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INSCRIBING INDIAN INDENTURESHIP IN THE CREOLISED CARIBBEAN: THE HOMING DESIRE IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S *A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS*

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), by Nobel-prize winner V.S. Naipaul reflects, through the metaphor of the house, characteristically Caribbean concerns regarding the meanings of home. Therefore, it is argued that the Indo-Caribbean community should be accounted for in theories of creolisation which, until recently, have ignored this community in favour of a unified Afro-creole identity that was to support the struggle for independence and other rights. The aim of this article is to understand creolisation by taking into account the interactions between the diverse diasporas that have created the contemporary Caribbean. As such, the novel unveils the conflicts that arise when there is a neglect of such negotiation. With its ending, even if not openly, *A House for Mr. Biswas* emphasises the immanence of lived experience in the perception of identity. The home in the novel eventually transitions into Avtar Brah's homing desire, a concept that challenges essentialism in the apprehension of diasporic identities. Reading the novel through this lens reconsiders the meanings of home in the context of the Caribbean in general and the Indo-Caribbean community in particular.

KEYWORDS: home; Naipaul; Indo-Trinidadian literature; Caribbean literature; A House for Mr. Biswas; diaspora; postcolonial studies

RESUMEN: *Inscribiendo la servidumbre india en el Caribe criollizado: El deseo doméstico en Una casa para el Señor Biswas de V.S. Naipaul*

Este artículo sostiene que la novela *Una Casa para el Señor Biswas* (1961) escrita por el ganador del premio Nobel V.S. Naipaul refleja, a través de la metáfora de la casa, una serie de preocupaciones característicamente caribeñas acerca de los significados del hogar. Por tanto, se sostiene que la comunidad indo-caribeña debiera ser considerada en las teorías de la criollización que, hasta hace poco, han ignorado a esta comunidad en pos de una identidad afro-caribeña unificada que ayudaría en las luchas por la independencia y otros derechos. Este artículo aboga por un acercamiento a la criollización que tenga en cuenta las interacciones entre las diversas diásporas que han creado el Caribe contemporáneo. Así, la novela revela los conflictos que tienen lugar cuando se abandona esa negociación. Con el final, incluso si no de manera abierta, *Una Casa para el Señor Biswas* da prioridad a la inmanencia de la experiencia vivida a la hora de percibir la identidad. El hogar en la novela hace una transición hacia el deseo doméstico de Avtar Brah, un concepto que cuestiona el esencialismo en la aprensión de las identidades diaspóricas. Leer la novela a través de este foco por tanto permite una reconsideración de los significados del hogar en el contexto del Caribe en general y de la comunidad indo-caribeña en particular.

PALABRAS CLAVE: hogar; Naipaul; literatura indo-trinitense; literatura caribeña; Una casa para el Señor Biswas; diáspora, estudios poscoloniales

INTRODUCTION

V.S. Naipaul's literary opus and his receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001 arguably brought the world close to the Indian community of the Caribbean, a group whose existence is often unknown to many. Nevertheless, he has not always been worthy of celebration, having been characterised as "just reactionary" or as speaking the voice of "many white racists," saying what racists always "wanted to say all along but could not" (Cudjoe, 1988: xii; 224). His claims have often raised suspicions that, not only does Naipaul not feel identified with the Caribbean identity, he also despises it. Upon winning the prestigious award, the journal *The Guardian* records that Naipaul issued the following statement: "I am utterly delighted. This is an unexpected accolade. It is a great tribute to both England, my home, and India, the home of my ancestors" ("VS Naipaul wins 2001 Nobel Prize," 2001: n.p.). The deliberate omission of the reference to the Caribbean, together with other controversies such as his description of Trinidad as an "unimportant, uncreative, [and] cynical" place, "a dot on the map" (1962: 41) in the non-fiction travel work *The Middle Passage* (1962), has been identified as a clear sign of the "postcolonial melancholia" described by Paul Gilroy, a purely narcissistic reaction (2005: 99). In this case, however, instead of being enacted by a white member of the metropolitan culture, it comes from someone who considers himself a successful product of colonial education—Naipaul's "consciousness of having a talent" (Bakari 2003, 254)—rather than a post-war migrant from the Third World (McLeod, 2004: 63; Nixon, 1992 40).

