled with a technique which would not have disgraced the creator of Sherlock Holmes."<sup>32</sup> Hinduism for Ganesh is just another adventure. His attitude towards his religion and cultural background is therefore consistent throughout the novel. As a young Hindu, he recognises and is ashamed of his decadent cultural background; as Pundit Ramsumair, he merely uses aspects of it for its mystic effects; and as a colonial politician he relinquishes that part of him which never seemed valuable.

Ganesh's failure to retain his native identity is at the heart of this novel, and in this regard, Naipaul treats his hero more sympathetically than many critics have admitted. The colonial is never sure of who he is. He forever seeks to define his position through the acquisition of all that is readily recognised as valuable in the "superior" metropolitan society. These are usually a familiar list: money, education, prominence and power. Such abstract qualities as benevolence, imagination and art are looked upon as unnecessary and eccentric. Ganesh, like Mr. Biswas, unconsciously strives after both material and spiritual values.

When his school friend Indarsingh wins a scholarship to England, "To Ganesh, Indarsingh had achieved a greatness beyond ambition."<sup>33</sup> Some years later, as he sits in a cinema, he thinks: "All these people with their name in big print on the screen have their bread butter, you hear. Even those in little little print. They not like me."<sup>34</sup> The plea for recognition is genuine and touching. When he directs his aspirations to the printed word, a peculiar blend of egotism and imagination is detected. This is the moment of conception for Ganesh, the writer:

Leela spoke to Ganesh. She asked him a question!  
"You could write too, sahib?"  
It took him off his guard. To cover up his surprise he began rearranging the booklets on the table.  
"Yes," he said. "I could write."  
And then, stupidly, almost without knowing what he was saying, "And one day I go write books like these. Just like these."  
Ramlogan's mouth fell open.  
"You only joking, sahib."  
Ganesh slapped his hand down on the booklets, and heard himself saying, "Yes, just like these. Just like these." 35

What begins as a petty boast turns into a sudden inspiration. Ganesh's spirit soars with the sheer magic of his new-found ambition. This ambition is as daring as it is imaginative and certainly sets Ganesh apart from his fellow Trinidadians. When he makes tentative inquiries from the boy at the printing



press, the ink-stained assistant scoffingly replies:

"You ever hear of Trinidad people writing books?" Ganesh courageously persists: "I writing a book."<sup>36</sup> Of course, Ganesh's first creative effort is ludicrous. 101 Questions and Answers on the Hindu Religion and his later books are "spiritual thrillers". The point is not Ganesh's inferior productions but his worthy intentions.

Even Ganesh as mystic and, later, politician is not simply a "successful fraud":<sup>37</sup>

But more than his powers,  
learning or tolerance, people  
liked his charity. He had no  
fixed fee and accepted whatever  
was given him. When someone  
complained that he was poor and  
at the same time persecuted by  
an evil spirit, Ganesh took care  
of the spirit and waived the fee.  
People began to say, "He not like  
the others. They only hot after  
your money. But Ganesh, he is a  
good man." 38

The passage is free from irony and the final sentence perfectly serious. His popularity with the people is used by Ramlogan and Leela to initiate business ventures.

Ramlogan begins a taxi-service, Leela a restaurant exclusively for Ganesh's clients. When Ganesh learns of the exorbitant fares his father-in-law charges, he angrily upbraids Leela, "You and your father is proper traders. Buy, sell, make money, money."<sup>39</sup> In spite of his honest intentions, however, he

soon falls prey to the very materialism he decries in Leela and her father.

His political career follows a similar pattern. After he is elected to parliament, he becomes the "terror in the Legislative Council" diligently representing his constituents:

There was no doubt that at this time Ganesh was the most popular man in Trinidad. He never went to a cocktail party at Government House. He never went to dinner there. He was always ready to present a petition to the Governor. He exposed scandal after scandal. And he was always ready to do a favour for any member of the public, rich or poor. 41

Up to this time, his motives and methods are laudable but then comes a much more difficult test; and Ganesh fails utterly. He is unable to cope with a mob of striking, frustrated, angry workers. "He talked instead as though they were the easy-going crowd in Woodford Square and he the fighting M.L.C. and nothing more."<sup>42</sup> The workers riot. This, after all, is what real politics is like in the West Indies, and the very chaotic nature of Ganesh's background robs him of the ability to deal with the actual chaos. After this encounter with the mob, "Ganesh never walked out again. He went to cocktail parties at Government House and drank lemonade. He wore a dinner-jacket to official dinners."<sup>43</sup> Unable to come

to terms with Trinidad and its colonial people he opts for the ultimate colonial bondage--mimicking the masters.

G. Ramsay Muir is a pathetic puppet. Ganesh was a weak but remarkable man.

Two water-colours done by the "crazy crazy" Mr. Stewart are appropriate metaphors for Ganesh's life and aspirations:

The water-colour, done in blues and yellows and browns, depicted a number of brown hands reaching out for a yellow light in the top left-hand corner.

"This, I think is rather interesting." Ganesh followed Mr. Stewart's finger and saw a blue shrunk hand curling backwards from the yellow light. "Some see Illumination," Mr. Stewart explained. "But they do sometimes get burnt and withdraw." 44

That Ganesh "withdraws" in the end, is obvious; that as "G.R. Muir, Esq. M.B.E." his very personality is now distorted like the "blue shrunk hand curling backwards" is sad and disappointing; but that he once actually saw and reached out for the "yellow light" is a hopeful statement of every man's potential.

The Suffrage of Elvira offers a more elaborate view of politics in Trinidad and shows how it is inextricably mixed with racism, religion, superstition and greed. The apparent chaos surrounding and indeed, engulfing the second general

election under universal adult suffrage in Elvira, a part of "the smallest, most isolated and most neglected of the nine counties of Trinidad", begins to make sense when one examines the composition and attitude of the Elvira electorate.

Race is the primary definer of political affiliations. The East Indians are expected to vote for Harbans, the only Indian candidate, and the Negroes for Preacher, a Negro and the only other candidate in the election. The withdrawn Spanish segment of the Elvira population, "more negro than Spanish now" supports neither candidate and is only influenced by Chittaranjan, one of Harbans' campaigners, because "it was said he lent them money."<sup>45</sup> The issues to be voted on are as primitive as these. But religion, superstition and bribery offset this simplistic approach.

Within the East Indian group, the Hindus and Muslims are distinct segments with as defined a rivalry as the East Indians and Negroes. They would never seriously consider supporting the Negro candidate, but they, in the form of their leader, Baksh, would need much coaxing and tangible evidence of goodwill from Harbans, a Hindu, before committing their votes to him. The Spanish support is also of a tenuous nature and is as easily overturned by the preachings of two white Jehovah's Witnesses as by the superstition surrounding the discovery of a litter of

dead puppies. Even the Hindu votes are threatened by division as a renegade Hindu, Lookhoor, uses his popularity, gained by advertising Indian movies from a loud-speaking van, to attract Indian voters to Preacher. It is never certain whether he would have gained some Hindu support for Preacher but it is very obvious that because he is an Indian, he is viewed with suspicion and open animosity by Preacher's supporters. On the other hand, Chittaranjan, the goldsmith, "the most important person in Elvira" because the richest, had unchallenged authority over the majority of the Hindus-- for a particular consideration, an arrangement of marriage between his daughter and the candidate's son. Initially, the negroes appear to be the only unified and consistent group whose votes would assuredly go to the negro candidate. But after Harbans provides a sumptuous "wake" on the death of Preacher's "campaign manager", Mr. Cuffy, a large number seems to have defected, for the final count on election day registers only seven hundred and sixteen votes for Preacher from a possible two thousand negro votes.

The election is a mere cover for intrigue and bargaining; support is easily bought, hence quickly lost. Even the foolish, yet traditional platforms of race and religion are undermined because of the basic fragmentation of this typical colonial

society. Cultural disorder produces the gigantic muddle which is Elvira:

Things were crazily mixed up in Elvira. Everybody, Hindus, Muslims and Christians, owned a Bible; the Hindus and Muslims looking on it, if anything, with greater awe. Hindus and Muslims celebrated Christmas and Easter. The Spaniards and some of the Negroes celebrated the Hindu festival of lights. Someone had told them that Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, was being honoured; they placed small earthen lamps on their money-boxes and waited, as they said, for the money to breed. Everybody celebrated the Muslim festival of Hosein. In fact, when Elvira was done with religious festivals, there were few straight days left. 46

Religion loses its conservative and spiritual significance and is used instead to support and explain superstition and ignorance. Mrs. Baksh, an ardent Muslim, is immediately convinced that the mangy little pup, Tiger, is an outcome of Preacher's "obeah". She proceeds to use the Bible in a most unorthodox manner to reveal the child responsible for the dog's presence in the house, then she takes the guilty one, Herbert, to a Hindu mystic in order to "get the spirit off him".<sup>47</sup> Her conduct in this affair is fully supported by her husband, "the leader of the Muslims", and would scarcely be criticised by any of her neighbours who would have acted in like manner given similar circumstances. Irony is implicit throughout this novel

and what at first appears comic, by simple repetition, develops into a grim testimony of the futility and utter selfishness of all the actors in The Suffrage of Elvira.

The crafty and volatile Baksh ceases to be amusing after he openly sells and resells the votes he "controls". A group which tolerates a leader such as Baksh is truly backward. The Hindus and Negroes appear in no better light and are as opportunistic, petty and unattractive as Baksh and his followers. Elvira's crude philistinism overwhelms every issue--love, sickness, even death. All the prominent citizens of Elvira are presented in detail and each is affected by a meanness which only their common background can explain. This colonial background amplifies the survival instinct at the expense of the more progressive one, cooperation. In The Middle Passage, Naipaul concludes:

In the colonial society every man had to be for himself; every man had to grasp whatever dignity and power he was allowed; he owed no loyalty to the island and scarcely any to his group. To understand this is to understand the squalor of the politics that came to Trinidad in 1946 . . . . There were no parties, only individuals. 48.

