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Theme and Image in V. S. Naipaul's
A House for Mr. Biswas

At first sight, V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas (London, 1961) is a simple and direct novel, a work in which the writer rejects all obliquity and circuitousness of presentation in order to achieve an effect of directness and precision. Yet Naipaul's calculated simplicity should not obscure from us the fact that many of the novel's most telling effects are obtained by employing a consistent structure of imagery and near-symbolism which operates on the surface of the novel but which gives a consistency and immediacy to what would otherwise be a disorganised and rambling narrative. The sheer length and detail of the novel demand such a scheme, and coherence is given to the work by a number of themes and images which occur throughout in various guises. This essay will attempt to demonstrate how three motifs—the house, the middle passage, and the vegetation image—are central to an understanding of the novel, and how they buttress the main theme of social frustration and personal rejection. However, this technique, which we might term that of the intermittent image, is not idiosyncratic to A House for Mr. Biswas; it is well developed in the earlier novels, and gives a unity to the whole output, so that what appears as direct, inconsequential narrative is seen, on closer examination, to have an order and logic which was not initially suspected.

II

We are introduced to the house motif at the very beginning of the work. The novel proper is an extended flashback, and the first few sentences remind one of the opening of Nabokov's Laughter in the Dark, for, with a cool, merciless detachment, both authors abjure plot and narrative as sources of tension and deliberately decline to invoke in the reader an anxiety as to what happens next. This will be a novel, not of narrative, but of situation and observation.

Ten weeks before he died, Mr. Mohun Biswas, a journalist of Sikkim Street, St. James, Port of Spain, was sacked. He had been ill for some time. In less than a year he had spent more than nine weeks in the Colonial Hospital and convalesced at home for even longer . . . Mr. Biswas was forty-six, and had four children. He had no money. His wife Shama had no
money. On the house in Sikkim Street Mr. Biswas owed, and had been owing for four years, three thousand dollars. The interest on this, at eight per cent, came to twenty dollars a month; the ground rent was ten dollars.

Two children were at school. The two older children, on whom Mr. Biswas might have depended, were both abroad on scholarships . . .

This is the first dramatic point of the Prologue (p. 7)—the melding together of the themes of the hero’s death with the apparently mundane technicalities involved in house ownership, for these trivialities are at the very core of the protagonist’s experience. The second step (p. 8) is to illuminate this, to sketch in, with great power and economy, the significance which owning a house has for Mr. Biswas.

And during these months of illness and despair he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it: to walk in through his own front gate, to bar entry to whoever he wished, to close his doors and windows every night, to hear no noises except those of his family, to wander freely from room to room and about his yard, instead of being condemned, as before, to retire the moment he got home to the crowded room in one or the other of Mrs. Tulsi’s houses, crowded with Shama’s sisters, their husbands, their children. As a boy he had moved from one house of strangers to another; and since his marriage he felt he had lived nowhere but in the houses of the Tulsis . . . And now at the end he found himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth. That he should have been responsible for this seemed to him, in these last months, stupendous.

Naipaul elsewhere seems to use the image of the middle passage—the slaves’ journey from Africa to the New World—as a synonym for the Indians’ act of indenture and for the present-day emigrants’ journey to England and back again. West Indian society is an affair of nomads and migrants; after three hundred years there is still no resting place for its denizens, no secure cultural norm or geographical spot to which they can anchor themselves. So it is with Biswas—his life has been a pilgrimage from one mud hut or crumbling tenement to another, just as, in time, the whole of West Indian society has been on the move. His ambition to own a house is hence a metaphorical expression for the desire of a whole society to be at peace. Biswas has been cheated over the house. It is scamped and jerry-built, like a boat threatening at every moment to capsize, but this ultimately does not matter. The blemishes are quickly adjusted to, then forgotten. Coming back from the void of the hospital into the house, “he had stepped . . . into a welcoming world, a new, ready-made world. He could not quite believe that he had made that world” (pp. 11–12). For Biswas, home is not where one starts
from, but the goal for which one's whole being strains; home is not a place where you are born, but where you die. This is constantly harped on, together with the nomadic pilgrimage which precedes the attainment. For instance, the novel is divided into two parts, and the second half opens with a sentence which keeps before our eyes the whole panorama of Biswas' life and death in the same way that the novel's opening sentence does: "To the city of Port of Spain, where with one short break he was to spend the rest of his life, and where at Sikkim Street he was to die fifteen years later, Mr. Biswas came by accident" (p. 277). The theme is so insistent that the very last word of the novel is chosen and positioned to drive home the structure. Biswas is dead, and after his cremation "the sisters returned to their respective homes, and Shama and the children went back in the Prefect to the empty house" (p. 531).

