Colonial Displacement and Subjectivity in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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Judging by the critical acclaim it has received over the years, V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) has become essential reading in the canons of postwar British and Anglophone postcolonial fiction. Based closely on the life of Naipaul's father, it can be read as a novel of Indian indenture diaspora *par excellence* (Mishra, 1-23), as it chronicles the biography of Mohun Biswas and his life-long struggle to free himself from the shadow of the Tulsis, a powerful landowning family into which he marries, as reflected in his attempts to build a house for himself and secure a stable livelihood and source of income. The early part of the novel sketches a picture of the Indian indentured diasporic life in Trinidad, characterized by utter desolation, poverty, and marginality. In a chapter titled "Pastoral" that is anything but bucolic in its tenor, the reader is provided with an occasional glimpse into Biswas's maternal grandfather's uprooting from India:

> No one paid him any attention. Fate had brought him from India to the sugar-estate, aged him quickly and left him to die in a crumbling mud hut in the swamplands; yet he spoke of Fate often and affectionately, as though, merely by surviving, he had been particularly favoured. (15)

But his children's lives are no particular improvement over the father's: for example, one of his daughters is married to a laborer working in a sugar plantation, who can hardly support his wife and four children on his meager wages. The family's miseries intensify soon after his son-in-law, Raghu, drowns to death, while a scheming neighbor dispossesses the family of its house and the parcel of land on which it stood. The extended family is thus uprooted from the village, now living even more precariously on the kindness of distant relatives.

Many literary works from across the postcolonial diaspora tend to present a nostalgic picture of prior homelands; they bemoan the loss of these homelands as a result of colonial displacement, while endorsing the need to reproduce them symbolically in an alien territory. Such works suggest the urgency of making the new world one's own by re-creating it in an older image in a process of reterritorialization,[1] but *A House for Mr. Biswas* looks critically on such acts of memorialization as unhelpful and regressive. Rather, it favors a diasporic subject's breaking free from the received tradition in favor of his or her self-fashioning in colonialist, one could say Euro-modernist, terms. In other words, the ideology of a "centered" diaspora that understands diasporic dissemination in terms of an absent center (the national or cultural homeland from where the population originally scattered), a center that has a permanent hold over the displaced populations, is rejected in favour of imperial assimilation.[2] Like many immigrants from India, Raghu and his neighbors seek to reproduce the cultural habits of an imagined homeland,

particularly of the North Gangetic Plains, in their everyday lives. Yet the author describes their tentative remapping of the cultural geography of India in Trinidad in terms that are neither empowering nor enlightening. One such example is how, in keeping with a common Hindu practice, Raghu invites a pundit to "read" Mohun Biswas's future right after the baby is born. The pundit announces the child's fate in these terms:

> 'First of all, the features of this unfortunate boy. He will have good teeth but they will be rather wide, and there will be spaces between them. I suppose you know what that means. The boy will be a lecher and spendthrift. Possibly a liar as well. It is hard to be sure about those gaps between those teeth. They might mean only one of those things or they might mean all three.'
>
> 'What about the six fingers, pundit?'
>
> 'That's a shocking sign, of course. The only thing I can advise is to keep him away from trees and water. Particularly water.' (16)

Leaving aside the practice of reading a person's body, and hence his or her life, as a sign of something "written" by a transcendent authority, its meaning already telegraphed in advance, it is useful to note that the ethno-religious community Biswas and his family belong to is shown to be skin deep. The novel represents such community as a site of oppressive sociality and traditions, a community that is too eager to police individual behavior according to some pre-given doxa, while failing to support and nurture a person's existential needs. Clearly, such representations of Indian diasporic life in Trinidad go against the grain of the bulk of diasporic cultural theory that seeks to portray such life in enabling terms.

A similarly petrified world of superstition and orthodoxy is selected for criticism when Naipaul's narrator zeroes his gaze in on the affair of the Tulsis. Like the Biswases, the Tulsis are a family of displaced Indians. They are rich property owners—of an impressive house with a large storefront called Hanuman House, (named after the monkey god Hanuman whose statue overlooks the courtyard), a sugar plantation, more land and houses— supported by a considerable disposable income. The Tulsi household is headed by a widowed matriarch, and they live in a "nontraditional" arrangement with a dozen or more married daughters along with their husbands and kids, not to mention a host of other relatives (365). Pundit Tulsi, the family's namesake, was one of the very few wealthy Indians to come to Trinidad in the 1880s. With their orthodox religious worldview, rigid hierarchies, general subordination of women, and extended family ethic, the Tulsis resemble a microcosm of the traditional Hindu social system against which Biswas, a fatherless maverick and drifter, instinctively rebels. The pseudo-matriarchal arrangement, in which the traditionally revered figure of the son-in-law is treated as a "nonentity," is abhorrent to him, but he initially lacks the wherewithal to break decisively from the household, so as to carve out an independent life for himself. Consequently, he is caught in a relation of

dependency and ineffectual rebellion against a family that, paradoxically, protects and sustains him in other ways.