Yet, Naipaul's refusal to identify as Caribbean is worth exploring in the context of his many writings about Trinidad, especially the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961),[1] his most important and accomplished work and probably an essential reason for the granting of the award. Interestingly, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, often cited in anthologies on Caribbean literature, is considered one of the great Caribbean novels (Brathwaite, 1993: 39-43) which critics list under George Lamming's dictum that "the discovery of the novel by West Indians" in the years preceding the Second World War was one of the "three [main] important events in British Caribbean history" (2005: 36-37). The novels that emerged in this context are celebrated for exploring "visions of West Indian society" that

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[1] We could also mention *Miguel Street* (1959) here, a novel formed by sketches describing life in Port-of-Spain, the capital of Trinidad.

include "questions about culture, nationalism, and aesthetics" (Ghosh, 2020: 31), what William Ghosh calls novels "with a West Indian subject matter" (2020: 32). Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* is no exception. The novel deals with deterritorialization and identity, two essential features of the Caribbean experience being the result of what Édouard Glissant described in terms of "shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces" (1989: 62), the violent displacement of many cultures into a new context having to negotiate meanings both with one another as well as with their oppressors. Naipaul's extensive, detailed, eloquent, and sensitive tackling of these issues through the depiction of one man's life, from beginning to end, has earned him Derek Walcott's praise of being "one of the most mature of West Indian writers" (qtd. in French, 2008: 201). Through the lens of Avtar Brah's concept of "the homing desire," this article explores the extent to which *A House for Mr. Biswas* represents an essentially Caribbean aesthetic, if we consider the more inclusive definition of Caribbean creolisation proposed by contemporary figures such as Derek Walcott or Antonio Benítez-Rojo.

A POST-ESSENTIALIST THEORY OF CARIBBEAN CREOLISATION

The listing of *A House for Mr. Biswas* as one of the novels that best express the reality of the Caribbean is intriguing given the fact that it does not offer a very complete view of the society of Trinidad or, by extension, Caribbean society in the years nearing independence. The novel focuses on the Indo-Caribbean community of the island, which is seen as having little contact with the other cultures of the archipelago. There are few examples of creolisation, the main defining feature of Caribbean societies (Burns, 2009: 99; 102). *A House for Mr. Biswas* deals with the life—told from beginning to end—of Mohun Biswas, born in the early twentieth century[2] in rural Trinidad to a pair of girmatyas (Indian indentured labourers). A character arguably modelled after Naipaul's own father, Mr. Biswas marries into the Tulsis, an affluent Hindu family with a strong connection to the traditions of the India they left behind. The rooted cultural life in the Tulsi household (dubbed Hanuman House) contrasts with the understanding of the Caribbean as a "composite culture," a term used by Glissant to define the lack of single origins of the peoples of the Caribbean, who combine what is left of their partly lost experiences and "syncretize them into a new form" (Glissant, 1996: 115) In opposition, the Indian

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[2] There are several date references in the novel once Mr. Biswas becomes an adult—1937, 1938, and 1945—that suggest that he was probably born during the first decade of the twentieth century.

community described in the novel, apart from relying on its ancestral origin, is self-contained. As Bhoendradatt Tewarie distinctively points out, until the appearance of an Afro-Chinese photographer at the funeral of Biswas' father well into the first chapter, "we have no inkling that these events are taking place in Trinidad, not in India" (2002: xi). Hanuman House is listed as the main example of the connection with the ancestral home in the novel, while Mr. Biswas "has been touched by modernity," and "his past has been completely wiped out," while he "yearns after the outside world" (Tewarie, 2002: xiv). However, despite Tewarie's argument that the novel narrates how the second generation comes into contact with the creolised world and places like Hanuman House disappear (2002: xiv), Mr. Biswas has little or no close contact with non-Indian characters in the course of his transition to adulthood and eventual death.