If the house on Sikkim Street is, so to speak, the ideal Platonic house, the contemplation of which has been the main business of Biswas' life, then the novel is also littered throughout with other houses, pathetic attempts to imitate the Platonic ideal. There is, for instance, the doll's house which Biswas buys for Savi as a Christmas present and which costs him more than a month's wages. With its miniature perfection, the doll's house stands for the private order and delicacy which Biswas wishes to inject into his own life; giving it to Savi is an attempt to ween her from the values of the teeming Tulsi household and win her over to Biswas' view of what life should be. The toy costs him more than a month's wages, just as the house on Sikkim Street will encumber him with a vast debt. Shama and the Tulsis seem immediately to recognize the symbolic value of the doll's house; Mrs. Tulsi is angry because she sees it as a discrimination against the other children. So, of course, it is; Biswas attempts to contradict the Tulsi ethos which gives all the children the same present and thereby asserts that there is no such thing as individual personality. The members of the family group exist, in the Tulsis' eyes, only via their anonymous functions within the family. Returning later, Biswas finds that Shama has destroyed the doll's house because she cannot bear the attitude of the other mothers to it. The society which the Tulsis represent will not tolerate the implications of Biswas' present, and the destruction of the doll's house prefigures the destruction which the Tulsi will wreak upon the real house at Shorthills, a building of elegance and refinement which Biswas immediately loves and which he seems to see as a type of Eden. Here nature blooms richly, promising for the Tulsi a life of charm and luxuriance. Blow by heartbreaking blow, the Tulsi desecrate Eden and reduce it to a battered, degenerate rural slum, seeming to blaspheme deliberately against nature, tradition, culture, and ease (pp. 363–368):
He came back one afternoon to find the cherry tree cut down, the artificial mound partly dug up, the swimming pool partly filled in... Week by week the bush advanced and the estate, from looking neglected, began to look abandoned... Govind tore down the cricket pavilion one day. A rough cowshed went up in its place... In less than a morning the reader of W. C. Tuttle cut down the gri-gri palms along the drive... Govind, asserting himself, then cut down the orange trees... The plumbing remained un-repaired. Some lesser husbands built a latrine on the hillside. The house toilet, unused, became a sewing room... The rubbish heap started by the Tulsi at the foot of the hill grew higher and higher... It was W. C. Tuttle who dismantled the electricity plant and melted down the lead to make dumb-bells... Mr. Biswas closed his heart to sorrow and anger at a destruction he was powerless to prevent.