The Hanuman House serves as an allegory of sorts in its resemblance to a plantation estate. Seth, a senior Tulsi in-law and the manager of the household, dresses "more like a plantation overseer than a store manager" (82). Indeed, Biswas at one point is appointed a "driver" (i.e., a sub-overseer) in the family's sugarcane estate, thus subtly evoking a regime of colonial indentureship and slavery of which the Tulsis are the latter-day beneficiaries. The symbolism also partly explains Biswas's manifest hostility toward the Tulsis, since his marriage to Shama conjures up memories of a relation of servitude to his wife's family all over again. It is no wonder that Biswas feels "trapped" and "engulfed" by the Tulsis (223), but every time he seeks to earn his way to freedom, he is thrust even deeper into their fold, leading to a state of temporary insanity. In this context, Biswas's life-long ambition to acquire a house, a project that comes to fruition just before his death, acquires a highly symbolic charge. In the novel, Biswas's ambition to have a house of his own may represent a desire for freedom somewhat analogous to the postcolonial desire for a nation-state free from colonial relations of dependency. Indeed, critics have read Biswas' struggle to build a house for himself in a wide variety of contexts: as a desire for reterritorialization or acquisition of new roots on the part of the uprooted, but also as a symbol of a subaltern subject's pursuit of bourgeois self-making, autonomy, and worldly achievements (George 67, 91).

An important aspect of *A House for Mr. Biswas* is its articulation of colonial displacement in terms of a condition of marginalization and subalternity. By ideology and temperament, Naipaul is not a writer sympathetic to the subalternist cause, which implies that the oppressed of colonial history need to fight their oppressors by means of collective mobilization around a common cause.[3] At the same time, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, just as his early novel *Miguel Street* (1957), lays bare the states of emergency that displaced people are forced to live through daily, where they feel "as though, merely by surviving, [one] had been particularly favoured" (15). Biswas, in particular, represents the ambition of an aspiring rural subaltern, who seeks to achieve a modicum of autonomy and respectability within the very limited space for social mobility the colonial society provides. While many of his peers accommodate themselves uneasily to the life of scarcity into which they are born, Biswas's life remains truly unsettling and unsettled as he drifts from one state of livelihood to another, as he struggles to find some security and fulfillment in what he does. While not all instances of displacement in the novel are equally subalternizing (the Tulsis, for example, have clearly thrived in the diaspora), to Biswas his ancestral displacement from India, but also his uprooting of a more recent and localized kind, mean dispossession without the glamour that displacement sometimes acquires in the discourses of modernist exile and postmodern globalization. To him, just as much as to many of his peers,

colonial displacement has exacerbated his condition of powerlessness and dependency, and it is this specter of dependency Biswas fights all his life, personalized in his adversarial relation with the Tulsis.

Before we fully thematize Biswas's condition of subalternity as well as his rebellion against the Tulsis, it is important to recognize the multiplicity of political narratives that work at cross-purposes in this novel. One sometimes wonders why Biswas would choose to rebel against a family that offers him its youngest daughter in marriage, a place to live, and some degree of social status by virtue of his kinship with them, all in a gesture of caste-based solidarity based on their shared Brahmin identity. But it turns out that Biswas's political ambition is of a conservative kind despite his rhetoric of social rebellion. For example, it is not just the ritualized humdrum of Hindu traditionalism and the status-seeking pecking order of senior in-laws within the household that angers him; as a putatively Westernized non-orthodox Hindu, his ambition is to restore a normative "order of things" he believes has been violated within the household on two accounts.[4]

First, as a *ghar-jawain* (a son-in-law who lives with his wife's kin),[5] Biswas finds his sense of masculinity and social status severely threatened. After all, a *ghar-jawain* is a figure of universal disapproval in the Hindu social world: stereotypically speaking, to be a *ghar-jawain* is to surrender one's self-respect to one's social inferiors, to become a wife's wife, a figure of ridicule, so to speak. Biswas's perceptions of the threats to his masculinity from this "unnatural" family arrangement are suggested everywhere, but especially in those images of his body as soft (103), in the description of his unexercised swinging calves (148), his lack of competence in what he does, his contempt for physical labor, and so forth. Not every male in the Tulsi household feels this way about the *ghar-jawain* arrangement, but Biswas's somewhat modern ambition to become his own man ("to paddle one's own canoe" is his favorite phrase savagely ridiculed by the Tulsi power-brokers) makes him all the more prone to this type of reaction and rebellion.