There are reasons for the lasting self-containment of the Indian community in the Caribbean other than Muskesh Kumar's reflection that Indians ethnocentrically saw themselves as being above African-descended populations (2000-2001: 1151), and the authorities' interest that they remained isolated, so as to keep them from becoming their competitors in commercial success (Kumar, 2000-2001: 1152). Indian indentured labourers arrived in a society which was already creolised and where Afrocentrism was the main conceptual mechanism employed by the colonised in order to resist their colonisers and eventually fight for Independence (Mahabir, 1996: 284). Even before Independence, Indian institutions were not legitimized as part of the colonial state, at the same pace as Afro-Caribbeans started to acquire rights. As an example, marriages under the Hindu law were not recognised until 1946 (Baumann, 2004: 177).

This issue is tackled early in the novel when a converted Hindu teacher in a Canadian Presbyterian Mission school—very influential in the creation of an accommodationist Westernised Indo-Trinidadian Middle class (Mehta, 2001: 113)—asks Mr. Biswas for a birth certificate, which he does not have and therefore has to obtain from a solicitor who "made most of his money from Hindus" (Naipaul, 1961: 43). "You people don't even know how to born, it look like," says the teacher, who "held all unconverted Hindus in contempt" (Naipaul, 1961: 42). This situation shows how Hindus could not find any mechanisms for inclusion other than Westernisation, as the exclusivity of black cultural identity in the articulation of a national identity has continued as such in the post-

independent era, as Thomas H. Eriksen points out in his book *Us and Them in Modern Societies: Ethnicity and Nationalism in Mauritius, Trinidad and Beyond* (1992):[3]

> Trinidadian politics has been continuously dominated by blacks since the 1950s, and Trinidadian national identity is closely linked with cultural institutions associated with the blacks. I have met Trinidadians of non Indian origin who, when describing central aspects of Trinidadian culture, totally ignore the cultural distinctiveness of the citizens of Indian origin and who, if asked, regard the Indo-Trinidadian culture as a "spice;" a subordinate, subservient cultural dependency of the by-and large black West Indian society of Trinidad (1992: 129)

As the quotations shows, this is the tendency even in instances where the East Indian population, as it is often referred to, is the majority, in the cases of Trinidad and Guyana (Ramchand, 2004: 157; Mahabir 1996: 293). Therefore, the Indo-Caribbean community did not often empathise with struggles such as the Black Power movement that was particularly strong in Trinidad during the 1970s (Mahabir, 1996: 288; Nicholls, 1971: 447; 455), and was arguably one of the reasons why it did not get very far (Nicholls, 1971: 456).

Yet, Derek Walcott, a writer strongly associated with the development of a theory of creolisation, because of his insistence on acknowledging the cultural multiplicity and mixture to which the Caribbean writer is heir (Ramazani, 2003: 189), devoted a privileged space to the Indo-Caribbean community in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. In the speech Walcott explains the particularities of Caribbean art through his experience of seeing *Ramleela*, a "dramatization of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*" (1998: 65), performed in Trinidad: "I had often thought of but never seen *Ramleela*, and had never seen this theatre, an open field, with village children as warriors, princes, and gods [while] the scarlet ibises[4] [came] home at dusk" (1998: 66; 68). Walcott highlights how, despite the possibility of tracing the roots of this tradition, the performance is not the same as what one would see in India: "Why should India be 'lost' when none of these villagers

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[3]After thirty-four years of unbroken rule of the PNM (Eric Williams' government), excepting a few disastrous years controlled by the NAR, Trinidad saw an Indo-Caribbean Prime Minister for the first time. In 1995 Basdeo Panday was elected and in 2010 Kamla Persad-Bissessar became the second Indo-Caribbean prime minister of Trinidad as well as the first woman prime minister. This does not mean that the historical inequity in the representation of the Indian population in the institutions has been solved. One must consider the effects of many decades of state policies that ignored the Indian community's needs, thus resulting in their feeling of national unbelonging (Mahabir 1996: 291).