In the kitchen the brick floor is topped with mud, but the most significant step in the process of spoliation is undertaken by the family pundit Hari. "Hari cut down the Julie mango tree in the raised bed at the end of the garden and built a small, kennel-like boxboard hut; this was the temple" (p. 363). Hari, as the embodiment of the deepest and most powerfully felt cultural drives of the Tulsi family and Indian society in general, typifies all the values which conspire to crush Biswas. Every pathetic attempt by Biswas to assert his individuality is neutralized by the Tulsis' insistence that any radical form of action should be safeguarded by a Hindu ceremony at which Hari officiates. In this way, Biswas can never escape the long arm of Hindu concern; it is as if Hari's blessing is really a curse, and Hari himself, although colourless and ineffectual as a person, is as potent a force as Shiva the destroyer. Perhaps we could say, rather fancifully, that it is almost as if Biswas is trying to enact the role of Vishnu, to protect and preserve (his name is, after all, Mohun, and, as the pundit told Bipi, this is a name given to Krishna, who is an avatar of Vishnu), but in this new myth situation the ingredient forces work, not in conjunction, but in dialectical opposition. Biswas cannot defeat the Tulsi and Hanuman House, an organisation which, with exquisite etymological precision, he derides as "the monkey house..." The house which Mr. Biswas attempts to build for himself at Green Vale fails because Hari has blessed it, and Biswas realises the full force of this only when his decaying sanity gives him insight. "Into Mr. Biswas' busy, exhausted mind came the thought: 'Hari blessed it. Shama made him bless it. They gave the galvanized iron and they blessed it'... He remembered the suitcase, the whining prayer, the sprinkling with the mango leaf, the dropping of the penny. 'Hari blessed it'" (pp. 244–245). Hari's death leads to the eventual breakup of the Tulsi family; his presence is symbolic of their power and unity, and with his death...
the family disintegrates and the process of Biswas’ emancipation can begin.

Biswa’s breakdown, with his resultant hovering upon the brink of insanity, is caused by the frustration of his housebuilding scheme, which is an attempt to escape from the claustrophobia of the labour lines at Green Vale and the antheap of Hanuman House. The horror was almost insupportable even at The Chase, and his fear becomes crystallized around the idea of the future. If the present is terrible, then the future will be worse (p. 171):

And always the thought, the fear about the future. The future wasn’t the next day or the next week or even the next year, times within the comprehension and therefore without dread. The future he feared could not be thought of in terms of time. It was a blankness, a void like this in dreams, into which, past tomorrow and next week and next year, he was falling.

The attempt to build a house is an attempt to find a handhold to stop his slide into the abyss, but the house in fact accelerates the process, for the ideal house can exist only in the mind’s eye, while the actual house is quite different, the stages of its construction marked by an incessant paring down of the quality of the materials (tree branches for beams, old rusty galvanized iron for new roofing), until he is left with the derelict shack typical of Trinidadian attempts at housebuilding. As the real nature of the undertaking becomes apparent, Biswas is gripped by a terrible lassitude and is incapable of doing anything except lie on his bed and reread the headlines of the old newspapers which constitute his wallpaper. The violence of the breakdown is presaged by one headline which comes to possess him utterly, so that he is unable to banish it from his mind: “Amazing scenes were witnessed yesterday when.” He repeats the phrase in all company, scribbles it on any blank surface, and takes to lettering texts for his walls. “He who believeth in me I will never lose hold and he shall never lose hold of me” (p. 190). The text is ironic; Biswas would have been better advised to study the import of the “puzzling” story which his friend Misir publishes in a local newspaper. A starving man is rescued by a benefactor. He becomes rich and, years later, rescues the benefactor from drowning, only to perish himself in the attempt. The moral seems to be not an apothegm about the sanctity of repaying a debt, but the message that one cannot win; all success is illusory. “For unto everyone that hath shall be given . . .” would have been a more appropriate text for Biswas’ walls. The impending crack-up is, significantly, described in terms of the increasing hostility of Biswas’ environment; he has always been passive, acted upon, and has never been able to control the larger environment of
Trinidad society. “When he closed the door of his room at night it was like an imprisonment... But now in the shape and position of everything around him, the trees, the furniture, even those letters he made with brush and ink, there was an alertness, an expectancy” (p. 205). Green Vale closes in; the menace becomes concrete when the labourers kill and disembowel Biswas’ dog. “On the wall he saw a nail that could puncture his eye... At last he fell asleep, with his hands covering the vulnerable parts of his body, and wishing he had hands to cover himself all over” (pp. 206–207).

