

## Drawing Some Elements from the Life of Naipaul's A House for Mr Biswas

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### Abstract:

V. S. Naipaul, familiarly Vidiya Naipaul, was born on 17 August 1932 in Chaguanas in Trinidad. He was the second child of his mother Droapatie (*née* Capildeo) and father Seepersad Naipaul. In the 1880s, his grandparents emigrated from India to work as farm labourers. In the Indian immigrant community in Trinidad, Naipaul's father became an English-language journalist, and in 1929 began contributing articles to the *Trinidad Guardian*. In 1932, the year Naipaul was born, his father joined the staff as the Chaguanas correspondent. In "A prologue to an autobiography" (1983), Naipaul describes how his father's reverence for writers and for the writing life spawned his own dreams and aspirations to become a writer.

The Naipauls believed themselves to be the descendants of Hindu Brahmins, though they did not observe many of the practices and restrictions common to Brahmins in India.<sup>[9][10][11]</sup> The family gradually stopped speaking Indian languages and spoke English at home.<sup>[12]</sup> During the Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he accepted some family members on his paternal side of Nepali origin. He also told that a Nepalese man provided an 1872 British gazette which enlists Nepalese people at Benaras with the surname Naipal (surname).

In 1939, when he was seven years old, Naipaul's family moved to Trinidad's capital, Port of Spain, where Naipaul

enrolled in the government-run Queen's Royal College, a well-regarded school that was modeled after a British public school. Upon graduation, Naipaul won a Trinidad Government scholarship that allowed him to study at any institution of higher learning in the British Commonwealth; he chose Oxford. Naipaul moved to London in 1954. In December of that year, Henry Swanzy, the producer of a BBC weekly programme called *Caribbean Voices*, hired Naipaul as presenter. A generation of Caribbean writers had debuted on *Caribbean Voices*, including George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Derek Walcott, and Naipaul himself. Naipaul stayed in the part-time job for four years.

### Introduction:

His fiction and especially his travel writing have been criticised for their allegedly unsympathetic portrayal of the Third World. The novelist Robert Harris has called his portrayal of Africa racist and "repulsive," reminiscent of Oswald Mosley's fascism. Edward Said argues that Naipaul "allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution", promoting what Said classifies as "colonial mythologies about wogs and darkies". Said believes that Naipaul's worldview may be most salient in the author's book-length essay *The Middle Passage*, which Naipaul composed after returning to the Caribbean after 10 years of exile in England, and the work *An Area of Darkness*. Naipaul has been accused of misogyny, and of committing acts of "chronic physical abuse" against his mistress of 25 years, Margaret Murray, who wrote in

a letter to *The New York Review of Books*: "Vidia says I didn't mind the abuse. I certainly did mind." Writing in *The New York Review of Books* about Naipaul, Joan Didion offers the following portrayal of the writer: The actual world has for Naipaul a radiance that diminishes all ideas of it. The pink haze of the bauxite dust on the first page of *Guerrillas* tells us what we need to know about the history and social organization of the unnamed island on which the action takes place, tells us in one image who runs the island and for whose profit the island is run and at what cost to the life of the island this profit has historically been obtained, but all of this implicit information pales in the presence of the physical fact, the dust itself. The world Naipaul sees is of course no void at all: it is a world dense with physical and social phenomena, brutally alive with the complications and contradictions of actual human endeavour. This world of Naipaul's is in fact charged with what can only be described as a romantic view of reality, an almost unbearable tension between the idea and the physical fact.

*A House for Mr Biswas* is a 1961 novel by V. S. Naipaul, significant as Naipaul's first work to achieve acclaim worldwide. It is the story of Mohun Biswas, an Indo-Trinidadian who continually strives for success and mostly fails, who marries into the Tulsi family only to find himself dominated by it, and who finally sets the goal of owning his own house. Drawing some elements from the life of Naipaul's father, the work is primarily a sharply drawn look at life that uses postcolonial perspectives to view a vanished colonial world.

Mohun Biswas is born in rural Trinidad to parents of Indian origin. His birth was considered inauspicious as he is born "in the wrong way" and with an extra finger. A pandit prophesies that the newborn child

"will be a lecher and a spendthrift. Possibly a liar as well", and that he will "eat up his mother and father". The pandit advises that the boy be kept "away from trees and water. Particularly water". A few years later, Mohun leads a neighbour's calf, which he is tending, to a stream. The boy, who has never seen water "in its natural form", becomes distracted and allows the calf to wander off. Mohun then hides in fear of punishment. His father, believing his son to be in the water, drowns in an attempt to save him, thus in part fulfilling the pandit's prophecy. This leads to the dissolution of the family. Mohun's sister is sent to live with a wealthy aunt and uncle, Tara and Ajodha. Mohun, his mother, and two older brothers go to live with other relatives.

The boy is withdrawn prematurely from school and apprenticed to a pandit, but is cast out on bad terms. Ajodha then puts him in the care of his alcoholic and abusive brother Bhandat, an arrangement which also ends badly. Finally, the young Mr Biswas decides to make his own fortune. He encounters a friend from his school days who helps him get into the business of sign-writing. While on the job, Mr Biswas attempts to romance a client's daughter but his advances are misinterpreted as a wedding proposal. He is drawn into a marriage which he does not have the nerve to stop and becomes a member of the Tulsi household.

Mr Biswas becomes very unhappy with his wife Shama and her overbearing family. The Tulsis (and the big decaying house where they live) represent the communal way of life which is traditional throughout Africa and Asia. Mr Biswas is offered a place in this cosmos, a subordinate place to be sure, but a place that is guaranteed and from which advancement is possible. But Mr Biswas wants more. He is, by instinct, a modern man. He wants to be the author of his own life. That is an aspiration with

which Tulsis cannot deal, and their decaying world conspires to drag him down.<sup>[4]</sup> Despite his poor education, Mr Biswas becomes a journalist, has four children with Shama, and attempts several times to build a house that he can call his own, a house which will symbolize his independence.

**Conclusion:**

The actual world has for Naipaul a radiance that diminishes all ideas of it. The pink haze of the bauxite dust on the first page of *Guerrillas* tells us what we need to know about the history and social organization of the unnamed island on which the action takes place, tells us in one image who runs the island and for whose profit the island is run and at what cost to the life of the island this profit has historically been obtained, but all of this implicit information pales in the presence of the physical fact, the dust itself. The world Naipaul sees is of course no void at all: it is a world dense with physical and social phenomena, brutally alive with the complications and contradictions of actual human endeavour. This world of Naipaul's is in fact charged with what can only be described as a romantic view of reality, an almost unbearable tension between the idea and the physical fact.

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