[4] Ibises are the national bird of Trinidad (Burnett 2000: 104). According to Burnett, the image of the ibises transmits a syncretic image of the performance where the Hindu children dressed in red become a metaphor of the ibises and vice versa: "[e]ach becomes a symbol of the other; together they become a new myth of Trinidad, one demonstrating how Hindu tradition is naturalized to the Caribbean" (2000: 104).

ever really knew it, and why not 'continuing', why not the perpetuation of joy in Felicity and in all the other nouns of the Central Plain: Couva, Chaguanas, Charley Village?" (1998: 69). In fact, this is all quite specific of the Caribbean.

Claims like James Anthony Froude's, that in the Caribbean, "[t]here are no people there in the true sense of the word, with a character and purpose of their own" (qtd. in Puri, 2004: 43), was ill replicated by Naipaul, who controversially claimed that "nothing has ever been created in the West Indies, and nothing will ever be created" (qtd. in Walcott, 1974: 8-9). Walcott, on the other hand, celebrates the particularity of Caribbean art as being composed by the "restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent" (1998: 69). This art is not a mere copy but something else; and in fact, something more:

> Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain *more* pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places (emphasis mine; 1998: 69)

What Walcott describes, in his view, both applies to the Afro-Caribbean population and to the Indo-Caribbean one. As he himself explains, the performance was not a case of "desperate resignation of preserving a culture, but […] an openness of belief that was as steady as the wind bending the cane lances of the Caroni plain" (1998: 68). According to Paula Burnett, the performance is creolised by its very location (2000: 104). Influenced by the local landscape and its very history, it is evolving in a different direction from what happens in the land of the ancestors (Burnett, 2000: 104).

Many critics include the presence of Indians in the Caribbean in their definitions of creolisation, such as Lorna Burns who mentions "the eradication of the indigenous Amerindians and a massive influx of Europeans, Africans, Indians, and Chinese in the establishment of plantation societies" and concludes that "[t]he contemporary Caribbean population remains a testament to this forced meeting of disparate cultures […] namely, creolization" (2009: 99). Similarly, Antonio Benítez-Rojo mentions another indentured group—the Chinese in Cuba—to argue that the Cuban carnival is a creolised phenomenon: "[t]he Chinese horn within Cuban carnival music entails a complex

historical mystery: the arrival of the Chinese in Cuba, the cruel exploitation of this ethnic group" (qtd. in Alvarez Borland and Bosch, 2009: 1). The concept of creolisation described by Burns and Benítez-Rojo does not measure the degree to which these cultures show signs of transculturation, nor does it consider the different stages of hybridity where the groups might find themselves and also the extent of their negotiations with one another.

As Brenda J Mehta points out regarding the Indo-Caribbean community, the creolisation argument has sometimes

> eliminat[ed] the region's subjective particularities of race, local and national identity, history, linguistic affiliations, and cultural specificities. [Their] experiences have been subsumed under the blanket characterization of a unified Caribbean reality that has obfuscated the dislocations, ruptures, and erasures that have characterized different Caribbean colonial histories (2001:111)

In my opinion, however, the problem is not the concept of creolisation itself, as the previous definitions by Burns and Benítez-Rojo demonstrate. Rather, there is a need to open up the definition of creolisation so that it includes different degrees of transculturation which are also characteristic of the Caribbean. As Kumar Mahabir contends "Indian culture in [places like] Trinidad and Guyana is a New World phenomenon, derived and similar to that of India but different in marked ways" (1996: 297), just like Afro-Creole culture. By offering a traditionally marginalised point of view in a novel which eventually became, in C.L.R. James' valuable opinion, "the finest study ever produced in the West Indies" (qtd. in Tewarie, 2002: 8), *A House for Mr Biswas* therefore contributes to a more accurate description of the creole society. This is a belief also shared by Edward Kamau Brathwaite, who through his notion of "Nation Language" was extremely concerned with expressing the Caribbean experience in a way which was endemic to the region and not a borrowed one. In the earlier Caribbean novels by George Lamming and Samuel Selvon, the style is modernist and focuses on the interiority of an exiled character alienated from the Caribbean society (1993: 36). For Braithwaite, however, in *A House for Mr. Biswas* "one comes face to face with […] a culture […] a society in [a] whole and complex way [catching] the varying shifts and shades of narrative, action and speech" (1993: 43; 53). In fact, the novel bears witness to a community, as Vanesha Singh claims in her article "Let's stop erasing the history of

Caribbean indentured labour," which is not often enough represented and whose history is not accurately transmitted (2019: n.p.).