III

We have seen already that Biswas is much more than an unsuccessful housebuilder. Yet the issue has even more extensive ramifications. The house, as an artifact, is an attempt to translate into a concrete, tangible form the creative impulse whose frustration is one of the major aspects of Biswas’ personality. Naipaul’s earlier work should prepare us for the thesis that much of Biswas’ predicament is a reflection of the inability of the artist to come to terms with his own society, and perhaps we can discover this theme at the very outset of Naipaul’s career. In *Miguel Street* (London, 1959), Naipaul wrote (p. 63),

> We walked along the sea-wall at Docksite one day, and I said, “Mr. Wordsworth, if I drop this pin in the water, do you think it will float?”

> He said, “This is a strange world. Drop your pin, and let us see what will happen.”

> The pin sank.

> I said, “How is the poem this month?”

In the childlike story of the life and death of the failed poet B. Wordsworth, Naipaul constructs an image which the reader might well take as emblematic of both Naipaul’s own predicament as a West Indian novelist and of the predicament of Biswas. The narrator, as a boy, meets the itinerant Negro poet B. (for Black) Wordsworth, who tells the boy that he is engaged on the composition of the greatest poem in the world, to which he adds one line a month, in the hope that this one line will be the distillation of a whole month’s experience. We are only told one line—the bathetic, “The past is deep.” Dying, the poet says that the poem is not going well: the poem that he asserts he is composing is in fact his own life. He also tells the boy, elliptically, the reason for his isolation and loneliness—a story of a dead wife and a still-born child. Yet, on his death bed, he denies the validity of the two myths by which he has cherished his life; there is no poem, and there was no girl-wife. Returning to the poet’s cottage a year later, the
boy finds that it has disappeared and has been replaced by an office block.

The story is in many ways trite and sentimental, yet the paradoxes of Black Wordsworth's life give us an epitome of the predicament of the artist in a colonial society. Black Wordsworth tries to live the patterns established for him by his brother W. (White) Wordsworth; he contemplates bees and flowers, takes refuge in the role of aesthetic recluse. The past is a burden which cripples him. He tries to deny its power, and the few words he produces are clichés. His function is simply to exist, to embody in however inadequate a way the creative drive in a society which provides no outlet for creativity. This short story, with the lonely figure of B. Wordsworth at its centre, is Naipaul's first tentative draft of an image which is later to become an obsession with him. Miguel Street was the third of Naipaul's works to be published, but the first to be written (v. Naipaul's interview with David Bates, London Sunday Times, 26 May 1963), and in B. Wordsworth, with his undirected aesthetic leanings and frustrated creativity, we can see the progenitor of Ganesh Ramsumair of The Mystic Masseur (London, 1957), stranded in the hot and dusty village of Fuente Grove, surrounded by books (mostly unread) which he values for their footage, starting innumerable notebooks and never finishing them. In Naipaul's travel book, The Middle Passage (London, 1962), this "derelict man in a derelict land" (p. 190) becomes an almost explicit embodiment of the West Indian experience, when Naipaul relates his encounter with such a man in Surinam, seeing in him the image of a society whose members are abducted from Africa or duped into quitting India, only to be abandoned in the alien colonial wilderness. Hence, "The past is deep," for "nothing was created in the British West Indies, no civilization as in Spanish America, no great revolution as in Haiti or the American colonies . . . The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (The Middle Passage, p. 29). The pin which B. Wordsworth tells the boy to drop into the harbour sinks immediately, despite the poet's assurance that we live in a strange world, just as all Mr. Biswas' attempts to find romance in the sterile society that surrounds him seem to founder. Returning to the house of the dead poet, the boy finds that his beloved trees have been cut down, "and there was brick and concrete everywhere. It was as if B. Wordsworth had never existed" (p. 65), just as Mr. Biswas returns to the village where he was born to find that it has disappeared, for the land was rich in oil and is now a gar-