It is surprising that any individual would subject himself

to the greedy whims of an electorate such as Elvira. Harbans, the candidate, represents a revealing study of the ambitious Trinidadian and his bitter confrontation with the reality of his environment.

Harbans is by no means the altruistic politician, willing to sacrifice himself for his constituents. He does not even live in Elvira. He is, however, a successful businessman who sees the new opportunities in politics as a means of improving himself. He is fully aware that to gain favour with the leaders in Elvira he would have to resort to bribes and promises. What he is not prepared for is the onslaught of demands from leaders and voters alike for cash, open rum accounts, van and loud-speaker, financing of a "wake" and religious ceremonies, and even his son as a marriage partner. It is understandable that when he actually feels threatened by Preacher, he bitterly complains: "How much money Preacher spend for him to beat me in a election?" Dhaniram's words of consolation only give another turn of the screw, "This democracy is a damn funny thing."<sup>49</sup> By the end of the campaign he is a tired, frustrated old man who wins an election but learns to detest the very people who voted him in. The victory celebration, fuelled by a new set of demands, explodes into a riot. This closing event amply encapsulates the content and mood of the entire



novel. Harbans' final appearance and speech seem logical and justifiable:

"Elvira, Elvira." Harbans shook his head and spoke to the back of his hands, covered almost up to the knuckles by the sleeves of his big grey coat. "Elvira, you is a bitch."

And he came to Elvira no more. 50

One may even be allowed to pun on the word "suffrage" in reviewing Harbans' experience in "the suffrage of Elvira". He is, admittedly, a poor choice for a "candidate" but his constituents seem to deserve no better.

And so the vicious cycle of the West Indian futility rolls on its useless way. In Miguel Street, the dreams of fragmented personalities are doubly broken by the fragmentation of the society which spawned the dreamers and the dreams. In The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira, two little men do indeed have their dreams of success come true. But Ganesh and Harbans can only succeed by rising above the disorder of their environment, a feat which is only possible by severing their link with their society. In the process, they must reject their past and deny the authenticity of their old selves-- a perilous, psychological state.

The pattern of Naipaul's three early novels is thus apparent. The main character, after a period of total immersion

in his society, turns away in disillusionment or disgust and seeks some means of escape. The narrator in Miguel Street goes "abroad to study" (one is almost certain he will never return); Ganesh rejects his native identity and name, metamorphosing into G. Ramsay Muir, M.B.E.; Harbans curses Elvira and, although elected to represent that district, never visits it again. This pattern continues in Naipaul's two larger West Indian novels, A House for Mr. Biswas and The Mimic Men, but here the mood and intention is predominantly serious and the quest for wholeness intensely personal and deliberate.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER II

1  
V.S. Naipaul, The Overcrowded Barracoon and other articles (London, England: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1972), p. 11.

2  
V.S. Naipaul, Miguel Street (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971), p. 106.

3  
Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 23.

4  
Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 119.

5  
V.S. Naipaul, The Mystic Masseur (London, England: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1971), p. 55.

6  
V.S. Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), p. 148.

7  
Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 55.

8  
Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 35.

9  
Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 37.

10  
Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 90.

11  
Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 90.

12  
Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 91.

13  
Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 31.

14  
Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 90.

15  
Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 165.

- 16 Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 163.
- 17 Naipaul, Miguel Street, p. 167.
- 18 V.S. Naipaul, The Middle Passage (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), p. 78.
- 19 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 14.
- 20 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 20.
- 21 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 96.
- 22 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, pp. 184-192.
- 23 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, pp. 209-213.
- 24 Naipaul, Middle Passage, p. 62.
- 25 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 17.
- 26 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, pp. 24-26.
- 27 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 53.
- 28 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 60.
- 29 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, pp. 16-17.
- 30 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 119.
- 31 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 206.
- 32 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 114.
- 33 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 18.

- 34 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 22.
- 35 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 40.
- 36 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 44.
- 37 Gordon Rohlehr, "The Ironic Approach," The Islands in Between, ed. Louis James (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 122.
- 38 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 134.
- 39 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 141.
- 40 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 149.
- 41 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 208.
- 42 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 211.
- 43 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 213.
- 44 Naipaul, Mystic Masseur, p. 35.
- 45 V.S. Naipaul, The Suffrage of Elvira (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), p. 24.
- 46 Naipaul, Elvira, p. 66.
- 47 Naipaul, Elvira, pp. 61-65.
- 48 Naipaul, Middle Passage, p. 78.
- 49 Naipaul, Elvira, p. 130.
- 50 Naipaul, Elvira, p. 206.

### Chapter III

It is clear that Naipaul's first three books allowed him to experiment not only with the art of writing but with his West Indian material as well. He concedes, "Those three books were an apprenticeship, if you like, then I was ready to write Mr. Biswas."<sup>1</sup> The West Indian society and the individual's arbitrary and perplexing relation to it have already been defined. The Hindu and Creole segments have been briefly sketched and their differences noted. The major themes of rootlessness, alienation and escape have all been touched on. But, like the characters in his early novels, all these features have only been partially developed and often betray the novice writer at work.

Mr. Biswas, on the other hand, is fully rounded and exists in a world of solid characters and exhaustive details. What Naipaul hints at in his early fiction, he improves and expands in this sweep of three generations. The stagnant, decaying Hindu world; the poverty and chaos of the Creole society; and the painful struggle of one man to rise above both, are all rendered with the authenticity that only historical truths will allow, and the artistry that only a truly talented writer can generate. This book is Naipaul's

most profound attempt to dramatise his own history and recreate his fragmented and disintegrated society. He admits as much:

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. 2

It is interesting to note how therapeutically he views his writing, yet a few West Indian critics such as Van Sertima, rigidly maintain that all Naipaul does is "insidiously flatter" the "sensitivity" of English critics.<sup>3</sup> Naipaul's intentions are always apparent to the competent reader, who will clearly see the progression from his three early novels to A House for Mr. Biswas.

As Kenneth Ramchand notes, A House for Mr. Biswas "is the West Indian novel of rootlessness par excellence"<sup>4</sup> and part of Naipaul's real achievement is that this theme works at a number of levels for various subjects simultaneously. The "house", of course, is the most powerful symbol in the novel and it represents, unobtrusively, the need for physical and spiritual shelter. The need is shared, as much by the Hindu and Creole society as by Biswas himself. By a blind accident of history,

they all find themselves "unnecessary and unaccommodated" and the novel charts their various painful and often futile attempts to redress this state.

The bastion of Hinduism "Hanuman House" is actually described in military terms: "Hanuman House stood like an alien white fortress . . . bulky, impregnable and blank. . . The side walls were windowless."<sup>5</sup> In Trinidad, it is not merely "alien" but crumbling. The "bulky, impregnable" walls are deceptive; they are not made of concrete at all, but hollow clay blocks.<sup>6</sup> The symbolism is astute. The Tulsis are vainly attempting to keep intact a culture which has been battered by transplantation and colonialism and which is now reduced to hollow rituals. While the "fortress" offers some protection to its older members who are incapable of dealing with the "new world" about them, it imprisons the young ones in an older world they have never known. The windowless walls of Hanuman House are "as difficult for the outsider to penetrate as for one of its members to escape. It protected and imprisoned, a static world, awaiting decay."<sup>7</sup> Significantly, the benevolent Hindu god after whom Hanuman House is named and whose statue appears on its roof is "whitewashed", and from the ground appears "slightly sinister".



This "whitewashed", distorted god of the Tulsis indicates the full extent to which their religion has been adulterated and "reduced to rites without philosophy."<sup>8</sup>

The "decay" from within is reinforced by erosion from without as aspects of the non-Hindu Trinidadian life are adopted by the Tulsi household. Mrs. Tulsi's two sons are sent to a Roman Catholic college and when the elder goes to sit his examination, he is laden with an odd assortment of religious charms--"with crucifix, sacred thread and beads, a mysterious sachet, a number of curious armlets, consecrated coins, and a lime in each trouser pocket."<sup>9</sup> Christianity, Hinduism and Obeah are strangely aligned in the hope of harnessing their individual and collective power. Echoes of the "crazily mixed-up Elvira" are certainly evident here.

It is only a matter of time before Hanuman House collapses under the dual force of decadence and modernity. The "House" which Biswas views as impregnable and overwhelming in his youth disintegrates and is deserted before he is forty. The attempt to regroup at "Shorthills" is a final but futile try to stave off a greater chaos and a more permanent dislocation. Predictably, "Shorthills" also collapses, then everyone becomes aware of a new and frightening disorder:

The widows were now almost frantic to have their children educated. There was no longer a Hanuman House to protect them; everyone had to fight for himself in a new world, the world Owad and Shekhar had entered, where education was the only protection. 10

They are all suddenly exposed and vulnerable. Significantly, the breakdown of the family organisation is marked by an almost total exodus to the city, Port-of-Spain. The abandonment of the familiar rural setting is a final surrender to the Creole world of Trinidad. The young must now be trained to survive and even succeed in this alien "new world".

The "childish multitude" of "readers and learners" feel the immediate results of their new state. They are housed and fed like cattle. Many have been separated from their parents and are now merely anonymous units under Basdai's frenzied supervision and exhortations, "Read! Learn! Learn! Read!"<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Tulsi's two sons are seen as proof of the success and security education can provide. But Owad and Shekhar are not as content and complete as their little emulators are led to believe.

It is true that Shekhar, the elder, marries into a very rich family primarily because he is thought to be "well educated". The concessions he makes, however, are enormous.