THE HOMING DESIRE

As made explicit by its very title, the topic of finding a home is ever present in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. We could say that this is another reason that makes it an essentially Caribbean novel, considering the diasporic condition that defines the archipelago's inhabitants. In relation to this, Avtar Brah argues that "the concept of diaspora" always implies "the subtext of 'home'" (1996: 180). She wonders whether "a place of residence" ever "become[s] home" (1996: 1). That is, if there is a diaspora, there is a home, most normally understood as the place which is left (Brah, 1996: 181), but the idea of home can also be based on "lived experience," that is, "where feelings of rootedness ensue from the mundane and the unexpected of daily practice […]. It signifies the social and psychic geography of space that is experienced in terms of a neighbourhood or a hometown" (Brah 1996: 4). "[C]olonial regimes of power" (Brah, 1996: 3) come into play in the negotiation of these issues. For modern diasporic subjects, the place of residence may never become home because of what Brah refers to as "the racialisation of looks," which are "crucial to the constitution of racisms" (1996: 3). The Indo-Caribbean community finds itself in a situation similar to these modern diasporic subjects as well as those heir to the historical diaspora of the Black Atlantic. Both the colonial situation and the looks which associate them with their ancestral land are evidence of the difficulty of finding a home in the Caribbean, a matter that informs both the novel and much of Afro-Creole Caribbean literature. All these aspects crystallise in the different houses inhabited by Mr. Biswas in Naipaul's novel.

Once he becomes an adult, Mr. Biswas lives in transit in six houses, the last being owned by him. He marries[5] into the Tulsi family, which functions as a Hindu clan, and moves into the family house run by the matriarch Mrs. Tulsi. He is accepted because he comes

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[5] Throughout the novel, Mr. Biswas is abusive and violent towards his wife, whom he blames for all his misfortunes. Rather than acknowledging his share of responsibility in the choices he makes—even if many are determined by deceit and manipulation—he extends his hatred for the Tulsis to her, who even more than him is deprived of her agency within the household and with regards to her destiny. She did not completely decide on their marriage either. It should be acknowledged that Mr. Biswas is in many instances toxic and hypocritical, completely dismissing the consequences of his actions and absolutely lacking in empathy. Therefore, there are many distressing scenes in the novel in this respect.

from a Brahmin family in India. The house is, in David Punter's words, a "sprawling hinterland full of half broken antiques and useless toys, a repository of memory which is the only place, to be sure, where the Tulsis can feel 'at home'" (2000: 82). Once inside, Mr. Biswas experiences bodily reactions whose description has been praised as an accurate portrayal of deteriorated mental health, a result "of his nervousness at having to submit to Tulsi authority […] lead[ing] to complete collapse and nervous breakdown" (Labaune-Demeule, 2017: 3). His sensations of nausea towards situations or characters even result in in eating disorders:

> How I hate people who breathe like that, Mr. Biswas thought. And how that Govind smells! It wasn't a smell of sweat but of oil, body oil, associated in Mr. Biswas's mind with the pimples on Govind's face. How unpleasant it must be, to be married to a man like that! (1961: 129)

> He heard footsteps and Shama came into the room with a brass plate loaded with rice, curried potatoes, lentils and coconut chutney.
> "How often you want me to tell you that I hate those blasted brass plates?" She put the plate on the floor.
> He walked round it. "Nobody ever teach you hygiene at school? Rice, potatoes. All that damn starch." He tapped his belly. "You want to blow me up?" At the sight of Shama his depression had turned to anger, but he spoke jocularly (1961: 132)

Biswas' psychological state finds a parallel in the colonial situation experienced across the Caribbean. As a matter of fact, mental health has often been employed as a metaphor for the condition of colonised populations, as is the case with the term "cultural schizophrenia," a condition that takes place when an individual faces two opposing contexts—the family and the society—in their socialisation and education (Oliver-Rotger, 2016: 115). In a different but not quite unrelated vein, Mr. Biswas' unrest derives from the impossibility of leaving Hanuman House, doubling the many times (self)imposed Indo-Caribbean confinement for the reasons listed above.