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den suburb: “The world carried no witness to Mr. Biswas’ birth and early years” (p. 38). The world contemptuously denies all the individual’s attempts to assert his dignity and difference, and Naipaul’s major novel narrates the attempts of an individual to fight back against this cosmic denial of his very existence. How dreadful, then, “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” (p. 13). Naipaul himself is evidently very conscious of the importance of this theme in his work. In the interview with David Bates, cited earlier, he says that the main literary influence exerted on him so far has been that of his father, for “other writers are aware that they are writing about rooted societies; his work showed me that one could write about another kind of society”—the rootless, impermanent world whose flux and mutability Mr. Biswas tries to defy. Or, as another critic remarks, “The book is about Mohun Biswas’ will to make a dent in the world, to leave behind him something of value—in his case, a house. It is also about his effort and struggle to give his own life some shape and purpose and meaning, in a situation which, from the first, renders him almost powerless to do so.”

It is perhaps significant that the crisis of the breakdown is prompted by an unusual moment of insight on Biswas’ part, an insight not only into his own situation but into the whole West Indian predicament—the predicament of a nomadic society, a wanderer in space and time, which can find no anchorage. It is often the predicament of the artist, but seems necessarily the predicament of the frustrated West Indian artist, whether he is B. Wordsworth, producing one passionate platitude a month, or Mr. Biswas, who worked “more and more elaborate messages of comfort for his walls with a steady, unthinking hand, and a mind in turmoil” (p. 259). Biswas now sees the significance of his own nomadic life, for he feels that for too long he has regarded each stage in his life as temporary. He therefore decides not to plan for any hypothetical future, but to savour the richness of each passing action. He deliberately starts to read and relish a novel, but his mental image of himself as a civilized man inhabiting a clearing in the jungle of the world’s barbarity shifts to the image of a man trapped in a billowing black cloud, the void into which he at last tumbles. It seems to him, suddenly and too late, that all his life has been happy, but that he has always denied his own contentment, so that now he is swamped by “grief for a happy life never enjoyed and now lost . . . [He] forced himself to cry for all his lost happiness” (pp. 241–242).

And so, the crisis comes with the violence of the storm which blows down the ramshackle frame of the abortive house, and Biswas, like Lear, chooses to quit the safety of the labour lines and sit in the wind-swept wreckage until, like Lear again, he becomes the basic "unaccommodated man" whom Naipaul describes in the Prologue—"unnecessary and unaccommodated." During the storm myriads of ants appear and Anand tries to massacre them, but they mount his stick and bite his arm. "He was suddenly terrified of them, their anger, their vindictiveness, their number" (p. 262), as if they stood for the teeming masses of Hanuman House who cannot be defied. And, indeed, the little creatures seem to exult in Biswas' destruction with as great a relish as do the Tulis:

... the rain and wind swept through the room with unnecessary strength and forced open the door of the drawing room, wall-less, floor-less, of the house Mr. Biswas had built... lightning flashed intermittently, steel blue exploding into white, showed the ants continually disarranged, continually reforming. (p. 263)

His recuperation at Hanuman House is a period when the entire environment, of The Chase, Green Vale, the whole of the Trinidad ethos, can be mercifully held in suspense, for "surrender had removed the world of damp walls and papercovered walls, of hot sun and driving rain, and had brought him this: this wordless room, this nothingness" (p. 269). Curled like a foetus in the darkness, he awaits rebirth, a rebirth to a new life, from the countryside and communalism of the first part of the novel to the town and individualism of the second, an environment in which the old Hanuman House organism gradually breaks up, leaving only individuals. The last sentence of the first half harks back to the title of the first chapter—"Pastoral"—and the whitewashed palm trees outside Hanuman House are like the mudcaked legs of Pratap and Prasad as boys, fresh from the buffalo pond. A grim pastoral, for the lush elegance of Arcadia is far from the sunbaked mud of Trinidad.