The brahminical obsession of retaining purity of caste in marriage is conveniently stifled; Shekhar's wife Dorothy, and her family are proud Presbyterians. A compromise is struck for the wedding ceremony: the marriage takes place in "a registry office". A further and more blatant departure occurs when Shekhar--

contrary to Hindu custom and the traditions of his family, did not bring his bride home, but left Hanuman House for good, no longer talking of suicide, to look after the lorries, cinema, land and filling station of his wife's family. 12

Since Hindu custom dictates that it is the wife who should live with and become an inferior member of her husband's family, Shekhar now finds himself in the same emasculated role as Biswas and the other poor husbands who married into the Tulsī clan. A greater disappointment becomes evident when the married Shekhar breaks down in envious tears after hearing of Owad's proposed trip "abroad to study, to become a doctor."<sup>13</sup> Marriage and money are poor substitutes for a thwarted ambition. Materially, Shekhar has gained much, culturally and psychologically, he has lost just as much. And "studies abroad" do not provide Owad with the integrity his elder brother so painfully lacks.

On his return to Trinidad as a medical doctor, Owad is as radically transformed as G. Ramsay Muir at the end of

The Mystic Masseur. Owad does not change his name but appears just as artificial and apish when he boasts about his political activities in England and mouths revolutionary jibberish to his awe-struck, credulous family. A clearer demonstration of his petty, self-centered mind is his heartless anubbing of Seth on the wharf<sup>14</sup> and his cruel belittling of Anand before the entire family.<sup>15</sup> His angry condemnation of what he terms Anand's "conceited selfishness and egocentricity" is pure irony. It takes him very little time to find his "right place" in society--

with his medical colleagues, a new caste separate from the society from which it had been released. He went south to Shekhar's. He played tennis at the India club. And, almost as suddenly as it had started, talk of the revolution ended. 16

He becomes part of the new elite, "released" from both the Hindu and Creole world of Trinidad. This group takes pride in its estrangement from the native population and deliberately imitates the foreign lifestyle it has been exposed to for a short time. Owad's marriage to Dorothy's cousin, "the Presbyterian violinist", and his departure from Port-of-Spain, mark a complete break with his former life. As with Shekhar, the pattern is repeated; success for Owad is only possible after a rejection of the past and a denial

of his native identity. What Robert Morris perceives as implicit in the success of Ganesh and Harbans holds true for Shekhar and Owad as well.

Naipaul's cool, cumulative ironies make clear, success bought at the expense of spirit and through an evasion that means fraudulence and betrayal must count--paradoxically--as the grandest of failures. The snobbism of the turncoats who succeed sounds the prelude to a cultural isolation far more damaging than the insulation of those who fail. 17

Yet the "readers and learners", Owad and Shekhar, and even Anand are caught in a wretched dilemma--to remain within the traditional fold is to stagnate and decay; to succeed in the "new world" is to betray one's origins and deny the very basis of one's personality. From this angle, the "West Indian futility"<sup>18</sup> is inescapable and Naipaul's world irredeemably absurd. But Mr. Biswas charts a third course, away from the Tulsis, yet within the bounds of an authentic self and his native Trinidad society. Biswas' quest for integrity and his ardent struggle to attain "accommodation and necessity" are the central movements of the novel.

Biswas' flawed and inauspicious birth renders his childhood a travesty of the title this phase of his life bears--  
"Pastoral". His entrance into the world "Six-fingered, and

born in the wrong way"<sup>19</sup> brings upon him prophecies of lechery and prodigality and strict prohibition "from trees and water".<sup>20</sup> He is relegated to the desert rather than the pasture. But in an odd manner, this part of his life is the only period of pastoral innocence and security he ever enjoys. Mohan, the child, along with the rickety calf in his charge, goes "for walks across damp fields of razor grass and along the rutted lanes between the cane fields."<sup>21</sup> He discovers a shallow stream, which, although forbidden to him, he frequents regularly to play with and admire the water, the weeds and the little black fishes. This was his private stream--"Its delights seemed endless."<sup>22</sup>

At this time even his future appears uneventfully calm and inevitable. His poor labouring parents, his elder brothers not yet twelve but already established on the estate as "buffalo-boys" and his only sister destined for early marriage all reinforce the logic of his own course. Because water is taboo to him, he would not join his brothers in the buffalo pond. Instead,

It was to be the grass gang for Mr. Biswas. Later he would move to the cane fields, to weed and clean and plant and reap; he would be paid by the task and his tasks would be measured out by a driver with a long bamboo rod.

And there he would remain. He would never become a driver or a weicher because he wouldn't be able to read. Perhaps, after many years, he might save enough to rent or buy a few acres where he would plant his own canes, which he would sell to the estate at a price fixed by them. 23

Like so many others, he will join this simple tide of unambitious lives until its course is run. Having never known much, they are satisfied with very little. But the macabre realisation of the midwife's prophecy, "this boy [Mohan] will eat up his own mother and father",<sup>24</sup> deals a shattering blow to the young hero's family and his "pastoral" future. Mr. Biswas, the elder, dies while trying to retrieve the non-existent corpse of his son. His own corpse becomes a substitute for Mohan's.

It is difficult to underline the occurrence without seeming to pander to the superstitious elements in Biswas' society which Naipaul clearly satirizes. The author, however, proceeds to actualize the midwife's prophecy. At his father's funeral, Mohan "could detect a new, raw smell in the air. There was also a strange taste in his mouth; he had never eaten meat, but now he felt he had eaten raw white flesh."<sup>25</sup> This is partly to illustrate the power of suggestion, but more importantly, to mark symbolically the release of Mohan from his father's way of life-- a release

which is only possible through the death or sacrifice of his father. Here, as in the Holy Communion, sacrifice and cannibalism are two interpretations of one symbolic act.

On the other hand, the absence of his father, the protector and pivot of the family, unleashes the heartless persecutions of a society which lacks a communal sympathy and core. The frightened, fractured family of Mr. Biswas cowers, submits and dissolves. His two elder brothers are sent to a distant relative "in the heart of the sugar estates; they were already broken into estate work and were too old to learn anything else."<sup>26</sup> Dehuti goes to live with her aunt Tara where she would be no more than a servant, but would at least be provided with a dowry when she was old enough to marry. The youngest, Mohan, lives with his mother at Pagotes "on Tara's bounty . . . but with some of Tara's husband's dependent relations."<sup>27</sup>

His dependence at this time is only matched by his homelessness as he moves from the "back trace" at Pagotes to Pundit Jairam, then to Bhandat's rumshop and once more back to Pagotes, before he even sees Shama and the Tulsis:

For the next thirty-five years  
he was to be a wanderer with no  
place he would call his own,  
with no family except that which



he was to attempt to create  
out of the engulfing world  
of the Tulsis. 28

And so his quest for a home becomes first of all a personal search for identity and purpose and secondly, a need to reinstate himself within the warm, integrated form of a family. The "house" symbolically accommodates both these needs.

His early years also nourish the romanticism which supports and sometimes makes ridiculous his later struggles with the Tulsis and life in Trinidad. He reads Hall Caine, Marie Corelli and Samuel Smiles and unconsciously assumes the part of the young, struggling hero who will triumph in the end:

He no longer simply lived. He  
had begun to wait, not only for  
love, but for the world to yield  
its sweetness and romance. He  
deferred all his pleasure in life  
until that day. 29

In this frame of mind, he sees and "falls in love with" Shama Tulsi. The juxtaposition of these two strands of Biswas' life is representative of Naipaul's brilliant use of irony in the novel. The materialistic, impersonal, crudely practical and "tough" world of the Tulsis is radically opposed to romance and the emancipation of the spirit.

Hanuman House, the symbol of the Tulsis, is actually built like a prison. The thick, windowless walls and narrow doors at first overawe, then frighten Biswas. Within the walls, he is struck on his first visit by the communal kitchen whose "doorway gaped black; soot stained the wall about it and the ceiling just above; so the blackness seemed to fill the kitchen like a solid substance."<sup>30</sup> This is the first "engulfing" void he faces and is sucked into. In panic, he reasons, "The world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He felt trapped."<sup>31</sup> In marrying Shama on Mrs. Tulsi's terms, Biswas submits to the deep Hindu humiliation of assuming the ritualistic female role by living with his wife's family. He joins the faceless group of poor "Tulsi husbands" who,

under Seth's supervision, worked on the Tulsi land, looked after the Tulsi animals, and served in the store. In return they were given food, shelter and a little money; their children were looked after; and they were treated with respect by people outside because they were connected with the Tulsi family. Their names were forgotten; they became Tulsis. 32

It is against this type of psychic emasculation and anonymity that Biswas quickly rebels.

Initially, his rebellion lacks purpose and thought. It is manifested in silly pranks as he makes up names for

various members of the household or parades his "flour-sack" shorts in defiance of taunts from the Tulsis children. His triumphs are useless and puerile and soon he realises how utterly worthless he continues to be:

All his joy at that had turned into disgust at his condition. The campaign against the Tulsis, which he had been conducting with such pleasure, now seemed pointless and degrading. Suppose, Mr. Biswas thought in the long room, suppose that at one word I could just disappear from this room, what would remain to speak of me? A few clothes, a few books. The shouts and thumps in the hall would continue; the puja would be done; in the morning the Tulsis store would open its doors.

He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him. 33

A house in which one is unnecessary negates one's very being. He is able to articulate, for the first time, his greatest fear--the void of nonentity. The house becomes a powerful symbol for him. By viewing its negative connotations, he is able to consciously consider its positive values. A house of his own will provide the privacy, security and sense of importance he needs so urgently.