Hanuman House takes isolation and confinement to a whole different level. It works through the very principles of the clan, according to which all the generations descending from the House's founder Pundit Tulsi, a Hindu priest, are supposed to occupy a hierarchically-defined position in the household. This is only sustainable through a deliberate ignorance of what lies outside the house and thus they live in what Kenneth Ramchand calls a "cultural hulk" (2004: 159):

the Tulsis had never considered themselves settled in Arwacas or even Trinidad. It was no more than a stage in the journey that had begun when Pundit Tulsi left India […] Mr Biswas didn't take such talk seriously. The old men would never see India again. And he could not imagine the Tulsis anywhere else except at Arwacas. Separate from their house, and lands, they would be separate from the labourers, tenants and friends who respected them for their piety and the memory of Pundit Tulsi; their Hindu status would be worthless and, as had happened during their descent on the house in Port of Spain, they would be only exotic (Naipaul, 1961: 390)

There is a lot to unpack in this quotation. Édouard Glissant confronts the experience of the New World—which he claims is a rhizomatic approach to cultural identity—to the rooted logic of the European colonisers, who transplanted their roots into a new place, imposing their language and cultural views (1997: 14). This is the logic behind the biological notion of kinship—filiation (1997: 47)—that informs not only the institution of the clan, but also the colonisers' claim to the land. However, the quotation explains that it is precisely in Trinidad that this logic works for the Tulsis, that it would in fact be lost in India, where the memory of their honourable ancestor is no longer remembered.

Rather than maintaining the ancestral worldviews of India—where "founding myths did not generate the process of filiation" (Glissant, 1997: 47)—the Tulsis have adopted a colonial attitude with regards to certain aspects. Bruce King points out that

> Hanuman House is not a solid society. It is a temporary refuge for those by circumstances or personality unable to find a place in Trinidad. Rather than Hanuman House typifying Indian traditional culture, the Tulsi children go to Christian missionary schools, the husbands of Tulsi's daughters live with the wife's family (instead of bringing the daughters to their own family as is customary in India) and there is an absurd mixture of Westernization and ritualism (2003: 48)

Mr. Biswas's reaction to the house and its lifeways is not merely a desire for participating in the logics of the New World. He adopts a reactionary attitude—arguably derived from the colonised status, a topic on which most criticism about the book has focused—that associates Hindu customs, including the food, with a lack of success in the process of reaching progress and modernisation. He thus mocks, on various occasions, the sacred ritual of the *puja* performed by the family:

> The camphor had been used to give incense to the images in the prayer-room; now it was to be offered to every member of the family […]. Then he sucked his teeth, stamped up to the landing and offered the aromatic camphor flame to Mr. Biswas. Mr. Biswas rescued more sodden biscuit from the enamel cup. He put his mouth under the spoon, caught the biscuit that broke off, chewed noisily and said, "You could take that away. You know I don't hold with this idol worship."

[…]
"M-m-m-m. Mm!" Miss Blackie made a loud purring noise. She was offended. She was a Roman Catholic and went to mass every morning, but she had seen the Hindu rites performed every day for many years and regarded them as inviolate as her own.
"Idols are stepping-stones to the worship of the real thing," Mr. Biswas said, quoting Pankaj Rai to the hall. "They are necessary only in a spiritually backward society. Look at that little boy down there. You think he know what he was doing this morning?" (Naipaul, 1961: 129-130)

Mr. Biswas' understanding of progress as the adoption of Western modernity is perhaps the reason why he does not feel at home, once he manages to leave Hanuman House.