Misir's story had raised the issue of the paradoxical nature of success. Biswas' life in Port of Spain is an extended paradox whose outcome it is impossible to resolve in neat terms. Biswas is a brahmin, living in a squalid tenement and reporting on the luxurious lives of others. Yet, in a sense, Biswas does triumph, and his triumph, like Lear's, is not expressible in conventional terms. If Lear really does believe that Cordelia is alive at the end of the play, and if the selfish old man who would not wait a jot for dinner dies from an excess of pure joy at another's good fortune, then the agony on the heath—Biswas' "great anguish" at Green
Vale—has all been worth it. Although Biswas never attains the eventual material success of many of the other characters of the novel, there is yet a sense in which the house on Sikkim Street is a reward which vastly outweighs their success, a reward for being true to himself and his vision. This vision has been constantly with him, and because he is emblematic of the frustrated artist, the inability to realise the vision of the house is paralleled by the inability to realise his other creative drives and to build a private world of art and romance. Biswas' attitude to his mother is a case in point, for he tries to resolve the tensions and uncertainties within the relationship by sublimating it into a literary experience. In this way, he seems to hope, he will give significance to a relationship which, he feels, shamefully lacks it. Expelled from Pundit Jairam's as a boy, he consoles himself on the long trudge home by elaborating a fantasy welcome of love and sympathy which Bipti will lavish on him. His return elicits, not sympathy, but anger (pp. 52–53):

Then her rage spent itself and she became as understanding and protective as he had hoped she would have been right at the start. But it was not sweet now... He did not see at the time how absurd and touching her behaviour was: welcoming him back to a hut that didn't belong to her, giving him food that wasn't hers. But the memory remained, and nearly thirty years later, when he was a member of a small literary group in Port of Spain, he wrote and read out a simple poem in blank verse about this meeting. The disappointment, his surliness, all the unpleasantness was ignored, and the circumstances improved to allegory: the journey, the welcome, the food, the shelter.