His real triumph at Hanuman House is his refusal to lay down his spirit and sink into the barren world about him. His early struggles with the Tulsis, regardless of their uncertain aims and petty methods, are a vindication of the

spirit in the face of overpowering circumstances. Although, at this stage, Biswas is clearly immature, cowardly and often contemptuous, his central urge to take hold of his life, "to paddle his own canoe" is laudable and quite courageous. But merely recognising the need for independence does not make one so. And certainly true independence does not automatically follow a successful rebellion. The development of integrity involves more than physical emancipation. It involves the constant questioning of one's ability and limitations, constant retrogression and despair, and painful and often barely perceptible progress. This becomes increasingly clear to the reader and painfully apparent to Biswas after he is released from Hanuman House and wins his own "establishment", a smelly, bug-infested old shop at "The Chase".

The dilapidated old shop parallels Biswas' current psychological state--indeed, all the houses in which he lives symbolically reveal the nature of his development or despair. At The Chase, he is afraid to assume, for the first time, the full responsibility of his life. He observes, "How lonely the shop was! And how frightening!"<sup>34</sup> Yet it is he who feels utterly alone and afraid. A nomadic past characterised by perpetual dependence makes his first try at independence a futile, frightening experience. His six years at The Chase produce three children, but little else, for these were

"years so squashed by their own boredom and futility that at the end they could be comprehended in one glance."<sup>35</sup>

In comparison, he sees Hanuman House as "a world, more real than The Chase, and less exposed".<sup>36</sup> He now finds his former "prison" a "sanctuary". This sad but open admission of his continued inadequacy as a husband, father and householder is retrogressive, yet a necessary step towards integrity and independence. At The Chase, he also develops a number of creative interests to lessen the burden of the six weary years. He reads philosophy (with the emphasis on Stoicism), religion and "innumerable" novels. He paints and even attempts short-story writing. The subject of his paintings alludes to the real purpose of these new occupations:

He painted cool, ordered forest scenes, with gracefully curving grass, cultivated trees ringed with friendly serpents, and floors bright with perfect flowers; not the rotting, mosquito-infested jungle he could find within an hour's walk. 37

In the face of disorder and darkness, he vainly attempts to escape into the order which bright, peaceful scenes or theories on philosophy and religion readily provide. But always, "the rotting, mosquito-infested jungle", which is his present life is more immediately apparent. He is still unable to cope with

this "jungle", a fact no amount of art or philosophy can alter or obscure.

Having learnt from his tenure at The Chase how unprepared and vulnerable he is on his own, Biswas opts for a limited independence within Tulsidom but away from Hanuman House. He accepts the position as "driver" on a Tulsi estate at Green Vale. But he soon finds out that one must either accept entrapment along with the safety it provides or freedom and its painful testing and constant demands on the self. At The Chase, he used art to ease his depression; at Green Vale, his vision of "the house" reappears to support and motivate his life. It is necessary to view his total vision of "the house" before one can deduce the deep urge and the compelling necessity which give it birth:

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. 38

His house must be sensibly ordered, colourful and strong with scope for "future development". In short, it must have all the qualities he so consciously lacks in his own life. This description of Biswas' ideal house later becomes a poignant commentary on the two houses he builds and the one he eventually inhabits. As in his paintings of "ordered forest scenes", his vision of the house does not take into consideration, or maybe consciously ignores, local conditions and Biswas' own psychological fears and limitations. When he attempts to implement his plans and build a house at Green Vale, this becomes overwhelmingly clear.

The house is a monstrosity. Only one room is ever completed. Its crooked frame on twisted, crapaud pillars is capped with battered, punctured, corrugated iron sheets which soon transform their asphalt fillings into a myriad of "asphalt snakes hanging from the roof".<sup>39</sup> These are not the "friendly serpents" of Biswas' paintings, but black, ominous creatures who begin to darken and oppress his dreams. At this point, Naipaul deliberately correlates the frightening, incomplete house with his hero's psychological state.

Biswas feels himself naked, inadequate and exposed, as displaced and lost as the "boy leaning against an earth house that had no reason for being there, under the dark

falling sky, a boy who didn't know where the road . . .  
went."<sup>40</sup> The full impact of this man's fragmented past  
and disordered life mires his spirit and confuses his mind.  
Animate as well as inanimate objects threaten and terrify  
his days and nights and all he sees of his future is a  
frightful void. A complete nervous breakdown is imminent.  
Naipaul achieves a brilliant climax as the growing storm in  
Biswas' mind erupts in unison with thunder, lightning and an  
actual deluge which cracks both the incomplete house and man.

In his second attempt to soar above his circumstances,  
Biswas ends like the winged ant struck impotent by the storm,  
"its wings collapsed and now a burden on its wormlike body".<sup>41</sup>  
Reduced to the naked essentials of "unaccommodated man" that  
"poor, bare, forked animal"<sup>42</sup>, Biswas welcomes and appreciates,  
as he has never done before, the warmth, society and safety of  
Hanuman House. He is now prepared to rely on this safety in  
order to free himself temporarily from a responsibility he is  
unable to assume at this time: "His children would never  
starve; they would always be sheltered and clothed. It didn't  
matter if he were at Green Vale or Arwacas, if he were alive  
or dead."<sup>43</sup> Although he overestimates the power of Hanuman  
House as he had once oversimplified its hostilities, this line  
of argument clears his conscience and literally frees him for  
a new "beginning": "He was going out into the world, to test



it for its power to frighten. The past was counterfeit, a series of cheating accidents. Real life, and its especial sweetness, awaited; he was still beginning."<sup>44</sup>

With typical naivety, Biswas primes himself for a fresh confrontation with his society and life. Unencumbered by wife, family or the Tulsis, he strikes out for the city, Port-of-Spain.

It is a bold move, positive and defiant in spite of his recent harrowing attempt at independence. This resilience and constant faith in the "sweetness of life" is Biswas' greatest asset. It steels him against the dark despair which perpetually threatens him, and it is only in the last few languid years of his life that he loses his confidence in the romanticism which propelled many of his active years.

None of his years is more active and prosperous than those spent in Port-of-Spain as a reporter. He gains prominence, importance, respect and, for the first time, the approval of the Tulsis. His future appears assuredly bright and fruitful. He is reconciled and reunited with Shama and his children, and Mrs. Tulsi offers him the distinct honour of sharing her Port-of-Spain residence. The house is modern, solid and spacious and he and his family are to have "the run of the house" except for the rooms held by Owad and Mrs. Tulsi.

Biswas views this as "the climax of his current good fortune".<sup>45</sup> What he fails to consider is that the town house, like all the other houses he has lived in so far, except the asphalt-snaked, incomplete one at Green Vale, belongs to the Tulsis. And while he is able to provide for his family materially, he has again made himself dependent on the Tulsis for shelter. The symbolic significance of this fact becomes clearer the longer he remains in the new Tulsi house.

For more than four years, he enjoys the false security of a house he does not own and a job which is not as purposeful or satisfying as he had hoped. Sharing out the Sentinel dollar-tokens as the Scarlet Pimpernel or hunting after Trinidad's shortest, tallest, fattest and thinnest men could hardly be interpreted as the "nobler purpose" which "awaited him, even in this limiting society."<sup>46</sup> The departure of Mr. Burnett, his patron at the Sentinel, reminds Biswas of his own vulnerability in his job and in the Tulsi house he shares. The old dread of the inexorable pull of the "void" re-emerges. The innate insecurity he struggles with all his life resumes its strangle-hold. He sees with much clarity that "The past could not be ignored; it was never counterfeit; he carried it within himself."<sup>47</sup> The need is to reconcile, not destroy the past; to accept its lessons and

avoid its errors. But Biswas repeats that which has always thwarted his growth. He rejoins the Tulsi clan for the dissipating "Shorthills Adventure". He is caught up once again in the bitter rivalries and petty jealousies of a family made desperate by the compelling demands of the encroaching Creole society. The house he builds here symbolises the whole "Shorthills Adventure": "The house was not painted. It stood red-raw in its unregulated green setting, not seeming to invite habitation so much as decay."<sup>48</sup> This house, like the other two in which he attempts to declare his independence, is ravaged by fire. The fact is significant if one is prepared to view Biswas in the redemptive light of the phoenix constantly arising from the ashes of his disappointments to begin another cycle of struggles towards security and wholeness. But he is a blundering phoenix. Immediately on his release from the Shorthills "interlude", Biswas and his family return to the overflowing, chaotic and aggressively competitive Tulsi household in Port-of-Spain.

The vivid correlation between his own lack of accommodation and that of the Hindu and Creole world of Trinidad becomes powerfully apparent during this period of his life. As he daily escapes the "childish multitude" haphazardly herded under the Tulsi house, he is forced by his assignment to the "Deserving Destitute Fund" into the equally crowded and futile existence

of the Creole society:

The Sentinel could not have chosen a better way of terrifying Mr. Biswas . . . Day after day he visited the mutilated, the defeated, the futile and the insane living in conditions not far removed from his own: in suffocating rotting wooden kennels, in sheds of box-board, canvas and tin, in dark and sweating concrete caverns . . . horror increased by the litters of children, most of them illegitimate, with navels projecting inches out of their bellies, as though they had been delivered with haste and disgust. 49

It is against this poverty-stricken, unhoused, unnecessary world that Biswas' final achievement of his own house in Sikkim Street must be viewed.