After the incident quoted above, Seth, the male leader of the House (late Pundit Tulsi's brother-in-law), decides that Mr. Biswas' family will be better off living away from the house, and sends them to The Chase, where they are to run a little family-owned shop. Punter employs the Freudian notion of the *unheimlich* to describe the characters' constant feeling of unbelonging as it applies to both Mr. Biswas—who desperately tries to belong, and believes it might be possible to feel at home on the island—and the Tulsis—who decide to perform the narrative that is inevitably "woven about them and which, because of their ambiguous colonial status, they are powerless to resist or refute" (Punter, 2000: 83):

> that was what Mr. Biswas continued to feel about their venture: that it was temporary and not quite real, and it didn't matter how it was arranged. He had felt that on the first afternoon; and the feeling lasted until he left The Chase. Real life was to begin for them soon, and elsewhere. The Chase was a pause, a preparation. (1961: 147)

Thus, Punter concludes that, despite the improvements made in the shop, Mr. Biswas can never feel at home there and overcome the feeling of temporariness because Indo-Caribbeans outside their cultural hulks (Ramchand, 2004: 159) are perceived as out of context on their islands (2000: 82-83), as explained in the previous section.

After living in The Chase, Mr. Biswas becomes obsessed with the fact that he has to *build* a house because that is the only way in which he can acquire his own, one that does not belong to the Tulsis. To him, it seems that having his own house will end the feeling of unrest. As Punter states, the house is "a symbol of independence […] a kind of 'housing' for his soul" (Punter, 2000: 81). But if the house is a metaphor, so are the many collapses

suffered by the houses. Two of them are burnt, another one wrecked by a storm.[6] Teju Cole points out that "[e]ven an expensive doll's house he buys for his daughter Savi quickly ends up a splintered wreck" (2016: n.p.)[7]. Mr. Biswas' failures result from the fact that, though he rejects the self-contained world that the Tulsis have created, the way out is not the Westernisation he pursues, as is demonstrated by his reading of the classics:

> Mr. Biswas saw himself in many Samuel Smiles heroes: he was young, he was poor, and he fancied he was struggling. But there always came a point when resemblance ceased. The heroes had rigid ambitions and lived in countries where ambitions could be pursued and had a meaning. He had no ambition, and in this hot land, apart from opening a shop or buying a motorbus, what could he do? (Naipaul, 1961: 68-69).

Because of his colonial literary education, Mr. Biswas encounters the double consciousness of the colonised, mentioned above, which was cultural schizophrenia. Because he acquired meanings found in Western classic texts, he now faces a meaningless existence; none of the aspirations, desires, and perceptions taught in the books can be found in the places where he lives, his supposed "homes."

Removing oneself from society does not work either. Tewarie points out that, when confronted with the outside world, Mrs. Tulsi is not able to keep the structure of the clan or the family together, because of the vision that she had cannot be sustained in the world

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[6] After Mr. Biswas becomes ruined and in debt in The Chase because he is conned by two fake lawyers, Seebaran and Mahmoud, Seth organises what he calls "insureanburn," burning the shop after it has been insured. He then sends Mr. Biswas to one of the family estates, Green Vale, to work as an overseer. There Mr. Biswas decides that he will build a house on the land but, because he does not have enough money for the right materials, the house is not solid enough to resist a storm and this ends up with Mr. Biswas succumbing to a mental breakdown that takes him back to Hanuman House. Even when it is obvious that the project at the Shorthills—Mrs. Tulsi's attempt to start anew in one of her estates after a fallout with Seth—is doomed to failure because the family's unity had begun to disintegrate and the hermetic structure sustained by Mrs. Tulsi cannot hold any longer, it is the house falling prey to a fire that ends the enterprise. On top of this, it is not the whole estate that burns, only Mr. Biswas' house: "Uncle Mohun's house is burning down!" (1961: 432).