His feelings do not flow into the pattern he anticipates for them, and this leads to a blockage in his pathetic creative drives which he is unable to resolve, just as B. Wordsworth's life-as-poem goes from bad to worse, finding only sporadic utterances in platitudes about the past and vain hopes that he lives in a marvellous world where pins may float on water. Bipti's death, the death of "the mother who had remained unknown and whom he had never loved" (p. 436), prompts him to write a prose poem of love for her. Reading it to a literary group, he weeps and is ashamed of himself. His first real job, that of sign painter, is a timid sublimation of his literary instincts, as the journalist's job will be, while any comment on his own predicament cannot progress further than the escape fantasy of the unfinished story about a fragile and barren heroine. Just as Ganesh Ramsumair of The Mystic Masseur can never fill a notebook because he is sidetracked by the dead-end aestheticism of his appreciation of the paper and typography of the books he attempts to read and assimilate, so Biswas' involvement with painting ends with his pas-
sionate love for the letters \( R \) and \( S \), and the subject matter and fate of his daubings are a dispirited comment on the chaos aroused in his mind by a society without cultural norms: “Mr. Biswas worked late into the night doing Santa Clauses and holly and berries and snow-capped letters; the finished signs quickly blistered in the blazing sun” (p. 70). Left to his own painterly devices, the situation is no different. Decorating the walls of the shop at The Chase, he paints landscapes, “not of the abandoned field next to the shop, the intricate bush at the back, the huts or trees across the road, or the low blue mountains of the Central Range in the distance. He painted cool, ordered forest scenes, with gracefully curving grass, cultivated trees ringed with friendly serpents, the floors bright with perfect flowers; not the rotting, mosquito-infested jungle he could find within an hour’s walk” (p. 164). As a boy, he had loved to read descriptions of bad weather in foreign countries; one recalls Naipaul’s contemptuous references to the weather bulletins which he noticed, were a constant feature of Radio Trinidad’s broadcasts when he returned for his fact-finding tour, “as though this [the weather] was at any moment liable to spectacular change” (The Middle Passage, p. 50). Biswas’ inability to keep his eye on the situation before him, whether as painter or writer, is, of course, symptomatic of his role as stranded colonial artist, isolated from the irrelevant alien culture he has been taught to admire as the only viable one, just as the much-derided daffodils-in-the-tropics motif is the undoing of the misguided and appropriately named B. Wordsworth. But all these ersatz literary and artistic criteria serve as periphrases for his great, overwhelming need, which is to inject into his life an element of magic, of romance. The descriptions of foreign landscape and weather “made him despair of finding romance in his own dull green land which the sun scorched every day” (pp. 70–71). Samuel Smiles is “as romantic and exciting as any novelist.” So, “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” (p. 73). It is precisely through these longings for the magical that he is easily trapped into marriage with Shama by the Tulis, and it is the marriage which kills his chance of attaining escape and romance. His weakness over the marriage really springs from his desire for a house; with Shama, he thinks, he will escape hovels, yet the marriage means that he is firmly committed to denying romance and giving up his chance of a house. Marriage means, not love and fulfilment, but the embrace of the Tulis, where one’s very name is forgotten. Hence the absence in the novel of any extended treatment of the theme of sexual love; it is subsumed by, or sublimated into, the consuming lust to own a house, which is the epitome of all that is desirable, magical, mysterious,
and, he fears, unattainable. For everything that is desirable is, by definition, distant, and in time as well as in space—the dead French owners of Shorthills, the dead Spaniards whose spirits consecrate the poui sticks, and the fact that “Mr. Biswas had thought of all writers as dead, and associated the production of books not only with distant lands, but with distant ages” (pp. 294–295). Every attempt at salvation enmeshes him more deeply in the environment which most terrifies him, but it is the marriage which has really been the mainspring of his subsequent misery: “. . . he would be losing romance for ever, since there could be no romance at Hanuman House” (p. 84). This he is prepared to renounce, for he sees the hovels of the very poor twice a day, “but that evening he saw them as for the first time. From such failure, which until only that morning had awaited him, he had by one stroke made himself exempt.” But he has not; seeking to horse-trade with fate, he has lost both house and romance. The city of Port of Spain offers a momentary hope of release: “Up to this time the city had been new and held an expectation which not even the deadest two o’clock sun could destroy. Anything could happen . . . the past could be undone, he would be re-made . . .” But the city is a cheat too, for “the city was no more than a repetition of this: this dark, dingy cafe, the chipped counter, the flies thick on the electric flex, the empty Coca-Cola cases stacked in a corner, the cracked glass case, the shopkeeper picking his teeth, waiting to close” (p. 341).

IV

So far the novel has conveyed a mood of quiet but none the less firm despair. But it ends, not on a note of gloom, but almost of exhilaration. These bones can live, and life and vindication come, paradoxically, only at the moment of Biswas’ death, and through the agency of a character who has hitherto been shadowy and ill-defined—Biswas’ daughter Savi. The brevity of the treatment of this regeneration would be casual and offhand were it not for the power and pungency of the last chapter, and for a recurrent symbolism which, throughout the novel, prepares for its success.

One of the devices by which the individualism and tenderness of B. Wordsworth’s personality is fixed in the reader’s attention involves the luxuriant foliage of his garden. He first acquires the boy’s companionship by promising him fruit from his garden, a garden whose vegetation sets the poet apart from the undifferentiated city dwellers. “The yard seemed all green. There was the big mango tree. There was a coconut tree and there was a palm tree. The place looked wild, as though it
wasn’t in the city at all. You couldn’t see all the big concrete houses in
the street” (p. 59). The trees embody the life that burgeons in the poet,
and when the boy returns to the house a year later, the poet’s destruction
is paralleled by the fate of his trees—“The mango tree and the plum tree
and the coconut tree had all been cut down, and there was brick and
concrete everywhere. It was as though B. Wordsworth had never ex-
isted” (p. 65). The poet has failed to leave a mark of his presence in the
world, just as Biswas would have failed but for the final acquisition of
the house. As Biswas’ life is a story of the battle against his hostile en-
vironment, so the changes in his fortunes are marked by the state of the
vegetation which surrounds him. At Green Vale, for instance, the en-
vironment is symbolic (p. 185):