Second, the Tulsi household represents a somewhat communal and collective idea of a house run by Mrs. Tulsi, whose ritual status as a widow is at best ambiguous. The pseudo-matriarchy she presides over with the help of male relatives comes up against a powerful expectation of colonial modernity privileged by Biswas: that of a patriarchal nuclear family as a desirable ideal with the father as a provider of the house and the wife as a caretaker, and of course, both of them functioning as an autonomous social unit. Eventually, the rigid social order of the Tulsi household disintegrates under the combined pressure of many contradictory forces, especially after Shekhar and Owad, Mrs. Tulsi's two sons, fail to occupy the place of prominence within the household when they grow up. Seth, the ruthless manager of the house, is sidelined in anticipation of the sons' ascendancy, but the sons follow their own career trajectories and refuse to take on the family mantle. Shekhar follows his sister-in-laws' example to become a *ghar-jawain* in his own right; on his part, Owad goes to England, only to return to the island fully

Anglicized *and* politically radicalized, and starts a family of his own after marrying a Presbyterian woman. Yet even before all this happens, the family arrangement painstakingly put in place by Mrs. Tulsi and her daughters begins to fall apart (365). The extended family (minus Seth and his wife) abandons the Hanuman House in favor of another estate recently bought by the family near Port of Spain, called Shorthills.

The narrator's coldly satirical account of the Tulsi takeover of the Shorthills estate is one of the most pleasing but politically dismaying parts of the novel. Once again, the account of the Tulsi household acquires an allegorical charge, its acquisition of the new estate perhaps suggesting the transfer of power by Britain to the non-European settler inhabitants in Trinidad in a prolonged struggle over autonomy and independence. The Tulsis' move to the new estate is described in terms that clearly imply a critique of the emerging postcolonial political order. A few telltale signs of that critique include the fact that the Shorthills estate is said to have been owned previously by "some French people," now gone (399), and its existence on Christopher Columbus Road probably suggests that, in laying claim to the colonial estate, the Tulsis have aspired to occupy the same exalted social position once occupied by European plantation owners (397). Additionally, the arrival of the Tulsi kinsfolk to the estate is described as an "invasion" (400); under their tutelage, the beautiful cricket grounds left behind by the French settlers become a grazing ground for cows, sheep, and mules. With Mrs. Tulsi remote, and no one deputed to manage the household, some of the in-laws start behaving like "barbarians," as they "plunder" the estate to make money for themselves on the side. As a result, "[w]eek by week the bush advanced and the estate, from looking neglected, began to look abandoned," as the narrator watches in horror the "dereliction" of the once stately mansion and its beautiful surroundings (404).

Faced with a novel that, at one level, laments the condition of subalternity and dependency exacerbated by colonialism while, at another, it castigates postcolonial subjectivity as somehow regressive, not up to the task of managing the political freedoms it desires, how do we square the novel's politics of subaltern empowerment with its colonialist macropolitics? One less than satisfactory response lies in the logic of displacement itself, as portrayed in the novel. Despite their considerable wealth and status among the Hindus, the Tulsis feel as unsettled as anyone else on the island. Like other East Indians in Trinidad, they think of their condition as a state of "permanent temporariness" (147), Trinidad for them being "no more than a stage in the journey that had begun when Pundit Tulsi left India," even though no one among them really takes the prospects of going back to India seriously (390). According to Naipaul's narrator, this state of mind encourages the Indians to behave as though they do not need to fully adapt to their new surroundings (390). Far from coming to terms with their historic displacement, they behave as though that they are in a temporary sojourn from India and that their ritualistic ways of living and being in the world are still fully relevant in their new social and territorial context. Biswas, just like the novel's unnamed narrator, deploys a powerful rhetoric of colonial modernity to expose the weaknesses of the Tulsi way of life. His complaint seems to be that, communal and mutually supportive though they may be, the Tulsis' unwillingness to adapt themselves to the protocols of colonial modernity marks them as anachronistic, and therefore unfit to take over the reigns of a postcolonial estate/state.

But the rhetoric of colonial assimilation Biswas champions in this book is misleading, to say the least. Despite their appearance of living by the dictates of Hindu orthodoxy and a pre- diasporic way of life, the Tulsis *are* a fairly modern family that knows how to adapt and survive in an alien place. Their situation is exemplary in the sense that they seek to balance the imperative to remain true to their received past (Hindu beliefs and practices) with the need to adapt and change (hybridity and heterodoxy), a fact seen in the instances when Mrs. Tulsi sends her children to a Roman Catholic school, allows the presence of Christian icons and Christmas celebrations within the household, and befriends a Roman Catholic maid as her confidante. Later, as Owad returns from England with somewhat exaggerated Whig and Russian revolutionary sympathies, the rest of the clan adopts his views enthusiastically as its own. Faced with such a chaotic blurring of boundaries between tradition and modernity, and cultural inwardness and colonial assimilation, it is Biswas and his Anglophile son, Anand, who come across as close-minded puritans who insist on the sanctity of a Tory version of Anglo-modernity, with its upper-class bias (the belief that only those with a European sense of culture and propriety are fit to own estate property), and its violent prejudices about how the Trinidad Indians (by implication, all island natives), are superstitious idol worshippers and hence unfit to govern themselves under the newly

emerging postcolonial political order. At a moment like this, one wonders if Naipaul's narrator has been looking at the Tulsi world with the same "imperial eye" that refuses to question its own observational authority, as theorized by Mary Louis Pratt and others.