[7] The description of the incidents is quite indicative: "[a] broken door, a ruined window, a staved-in wall or even roof – he had expected that. But not this. *The doll's house did not exist*. He saw only a bundle of firewood. None of its parts was whole. Its delicate joints were exposed and useless" (emphasis mine; Naipaul, 1961: 219). Mr. Biswas believes in the acquisition of his dream as a gradual process made of steps, effort, and determination. That is, what Ghosh describes in terms of the *Bildungsroman* tradition, "the bourgeois ideal of free self-making" (2020: 33), which in the end proves impossible for Mr. Biswas in the same way as the European novels, many times carrying the idea of *Bildung*, become "'distorted' as they move from the metropole to the colony" (Ghosh, 2020: 52) because they "creat[e] expectations and desires that are unrealizable in colonial contexts" (Ghosh, 2020: 54). This excerpt is one of the occasions on which such impossibility is highlighted.

outside the house (2002: 15). Even when the family is given an opportunity to settle in a northern fertile area and make use of its resources,

> the Tulsis do not know how to begin to take advantage of its opportunities for splendid living. The Tulsis are unequal to the task of colonizing the estate: they are too completely colonial themselves, having failed in their effort to sustain their world whole (Tewarie, 2002: xxiii)

While the narrator sees the decision to move up north as an "uprooting" (1961: 392), Tewarie contends that it was the opposite, "a new beginning, a return to solidity, a remaking of the clan as it might have been in the ideal" (2002: xi). This is obviously impossible. What both Mr. Biswas and Mrs. Tulsi fail to create is what Brah calls a "diaspora space," a place to negotiate the multilocationality of the self and the community.

As Brah expresses, "the concept of diaspora places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origin" (1996: 192-3). Attempts to find a home fail in the novel for several reasons, as listed above. If some of these reasons derive from the characters' own problematic approach and also from an impossibility intrinsic to the society where they live, where does the solution lie? What is being criticised in the novel? Perhaps, the conflict precisely lies in the idea of home, as it has been infused with Western connotations, as Glissant's ideas discussed above suggest. As Haleh Zargazadeh argues, "the specificity of the Caribbean as a site of diaspora should be taken into consideration in order to gain a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of 'home'" (2017: 716). In this vein, Brah proposes the homing desire as a characteristic of diaspora and diaspora space. The homing desire differs from the home in that "not all diasporas sustain an ideology of return" (1996: 194) and that "feeling at home" is not the same as "declaring a place home" (1996: 194). Feeling at home defies the categorisation of rootlessness, the perception that certain communities will always be rootless, while it accepts the continuous change that any identity continuously goes through (1996: 194). The collapse of the many houses featuring in the novel contains the message that home is a matter of negotiations—in which all the communities of the island are implicated and which all fail with respect to different aspects—and tolerance. It is not a matter of establishing a fixed and essentialist notion of identity, nor is it based on the colonial culture, or the ancestral one.

It is at the end that Mr. Biswas acquires his own house, one that is owned by him and that does not succumb to any catastrophe. He does so after he starts working as a journalist for the journal *The Sentinel*. Furthermore, the fact that he eventually manages to own his house is announced at the beginning of the novel, giving the impression that what readers have in their hands is a circular narrative and a traditional *Bildungsroman*. However, Mr. Biswas dies shortly after acquiring the house, and thus the dynamics that might take place inside are never explored. Readers do not know if Mr. Biswas will ever feel at home in this house, or whether the feelings of nausea, fatigue, and unrest described throughout the novel will continue in this new setting. There is no feeling of closure within the novel. The ending epitomises diaspora space, the perpetual possibility of transformation. Closure does not exist under these parameters. With this ending, the family remains immanent within the lived experience and does not project any desire for homelands or a rejection of roots and routes. As such, in questioning the meanings of home in the context of violent deterritorialization, *A House for Mr. Biswas* tackles a particularly Caribbean topic, further explored by the most famous theoreticians of creolisation. It therefore adds the Indian community to the process of creating Caribbean understandings of home and identity that, because of their very diasporic nature, differ from those inherited from the West. The Indo-Caribbean community is therefore a crucial contributor to the theory of Caribbean creolisation and narratives like this one have fully engaged in the debate of negotiating these meanings.

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