Whenever afterwards Mr. Biswas thought of Green Vale he thought of
the trees. They were tall and straight, and so hung with long, drooping
leaves that their trunks were hidden and appeared to be branchless. Half
the leaves were dead; the others, at the top, were a dead green. It was as
if all the trees had, at the same moment, been blighted in luxuriance, and
death was spreading at the same pace from all the roots. But death was
forever held in check. The tongue-like leaves of dark green turned slowly
to the brightest yellow, became brown and thin as if scorched, curled down-
wards, over the other dead leaves, and did not fall. And the new leaves
came, as sharp as daggers; but there was no freshness to them; they came
into the world old, without a shine, and only grew longer before they too
died.

Here, evidently, is a comment on Biswas’ life; the death-in-life appear-
ance of the trees is a parallel to his own existence, and as the leaves came
into the world old, so did Biswas, who bore the title “Mr.” even as a
new-born child—“Some time later they were awakened by the screams of
Mr. Biswas” (p. 15). The new leaves without a shine recall the scro-
fulous infant, Biswas, “dusty and muddy and unwashed . . . with eczema
and sores that swelled and burst and scabbed and burst again . . .” (p.
21). Images of blighted growth and desiccated vegetation also mark the
period of the stay in the Tulsi house in Port of Spain; the rose trees
Biswas attempts to tend, like the trees at Green Vale, mirror his condi-
tion: “A blight made their stems white, and gave them sickly, ill-formed
leaves. The buds opened slowly to reveal blanched, tattered blooms
covered with minute insects . . .” (p. 340), the insects perhaps standing
for the teeming life which is surrounding Biswas in the overcrowded
house. Eventually, Biswas himself, dying slowly from a heart disease, re-
calls the blighted trees, poisoned from within, for “his complexion grew
dark: not the darkness of a naturally dark skin, not the darkness of sun-
burn; this was a darkness that seemed to come from within, as though
the skin was a murky but transparent film and the flesh below it had been bruised and become diseased and its corruption was rising” (p. 529).

So the final triumph, the acquisition of the house, seems short-lived, as Biswas dies slowly, petulant and querulous, estranged from his son Anand, whose comprehension and love is the thing he needs most in the world. But (p. 530)

...right at the end everything seemed to grow bright. Savi returned and Mr. Biswas welcomed her as though she were herself and Anand combined. Savi got a job, at a bigger salary than Mr. Biswas could ever have got; and events organized themselves so neatly that Savi began to work as Mr. Biswas ceased to be paid. Mr. Biswas wrote to Anand: “How can you not believe in God after this?” It was a letter full of delights. He was enjoying Savi’s company; she had learned to drive and they went on little excursions; it was wonderful how intelligent she had grown. He had got a Butterfly orchid. The shade was flowering again; wasn’t it strange that a tree which grew so quickly could produce flowers with such a sweet scent?

For the tree which eventually grows true and straight, and produces fragrant flowers, is Savi herself, and it is her unexpected blossoming that crowns Biswas’ life with success. Biswas dies, but the house he has provided for his children is like a garden in which they can grow and flourish, and the measure of his triumph is that this bower becomes, for them, ordinary, and all the former halting places recede into the memory, to return only in the future under the passing stimulus of an apparently unrelated incident or impression. “A fragment of forgotten experience would be dislodged, isolated, puzzling ... When the memories had lost the power to hurt, with pain or joy, they would fall into place and give back the past” (pp. 523–524). So, Mr. Biswas transcends the limitations of time and space—his apparently crushing environment—and lives beyond death in the minds of Anand and Savi.

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