The restless, aspiring spirit of Biswas refuses to cower under the pompous, tyrannical presence of the newly returned, foreign-educated Owad Tulsi. He allows neither the son nor the mother the satisfaction of seeing him vanquished:

"You curse the day," Mrs. Tulsi said.  
"Coming to us with no more clothes than you could hang on a nail."  
This wounded Mr. Biswas. He could not reply at once. "I am giving you notice," he repeated at last.  
"I am giving YOU notice," Mrs. Tulsi said.  
"I gave it to you first." 50

The humour does not lessen the absurd dignity of this plucky little man who, when faced with eviction and no place to go, still attempts to assume control of his lot. He plunges

into overwhelming debt as he buys an overpriced, imperfectly built house--"The staircase was dangerous; the upper floor sagged; there was no backdoor; most of the windows didn't close; one door could not open."<sup>51</sup> But two points are immensely more important than the condition of the house: the first is that Biswas does provide shelter for himself and his family when they most need it and, by having his own house, he rises above both the crowded, stultifying Tulsis and the "defeated, futile" Creole world. The house is truly symbolic of Biswas' personality--often inadequate and faulty but in a society so obviously limited and poor, an acquisition of enormous value.

He is now able to surround himself with his family and "the gatherings of a lifetime"--furniture and household articles representing various stages of his life. To have them all within the security and warmth of a single house and that house his own, are of monumental importance to Biswas. Such an achievement justifies a lifetime of struggle:

How terrible it would have been,  
at this time, to be without it  
[the house]: to have died among  
the Tulsis, amid the squalor of  
that large, disintegrating and  
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. 52

It is a triumph against the stagnation and backwardness of Trinidad; it is a victory over the despair which insecurity and rootlessness have bred; and, with its Learian echoes, it is success on a mythical scale where puny man struggling against the perverse, stormy currents of life does find shelter and a purpose for living.

But in relation to the West Indian environment, Biswas' triumph can only remain abstract and limited. The security that his flawed, ugly house provides effectively isolates him from any communication with his society. Of course, this is what he consciously strives for--escape from the disorder and fragmentation which spawned him. In an unfortunate cycle, however, such a past has left him inadequately prepared educationally, financially and psychologically to draw any "sweetness" from life once he has achieved his house--"his enthusiasm, unsupported by ambition, faded".<sup>53</sup> Without enthusiasms his life also fades.

At forty-six, his battles are over. This cultural orphan, this historyless man has achieved all the success his limited talent and sterile environment will allow. He must now give way to his children and await their successes:

"There was nothing Mr. Biswas could do but wait. Wait for Anand. Wait for Savi. Wait for the five years to come to an

end. Wait. Wait."<sup>54</sup> Wait for death! It is a tragic, stunning testimony of life in a rootless, disordered society that the achievement of a single, real victory drains the life-blood of the soul. Biswas dies enjoying the company of his daughter, Savi, and admiring the mystery and romance of life he was never destined to share: "The shade was flowering again; wasn't it strange that a tree which grew so quickly could produce flowers with such a sweet scent?"<sup>55</sup>

It is by no means a happy ending. While his hopes for his children may be justified in Savi, the son who was closest to him, Anand, is morose and moody. He has inherited the psychic fragmentation which frustrates and darkens many of his father's active years. With this ending, the author maintains an unsentimental view of his hero. Biswas' symbolic victory in finally gaining his house does not alter the many limitations his past and his unaccommodating society have placed on him, and will place on his descendants. Even when the material conditions have changed, real integrity still evades the rootless East Indian, West Indian. In Anand's character are the seeds for Naipaul's exploration of the West Indian who has achieved educational and financial success but who is still

psychologically burdened by his broken, inglorious heritage. The flowering is The Mimic Men, an earnest, frenzied search for wholeness and order.



FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER III

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#### Chapter IV

From as far back as his first book, Miguel Street, Naipaul has been writing of the many types of "mimic men" in the West Indies. There were the idlers and ineffectual dreamers of Miguel Street; the ambitious, untalented yet ludicrously successful Pundit Ganesh in an even less talented, more ridiculous society; the opportunistic and ignorant Candidate Harbans in a greedy, superstitious, chaotic constituency; and the insecure Biswas, poor and displaced from childhood, seeking shelter in an unsympathetic, decaying Hindu world and a poverty-stricken, spiritually starved, Creole society. In The Mimic Men, however, Singh is not handicapped by poverty, ignorance, a lack of natural talent or the persecution of a grasping Hindu family. He has gained the material success, public eminence and apparent independence that Ganesh, Harbans and Biswas all longed to have. In addition, because of his university education and his exposure to a more sophisticated society in London, he is better able to recognise and articulate the many ills of his native background. But his clearly superior status and acute consciousness do not make him any less vulnerable to the subtle, yet overpowering consequences of his psychologically fragmented and

confusing past. In fact, his ability to rationalise his own condition sharpens rather than reduces his total alienation from his environment and his final rejection of an active life.

The Mimic Men, however, is more than a mere elaboration of Naipaul's previous West Indian novels: it is a profound re-enactment of the growth and nature of the East Indian, West Indian psyche and its reaction to the three cultures, Indian, Creole and English, which influence it. In the process, Kripal Singh, the narrator, confessor and visionary, comments on power, politics, social and racial interactions, sex, education, displacement, isolation and identity as experienced by the ex-colonial. Each topic is used to illuminate a facet of Singh's mind. Because of their intricate entanglement, however, Kripal's attitude to any one of these subjects is often influenced by his experience of another. This book, therefore, more than any other work of Naipaul, offers a compact, panoramic view of a displaced New World inhabitant, shown through his eyes, but often allowing an insight far deeper than his own.

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The non-linear, disjointed narrative structure of the novel, significantly reflects the narrator's inability to connect logically the various episodes of his life. Paradoxically,

he undertakes the writing of this narrative with the hope of creating the very logic and order that his structure denies. He confesses that "in that dream of writing I was attracted less by the act and the labour than by the calm and the order which the act would have implied."<sup>1</sup> The only order he does achieve in the end is the static, sterile state of absolute detachment from life.

On the other hand, the active phase of his life is coloured by a bitterness which is deeply rooted:

We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new. 2

Singh's caustic declaration applies not only to himself, but to his many compatriots mentioned in his narrative. It speaks of a fraud perpetuated from childhood, indeed, ingrained in the educational system which separated the school from the community it served as absolutely as dreams are separated from reality. For many of these students school is "a private hemisphere" where the "secret" of their background and everyday existence is never revealed. In fact, while in school, "We denied the landscape and the people we could see out of open doors and windows, we who took apples to the teacher and wrote

essays about visits to temperate farms."<sup>3</sup> Their English education thus openly encourages their fantasies of life in another land since it never acknowledges or prepares them for life in the land of their birth. The damaging schizophrenia which this produces often creates painfully embarrassing situations for these little scholars. On a school outing, Hok, whose name indicates Chinese ancestry but whose mother is Negro, is ashamed to greet her as she passes by. When forced to do so by the teacher, he breaks down and cries:

It wasn't only that the mother  
was black and of the people,  
though that was a point; it was  
that he had been expelled from  
that private hemisphere of  
fantasy where lay his true life.  
The last book he had been reading  
was The Heroes. What a difference  
between the mother of Perseus and  
that mother! 4

It is the deep, irreconcilable conflict between "learning" and life; between "the gold of the imagination" and "the lead of reality".<sup>5</sup> Singh closely identifies with Hok in this situation; "Hok had dreams like mine, was probably also marked, and lived in imagination far from us, far from the island on which he, like my father, like myself, had been shipwrecked."<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, many of Singh's friends "lived in imagination" far from Isabella; Haq is in Ancient China, Eden is Lord Jim, Browne is in Africa, Deschampsneufs paints on the Laurentian



slopes and Singh himself is a leader of Aryan Warriors on the plains of Central Asia. The notion that each has been cheated of his true destiny because of a cruel twist of history is a common urge for these fantasies which psychologically isolate each boy.

In these formative years, their attitude towards the West Indies solidifies. Nothing here is authentic or worthwhile; everything is ridiculous and shameful. Intimacy is dreaded because it can only expose the narrow, barren world they long to escape. As Singh breaches the privacy of Browne's home, he immediately realises that "it was more than an interior I had entered. I felt I had had a glimpse of the prison of the spirit in which Browne lived, to which he awakened everyday."<sup>7</sup> It is from a similar "prison" that Singh resolves to escape, "to abandon the shipwrecked island and all on it, and to seek my chieftainship in that real world . . . I was consciously holding myself back for the reality which lay elsewhere,"<sup>8</sup> --in England or France or Canada, "in Liège in a traffic jam, on the snow slopes of the Laurentians, was the true, pure world."<sup>9</sup> Education at "Isabella Imperial" is therefore not a preparation for life in Isabella but a chance to win a scholarship and enter the "real world": "this meant studies abroad, a profession, independence, the past

wiped out."<sup>10</sup> The goal is clearly stated by naively conceived. The unschooled Biswas learns his lesson much better than the scholarship winner Singh: "The past could not be ignored; it was never counterfeit; he carried it within himself."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the deep psychological damage that must result from one's wish to annihilate one's native character will remain a major obstacle to any future development or hope of integrity. In assessing the sub-conscious urges of both Eden and Browne, Singh asks the very pertinent question: "How could anyone, wishing only to abolish himself, go beyond a statement of distress?"<sup>12</sup> Ironically, this question is equally relevant to Singh as it is to Eden and Browne. It is also appropriate to most of the students produced by the "famous" Isabella Imperial school. When one considers that the leaders of Isabella's business and political life come from schools such as this, the perpetuation of a general inferiority feeling towards anything or anyone native to Isabella is understandable. Singh's characteristic declaration that "To be born on an island like Isabella, an obscure New World transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder"<sup>13</sup> is both literally and psychologically true.

A point which deepens the sense of disorder and dislocation is Singh's East Indianness. He constantly

refers to himself as the "picturesque Asiatic"--the intruder in the ancient struggle between master and slave, Deschampsneuf and Browne. Taking on the historical role of his race in the West Indies, Singh refuses to identify with either group and as a result is further isolated. It is with the hope of finding order, reality and self (the three are actually the same) that Singh departs for London, bidding goodbye forever, he hopes, to "this encircling, tainted sea"<sup>14</sup> on which he has been "shipwrecked" so long.