Indeed, it is revealing that, in the middle of Naipaul's account of the scenes of dereliction and plunder at Shorthills estate, Biswas's teenage son, Anand, recites a few memorable stanzas from "Bingen on the Rhine" (1867), a ballad by Caroline Norton, which was widely anthologized in the colonial-era school textbooks.[6] Composed by a minor Scots poet, the ballad narrates the story of a German mercenary serving in the French Foreign Legion ("A soldier of the legion lay dying in Algiers" 314), thus inadvertently disclosing the transnational and collaborative nature of the European colonial imaginary. While the ballad's French/German soldier is doubtlessly a fictional creation, soldiers like him did, in fact, serve in the French Foreign Legion after it was instituted in 1831. They played a pivotal role in the colonization of Algeria, Benin, Guadeloupe, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Martinique, Morocco, Mexico, French Guiana as well as the countries of Indochina while taking part in the brutal suppression of anti-colonial independence movements in the twentieth-century.[7] Stunned by Anand's solemn elocution of few lines from the ballad, some Tulsi kin shed tears on account of the tragic fate of the hapless legionnaire while Naipaul's text has absolutely nothing to say about the destruction these soldiers visit upon non-European natives (414-15). This astounding failure on the part of Naipaul's protagonist to take note of the violent excesses of the French legionnaires, in a novel written in the same years the Legion was busy suppressing the Algerian anti-colonial movement, cannot be a mere coincidence. Arguably, it suggests how the Indian-origin author, born in Trinidad and now living in London, has chosen a side in Europe's long simmering colonial wars, and, clearly, the side he has decided to cheer is not that of independence-seeking natives. It is also important to notice that the incident just described suggests how the novel's political outlook is fully shaped by colonial pedagogy and its selectively paraded "truths" about empire and colonialism. After all, *Bell's Standard Elocutionist*, from which Anand recites his lines, was a textbook popularly used in colonial classrooms. It is, therefore, obvious that, despite their status as colonial subalterns, Biswas and his son sympathize with the French colonial mission in Algeria, thus desiring the continuity of European empires in non-European places. Their rebellion against oppression of one kind, Hindu traditionalism and orthodoxy, is quietly exchanged for an apology for the tyranny of another kind, European colonialism, sold at home and abroad as a civilizing mission, by means of a seductive narrative that equates traditionalism with social oppression and colonial assimilation with the native's path to enlightenment and self-empowerment. In doing so, the novel reinforces an ideological perspective fully endorsed by erstwhile colonial powers while it forecloses the possibility of a historical anamnesis that could have linked the

intercontinental diasporas of coolitude and servitude, economically marginalized and culturally deracinated, to the same Euro-modernity whose condition of possibility were the extractive economies of India, Africa, and the Caribbean in the first place.[8]

Notes

1. On the concepts of "worlding" and reterritorialization, see Emmanuel Nelson, *Worldling: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (New York: Greenwood, 1992).
2. The term "centered diaspora" is from William Safran's "Diasporas Old and New: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora* 1.1 (1990): 1-19. For discussions on subalternity and its relation to postcolonial theory and criticism, see Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography* and the many dozens of essays collected in the *Subaltern Studies* series, vol. 1-12.
3. Foucault's notion of "the order of things" is particularly apposite here. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavstock, 1966).
4. Naipaul does not use the term *ghar-jawain* anywhere in the novel but the readers familiar with the taboos associated with this not-so-rare practice (out of economic necessity above anything) cannot miss its resonance here as well.
5. Caroline E. Norton composed the ballad in 1967. The first edition was brought out as a broadside by Poet's Box in Glasgow. It was later collected in David Charles Bell and Alexander Melville Bell, *Bell's Standard Elocutionist: Principles And Exercises* (London: W. Mullan, 1878). The 1878 edition does not contain the ballad Anand recites, so Naipaul must be referring to a later edition, probably 1889 (the first edition to include the ballad) or after. See p. 379.
6. See Tony Geraghty's *March or Die: A New History of the French Foreign Legion* (New York: Houghton and Mifflin, 1987) for additional details on the French Foreign Legion's role in creating and maintaining France's colonial empire.
7. On the formative conditions of coolitude, see Marina Carter and Khal, *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem, 2002).

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