It takes him only a few months in London, his "fantasy city", to realise that there is an even "greater disorder" here and a more painful "shipwreck" of lives. In Mr. Shylock's boarding-house where he stays, he meets a multitude of lonely immigrants in "a conglomeration of private cells".<sup>15</sup> The plight of the Maltese housekeeper, Lieni, abandoned with her illegitimate child yet always able to play the part of the "smart London girl" is typical of the sophisticated veneer hiding a greater panic. Taking the lead from Lieni, Singh develops the fatuous theory that "We become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others."<sup>16</sup> Since Lieni is willing to accept him as "the dandy, the extravagant colonial", he earnestly undertakes the part. He develops in this way a further level of mimicry which he takes quite seriously on his return to Isabella.

He continues his search for order and "the flowering, the extension of myself" away from London: "From room to room I moved, from district to district."<sup>17</sup> Like a lost soul in search of a resting place, this rootless, homeless progeny of the New World wanders on. But he is really a body in search of a soul; a life in pursuit of an authentic identity; a personality in need of approval and reassurance. No landscape, except of the mind, can satisfy these needs; no order, unless created within, will give direction to such a life. With sickening despair, the futility of Singh's search becomes apparent:

The crash was coming, but I could see this only when the crash had come and when the search for order had been abandoned for something more immediate and more reassuring. And the need for reassurance was constant. I began, as the saying is, to frequent prostitutes. 18

The movement is from the sublime to the shabbily mundane-- yet there is a crucial connection. The prostitutes, like London, hold out to Singh the false promise of fulfillment. It is significant that he is often disgusted and humiliated by these sexual adventures. They lead in the same direction as his earlier quest, "deeper down into emptiness".<sup>19</sup> What this psychological cripple (the word play on Kripal is appropriate and quite deliberate) does not realise, but what

the reader can easily grasp is Singh's perpetual need for a crutch. London, childhood fantasies, prostitutes, Sandra, business, politics and finally Hindu philosophy all fulfill the same function.

Singh's relationship with Sandra most clearly demonstrates the depth and urgency of this need. At the end of his disappointment with London, he discovers Sandra: "To me, drifting about the big city that had reduced me to futility, she was all that was positive."<sup>20</sup> He makes no secret of the reason he "attaches" himself to her:

I had such confidence in her rapaciousness, such confidence in her as someone who could come to no harm--a superstitious reliance on her, which was part of the strength I drew from her . . . it seemed to me that to attach myself to her was to acquire that protection which she offered. 21

But it is more a "protection" he needs than one which Sandra offers. If he were not so blinded by his own weakness, he would have noticed that Sandra also seeks "protection and assurance"--"Ahe had no community, no group, and had rejected her family."<sup>22</sup> She is, in fact, homeless too. She looks upon marriage to Singh as an escape from the "common" fate<sup>23</sup> which awaited her in her own society. Her determination to be free of the danger of that commonness which encircled her, "her

gift of the phrase" and a characteristic English composure, exaggerate her independence and magnify her real strength. Singh, however, with childish insecurity seeks to be comforted by her rather than comfort her. His obsession with her breasts<sup>24</sup> and indeed, with women's breasts in general<sup>25</sup> significantly follows from this childish insecurity. Sandra's offering of her "painted" breasts to him as a palliative to his "profoundly tragic" thoughts as they begin living together<sup>26</sup> seems a gesture of mother to child rather than woman to lover. Incidentally, the painted nipples are Sandra's own concessions to fantasy. She discontinues this habit after her disappointment with Isabella, Singh and maybe life itself. With Sandra's "protection" and "luck", Singh decides to escape from London "and it was escape to what I had so recently sought to escape from"<sup>27</sup>--Isabella.

His return to Isabella begins a phase of his life which he calls "the period between my preparation for life and my withdrawal from it, that period in parenthesis, when I was most active."<sup>28</sup> It is the period in which he becomes the successful businessman and then the "dandy" socialist politician. But these careers are no more than a continuation of the role-playing he is attracted to even as a child when he discovers "many were willing to take me for what I said I was

. . . It was like a revelation of wholeness."<sup>29</sup> Only much later does he realise how poor and deceptive a substitute for "wholeness" this is. In London, however, with Lieni's encouragement, he renews this attitude and on his return to Isabella is immediately attached to a group with similar pretensions: "The men were professional, young, mainly Indian, with a couple of local whites and coloured; they had all studied abroad and married abroad."<sup>30</sup> In the West Indies, the word "abroad" is purely magical, carrying with it depths of richness and mystery which the untravelled native worships and which the "returnee" wears like a badge of honour. But within their own group they scarcely deceive themselves: "The talk is a bit too loud, too hearty, too aggressive or too defensive; these people are acting, overdoing domesticity and the small details, over-stressing the fullness of their own lives."<sup>31</sup> It is the perfect description of the colonial middle class. They are mimicking, from memory, their counterparts in the foreign societies they visited.

This volatile shallow group cannot give Singh and Sandra the anchorage they need. While the young couple is initially dazzled and flattered by the attention paid them, especially after the enormous success of "Crippleville", they soon become bored with their own roles and the inanity of those about

them. In addition, Singh now recognises Sandra's personal insecurity--"She told me she had awakened in the night with a feeling of fear, a simple fear of place, of the absent world."<sup>32</sup> Her dislocation is as frightening and acute as his own. They had indeed "come together for self-defense."<sup>33</sup> Such an admission can only dissolve their individual illusions and bring to an end a fragile union. Their "Roman House" becomes the symbol of their now futile relationship: "We had both lost interest in it [the house], but we both kept this secret from the other."<sup>34</sup> Significantly, the break with Sandra and his middle class friends comes at the "housewarming" party. He abandons his extravagantly gaudy mansion to his equally pompous and wasteful friends. His "deep, blind, damaging anger" is as much against their pointless behaviour as against his own. He seeks consolation at the ruins of an old slave plantation. The trip from his "Roman House" to the slave plantation is symbolic. It marks the chasm between the present and the past which he is unable to bridge. It is also a grim reminder that the grandeur of his present home and life is an ineffectual cover for the origins he is unwilling or unable to acknowledge. It anticipates his final move in search of wholeness and his fight against absolute despair. He enters politics on the side of the descendents of the slaves.



His isolation after Sandra's departure and his rejection of the middle class world set him aimlessly adrift. Browne makes the initial suggestion that Singh should use the notoriety of his father and his won reputation as a businessman to enter active politics. The obvious incongruity of the folk leader and the middle class businessman combined in one person disturbs no one and Singh is immediately accepted and loudly endorsed as a nationalist politician.

But it takes him a very short time to realise that he could never really be part of Isabellan politics; he could never be "committed to a series of interiors I never wanted to enter."<sup>35</sup> The true depth of his alienation from Isabella becomes apparent even to himself:

A man, I suppose, fights only when he hopes, when he has a vision of order, when he feels strongly there is some connexion between the earth on which he walks and himself. But there was my vision of a disorder which it was beyond any one man to put right. There was my sense of wrongness, beginning with the stillness of that morning of return when I looked out on the slave island and tried to pretend it was mine. There was my deep sense of intrusion which deepened as I felt my power to be more a matter of words. So defiantly, in my mind, I asserted my character as intruder, the picturesque Asiatic born for other landsapes. 36

Drama and fantasy are moulded into one but they originate from a deeper source, Singh's latent East Indian tradition.

This tradition is encountered in various forms in Naipaul's novels. It provides Ganesh with a religious guise for his "mysticism"; it encourages superstition and ignorance in Elvira; it is the greatest threat to Biswas' individuality and, in The Mimic Men, it is the subtle propagator of fantasies. In every case, it is a divisive force which either separates the East Indian from his native West Indian society or causes a deep rift within the individual consciousness of the East Indian character.

Singh is affected in both ways. As a youth, he wills himself not to share the distress "of those thousands who, from their fields, could look forward to nothing but servitude and days in the sun."<sup>37</sup> As a politician, purportedly representing these very people, his stand does not change. But now the withdrawal is complete. He is unable to share the people's plight. He relies on his "sense of drama" to carry him through his role as a politician.

In this regard, however, Singh is not alone. The Chief Minister and his boyhood friend, Browne, is equally affected by an "ambivalent attitude towards the subject he most exploited;

the distress of his race."<sup>38</sup> Like Singhe, Browne also plays a part--"on the public platform . . . we each became our character."<sup>39</sup> The other politicians and politics in general on Isabella are lightly touched on but the tone is obvious--unreality, ineffectuality, futility. For Isabella, so totally dependent on foreign capital, goods and values, "no power was real which did not come from the outside."<sup>40</sup> These men with the mere trappings of power are "mimic men", overestimating the parts they play. These are the puppet politicians who talk of nationalism and nationalisation, but who can attempt neither without foreign sanction or participation.

They can only take themselves seriously if they believe in the parts they play. Singh can no longer believe in his: "For four years drama had supported me; now, abruptly drama failed."<sup>41</sup> He finds this an irrevocable loss, the collapse of another prop, one step closer to absolute disillusionment and despair. His political career effectively ends even before he fails on his mission to London on behalf of his government. This trip is important, however, for two significant encounters.

The first is his affair with Lady Stella, the "fairy-tale" lover, for whom the sex act, although involving two persons, is essentially "a private frenzy". It is the prime substantiation of the fantasy world where every action, regardless of how

intimately it involves others, is experienced alone. Singh has known this world for a long time. In Stella, he sees himself, "pathetically frenzied". First drama, than fantasy deserts him: "it was time to go, to leave the city of fantasy; to leave the fairyland of the hotel, no longer fairyland."<sup>42</sup> He makes another departure and experiences a greater sense of desolation.

The final withdrawal occurs in his bizarre encounter with the fat prostitute.<sup>43</sup> In a moment of neurotic revelation he realises that the prostitute offers no more than mounds of "helpless flesh". He is horrified and enlightened, "Through poor hideous flesh to have learned about flesh; through flesh to have gone beyond flesh."<sup>44</sup> Both imaginative and physical impotence overtake him.

On his return to Isabella, he is able to test this numbness of body and spirit. His political overthrow is borne with resignation and utter passivity. He also finds that "I soon ceased to react to the sight of my name; it was no longer something I could attach to myself."<sup>45</sup> Neither is he affected by the bloody racial conflict which erupts about him and because of him. A supporter who seeks consolation is offered instead a "ride with me to the end of the empty world."<sup>46</sup> He retreats or progresses into the "final emptiness".

The movement can be taken both ways. From childhood, he dreams of escaping his "shipwrecked" life in the West Indies by riding to the end of a flat, empty world with his Asian ancestors. It is an early, subconscious urge to destroy his past and abolish himself. Naipaul admits to the darkness of this image: "It's a very private image, not at all political. Just a sense of loss and rootlessness and despair --a very consoling image for these things."<sup>47</sup> Its consolation lies in the horseman's dual goal of escape and extinction.

On the other hand, all of Singh's adult life is spent in a futile search for order and meaning as he changes landscapes and roles with continuing disappointment. He seeks support from people and professions but is incapable of true involvement with either because he is so intent on avoiding "self-violation". The paradox here is that the "self" which he nurses and shelters is the very cause for his failure to relate to life in Isabella or London and is his greatest obstacle to true extension and growth. His successive withdrawals set a pattern which can only lead to the total rejection of all activity and effort. Such an absolute detachment from life leads in no other direction than "the final emptiness".

The child and the adult, therefore, working from two

separate points of departure, arrive at a common station. But maybe they are not separate at all and maybe Singh is right, at least about himself, when he says, "each person looks down into himself and finds only weakness, sees the boy or child he was and has never ceased to be."<sup>48</sup> The adult Singh never escapes the child's insecurity and lack of identifiable foundation. The damage and pain of the infant injure and deface the efforts of the man. From disorder to a rejection of all order is a simple and cyclical journey. London, the sought-after, "ideal landscape" becomes "the final emptiness".<sup>49</sup> In this light, it is of as little consequence as the "shipwrecked island" Isabella. What Singh views as an ultimate religious and philosophical attitude, rigid detachment, is no more than total surrender to the despair and rootlessness which dogged much of his conscious existence.

He glibly, but fallaciously, argues his final state:

I have lived through attachment and freed myself from one cycle of events. It gives me joy to find that in so doing I have also fulfilled the fourfold division of life prescribed by our Aryan ancestors. I have been student, householder and man of affairs, recluse. 50

The argument falls apart precisely because he has been successful in none of "the fourfold division of life".

A nervous breakdown aptly concludes his restless, frenzied student days; an empty house and a cold kitchen are fitting symbols for the period as "householder"; constant failure to serve those whose "affairs" he manages marks his tenure as "man of affairs"; and, as a "recluse", his meditative powers fixed upon an eater's ability to define and separate the "garbage" on his plate is a significant representation of the pointlessness of his own thoughts. Like his father, Gurudeva; he reverts to the mythology of his ancestors to soothe and anaesthetize the pain which rootlessness induces.

He also views his writing as a facet of his detachment. It becomes for him "an extension" of his life, offering, like the hotel, "order, sequence, regularity"--in short, the solidity he has always craved. But he is again deceived. His writing is initially conceived,

to give expression to the restlessness, the deep disorder, which the great explorations, the overthrow in three continents of established social organizations, the unnatural bringing together of peoples who could achieve fulfillment only within the security of their own societies and the landscapes hymned by their ancestors, it was my hope to give partial expression to the restlessness which this great upheaval has brought about . . . But this work will not now be written by me; I am too much a victim of that restlessness which was to have been my subject. 51

The fact is, because he is a "victim", the story of his life becomes a powerful and gripping expression of "the restlessness and deep disorder" he has inherited from history. It is a much more revealing and vivid account of the consequences of empire-building and exploitation than any chronological documentation of events can give. It shows, through a single member, how the physical and cultural dislocation of a people can lead to cultural, psychological and actual rootlessness. In The Mimic Men, Singh succeeds in the most dramatic and elaborate fashion in telling the East Indian, West Indian tale of rootlessness and fragmentation which Naipaul sought to give expression to in each of his previous West Indian novels. This success, however, makes him no less a permanent "victim" than the other protagonists.

Singh actually ends up in a "sanitarium" for the unattached and the homeless:

We are people who for one reason or another have withdrawn, from our respective countries, from the city where we find ourselves, from our families. . . . It comforts me to think that in this city alone there must be hundreds and thousands like ourselves. 52

Naipaul begins to hint at a rootlessness which is becoming increasingly widespread, one which compels him to widen and deepen his vision on this theme. He has, by this time in



his career, fully articulated the West Indian version. But he cannot overlook its similarity to and involvement with the growing feeling of isolation experienced by persons from many differing cultures. The West Indian exile, Singh, finds himself among an international assortment of exiles who also feel they have "lived through attachment" and have "freed" themselves from "one cycle of events". They have all opted for life "in a free state". Naipaul's next book, with this phrase as its title, is both an epilogue to his West Indian novels and a startling statement on the new dimensions of an old theme.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER IV

- 1  
V.S. Naipaul, The Mimic Men (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), p. 32.
- 2  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 146.
- 3  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 95.
- 4  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 97.
- 5  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 10.
- 6  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 97.
- 7  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 150.
- 8  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 118.
- 9  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 146.
- 10  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 148.
- 11  
V.S. Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), p. 316.
- 12  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 151.
- 13  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 118.
- 14  
Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 179.

- 15 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 18.
- 16 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 20.
- 17 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 30.
- 18 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 28.
- 19 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 28.
- 20 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 45.
- 21 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 47.
- 22 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 44.
- 23 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 46.
- 24 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 43.
- 25 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 25.
- 26 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 48.
- 27 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 31.
- 28 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 32.
- 29 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 113.
- 30 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 55.
- 31 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 63.

- 32 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 69.
- 33 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 69.
- 34 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 73.
- 35 Naipaul, Mimic Men, pp. 188-189.
- 36 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 207.
- 37 Naipaul, Mimic Men, pp. 144-145.
- 38 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 185.
- 39 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 196.
- 40 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 206.
- 41 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 221.
- 42 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 232.
- 43 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 235-237.
- 44 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 237.
- 45 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 239.
- 46 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 241.

47 V.S. Naipaul as quoted in Gordon Rohler, "The Creative Writer and West Indian Society", Kaie--The Literary Vision of Carifesta, No. 11 (August 1973), pp. 69-70.

- 48 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 200.
- 49 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 8.
- 50 Naipaul, Mimic Men, pp. 250-251.
- 51 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 32.
- 52 Naipaul, Mimic Men, p. 247.

## Chapter V

In a Free State is the culmination of Naipaul's work on rootlessness. It offers the grandest, most multi-faceted vision of this theme he has ever developed. Although the book consists of five apparently separate pieces, a reading of the whole immediately reveals a harmony of structure, style, content and theme skillfully accomplished. The five parts, three stories sandwiched between two fragments of a travel journal, are consciously arranged. The three stories are set off by the two extracts from the author's travel diary. The exasperating experiences in these fragments reveal the mood, intention and even the content of the longer pieces. Everyone is uncomfortably adrift, actually and psychologically. The author is among a motley array of thoughtless, unaccommodating tourists, first on the Mediterranean Sea and later on the sandy sea of the Egyptian desert. Santosh has lost his way in the confusion and chaos of Washington. The two West Indian brothers have also lost the thread of their existence and become vegetables in London. And Bobby and Linda are frighteningly alone on an African highway surrounded by a hostile native environment. The book depicts a world which has lost the assurance of geographical and cultural boundaries. In fact, none of the

protagonists is in his native setting: the Indian is in America, the West Indian in England and the English in Africa. The West Indian author is himself in Egypt.

The West Indian piece, "Tell me who to kill", is literally placed at the centre of this book--an extract from a travel journal and a story precede it, and a story and an extract from a travel journal follow it. This arrangement is deliberate and significant. The West Indian story sets the scene for and poses the final question in Naipaul's exploration of rootlessness--"who is to blame?" From a narrow West Indian base, the question grows in implication and intention, enveloping and being itself enveloped by the two other stories which speak of the uprooted world. Read in this way, the movement of In a Free State parallels the unfolding of this thesis. It shows how an artistic vision develops and grows; how a regional panic becomes a universal pain.

"Tell me who to kill" seeks to affix blame for the shame, spoilage and despair which two West Indian brothers share. In this compact and compelling short story, the whole West Indian drama is played out. The anonymous narrator is affected by the "ambition and shame" which all Naipaul's protagonists experience, and which the West Indian environment

seems to produce simultaneously. In a subtle twist to the usual tale of escape, this narrator seeks a vicarious release through the emancipation of his younger brother, Dayo, who becomes a personification of beauty in a harsh and hostile world:

The beauty in that room his baby  
brother is like a wonder to me,  
and I can't bear the thought of  
losing it. I can't bear the  
thought of the bare room and the  
wet coming through the gaps in  
the boards and the black mud  
outside and the smell of the  
smoke and the mosquitoes and  
the night coming. 1

To protect and nurture this "beauty" becomes his personal mission. His own "ordinary" life is sacrificed so that his brother can "break away" from a stifling society and an illiterate, poverty-stricken family background.

The ensuing episodes of flight to London, effort, disappointment and pain are too familiar in Naipaul's fiction to bear repetition. Like so many others, the two brothers end up lost and homeless with "nowhere to go".<sup>2</sup> What is new, however, is the seething rage of the narrator which is even worse than Singh's despair since it finds no release and is forced to lacerate its producer constantly. No one can miss the blind, impotent hatred which pervades this outpouring:



They take my money, they spoil  
my life, they separate us. But  
you can't kill them. O God,  
show me the enemy. Once you  
find out who the enemy is, you  
can kill him. But these people  
here they confuse me. Who hurt  
me? Who spoil my life? Tell  
me who to beat back. I work  
four years to save my money.  
I work like a donkey night and  
day. My brother was to be the  
educated one, the nice one.  
And this is how it is ending,  
in this room, eating with  
these people. Tell me who  
to kill. 3

The final sentence is a plea rather than a threat, for in the absence of a specific enemy, it is apparent who doubly suffers: "My life finish. It spoil, it spoil";<sup>4</sup> "I am the dead man."<sup>5</sup> Herein lies the larger colonial dilemma: the individual whose very psyche has been fractured by a history of colonialism cannot identify the oppressor since colonialism itself has been long dead. An ambiguous "they" can no longer suffice as the enemy, hence the colonial turns upon himself, the only recognisable source of his inadequacy. It is Naipaul's final despairing comment on the West Indian search for wholeness and independence. Had he stopped here, the West Indian would have appeared uniquely tainted and irretrievably separated from the larger fold of humankind. This may very well have been Naipaul's earlier conclusion; but the two stories which surround "Tell me who to kill" demonstrate such a drastically enlarged vision that

the West Indian experience becomes both the centre and the start of a world view which includes rather than ostracizes the West Indian.

In both "One out of many" and "In a free state", the protagonists, Santosh in America and Bobby in Africa, grapple with the devastating reality of their present situations and are finally resigned to a similar futility and despair. The echoes of "Tell me who to kill" reverberate in both these lives: "It spoil, it spoil."

Santosh's story is the more obvious. His childlike innocence and primitive Bombay existence are utterly shattered by his exposure to the "capital of the world", Washington. But this is more than a tale of the loss of innocence or the East overwhelmed by the West. It is the painful picture of the uprooting of a lifestyle and the consequent withering of a personality. The process is intensified because Santosh does not deliberately seek improvement of independence. He is caught in "an endless chain of action".<sup>6</sup> These actions free him from an absolute servility to his employer and improve his earnings over twenty times. He is able to view himself as an individual:

I had looked in the mirror and  
seen myself, and I knew it  
wasn't possible for me to  
return to Bombay to the sort

of job I had had and the life  
I had lived. I couldn't  
easily become part of someone  
else's presence again. 7

But with independence and the death of his old way of life come frightening new thoughts about his future: "I saw the future as a hole into which I was dropping."<sup>8</sup> He is hopelessly caught; unable to turn back and afraid to venture forward. His freedom turns to ashes as he declares: "I had never been free. I had been abandoned. I was like nothing."<sup>9</sup> His dislocation is complete; both Bombay and Washington are now equally alien. As if to complete his abandonment, he marries a negro woman and becomes "a stranger" in the "dark house" in which he lives. This is easily a metaphor for his life in general.

On one level, it is a very personal tale of one man's alienation from himself through the loss of his native culture. However, the story unfolds against a backdrop of riots, destruction and chaos as the blacks in Washington give wild expression to their own frustration and placelessness. Santosh's dislocation and despair parallel the more violent, yet equally futile state of his black brothers.

"In a free state" views the same question from a different angle. It reverses the movement of "One out of many". Instead of the primitive man accidentally and disastrously exposed to

civilization and progress, an Oxonian Englishman deliberately seeks the simplicity of Africa in order to revitalise a shattered existence (he actually leaves London after a mental breakdown). Bobby genuinely strives for communion with the African continent and its people. When one learns that Bobby is a homosexual who continually attempts to solicit African boys, however, his proud stand that he does not "object to physical contact with Africans" is ironic and less impressive. He repeatedly declares to Linda, his travelling companion and a transient, self-confessed, opportunistic white, that "My life is here [in Africa]." <sup>10</sup> But while Bobby may be more sympathetic to the country and its people, he is as much an outsider and transient as Linda and her husband. He indulges in mere self-deception when he assumes an intimacy with the people and their ways. He is often taken advantage of and finally cruelly and senselessly beaten by indifferent Africans. He is forced to end his delusions and submit, "I will have to leave". <sup>11</sup> One is certain that he will not return to England; he will probably follow Linda and her group, like migrating birds, further "South" (to South Africa) but after that, there is only the sea.

Again, as in "One out of many", Bobby's despair concludes against a background of civil war, where the "President's people" are killing and making homeless the "King's people". And while

the focus is on the rootlessness and insecurity of Bobby and the other whites in this newly independent African country, the story portrays the torn and ragged fabric of the African nation itself and the bleak future it faces. The stories of Santosh and Bobby are episodes of fragmentation and disorder on both personal and communal levels. These characters, along with so many others, may well ask "Who spoil my life?" But as in the case of the West Indian in "Tell me who to kill", there is no specific enemy.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the two fragments from the author's travel journal which enclose the three stories. The English "tramp" or "citizen of the world" (the two are significantly interchangeable) is shamefully abused by a few of the passengers aboard the Greek ship. Only a few hours after the incident, however, they forget the tramp's very existence. They are merely uninvolved vehicles of human prejudice. The Egyptian who whiplashes the "desert children" is equally unaffected by his actions, merely considering them part of the show for the tourists. What is also despondently clear is that the tourist, both on board the Greek ship and in the Egyptian desert, are undisturbed by the treatment of the tramp and the children. The author, who, in a state of frenzy, intercedes on behalf of the children is almost disgusted with

himself after his outburst: "I felt exposed, futile, and wanted only to be back at my table."<sup>12</sup> Compassion and outrage are slightly ridiculous in a world which has become a moving "Circus" where gaping spectators are unmoved by acts of wanton cruelty and destruction. The sets constantly change--London, Washington, Africa, Egypt--but the acts remain the same. Actors become spectators with growing rapidity, all undisputedly, "in a free state". But a state which isolates each person from the setting in which he finds himself.

Fiction and non-fiction are skillfully blended in this book and effectively enlarge the overall theme. It also perfects a trend which Naipaul started in 1960 when he returned to the West Indies and journalistically recorded his experiences and history in The Middle Passage and The Loss of El Dorado. Similarly, he has written two books<sup>13</sup> in responding to his visits to India, and a large number of essays<sup>14</sup> as he travelled about the world. He views this line of writing as importantly as he does his fiction and insists that "my response to the world could be expressed equally imaginatively in non-fiction, in journalism".<sup>15</sup> His further claim that the two strands interlock and he is "really writing one big book",<sup>16</sup> is fully substantiated in In a Free State. The cumulative movement which this thesis attempts to show in his fiction is given

added force by a similar movement in his non-fiction. That the two eventually combine to give a "final statement on this thing [rootlessness]",<sup>17</sup> is highly appropriate.

Working from the obscurity of his peculiar background, Naipaul has finally been able to fit his own responses into a larger frame, one which accommodates the rest of the world:

But it has taken me such a long time to work towards that from that great sense of the oddity of people, in my early books. Then the lost individual, and now this. It has been a great effort: It has required greater and greater understanding of the world, greater growing up. 18

Naipaul's "early books", Miguel Street, The Mystic Masseur and The Suffrage of Elvira demonstrating "the oddity of people", along with A House for Mr. Biswas and The Mimic Men describing the course of "the lost individual", have all been stages on a single route which culminates in In a Free State. The author's growing maturity and "greater understanding of the world" have led him from an almost pathological obsession with the disorder of his own background to a more expansive view of a world whose placidity and illusions have been hopelessly shattered by two world wars, massive mechanizations and the proliferation of dehumanising cities. Northrop Frye

forcefully sums up this new order:

The civilization we live in at present is a gigantic technological structure . . . it looks very impressive, except that it has no genuine human dignity. For all its wonderful machinery, we know it's really a crazy ramshackle building, and at any time may crash around our ears. 19

Naipaul has been able to tune in to this greater disorder and artistically articulate "the increasing 'rootlessness' of the modern world."<sup>20</sup>



FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER V

<sup>1</sup> V.S. Naipaul, "Tell me who to kill," In a Free State (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Naipaul, "Tell me . . .", p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Naipaul, "Tell me . . .", pp. 101-102.

<sup>4</sup> Naipaul, "Tell me . . .", p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Naipaul, "Tell me . . .", p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> V.S. Naipaul, "One out of many", In a Free State (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Naipaul, "One out . . .", p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Naipaul, "One out . . .", p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Naipaul, "One out . . .", p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> V.S. Naipaul, "In a free state", In a Free State (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), pp. 126 & 161.

<sup>11</sup> Naipaul, "In a free state", p. 238.

<sup>12</sup> V.S. Naipaul, "Epilogue, from a Journal: The Circus at Luxor", In a Free State (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), pp. 243-244.

<sup>13</sup> An Area of Darkness (1964) and India--A Wounded Civilization (1977).

14

The best of these essays are collected in The Overcrowded Barracoon and other articles (1972).

15

"The novelist V.S. Naipaul talks about his work to Roanld Bryden", The Listener, 22nd March, 1973, p. 367.

16

Ibid.

17

Ian Hamilton, "Without a place", Times Literary Supplement, 30th July, 1971, p. 898.

18

Ibid.

19

Northrop Frye, The Educated Imagination (Toronto: C.B.C. Publications, 1963), p. 67.

20

G.H. Bantock, "The Social and Intellectual Background", in The Modern Age, ed. Boris Ford (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961), p. 40.

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