

**Meenakshi Bharat, *V.S. Naipaul's A House for Mr Biswas: Critical Perspectives* (Pencraft International, 2013)**

This volume contains 14 essays discussing different aspects of *A House for Mr Biswas*. Each essay in the collection examines the novel comprehensively, and each presents a distinct perspective. As mentioned by the editor, 'more than half of them have been specifically written for this volume' (4). The essays seem well connected and are arranged in such a fashion that they inform each other. It is further mentioned in the 'Introduction' that 'even the others are very recent articles and all have been revisited by the authors to fit in with the purpose of the book to give new insights into the novel' (4). It has been a long time since the novel was first published, but it still gathers attention in the academic corridor. The diversity and range of reactions this novel garners warrants a collection of contemporary voices.

The essays are divided under four broad heads, facilitating the reader's entry into the text. The first broad head is 'Context', which integrates four broad framing essays that introduce the settings of the novel. The first, 'Looking for Mr Biswas', by John Thieme, a critic inseparably associated with Naipaulia, writes about the use of the central trope of the house and Biswas's struggle to become a householder. He relates this to his own experience of visiting a couple of the originals of the houses in the novel when he was researching his book on Naipaul, and particularly to his recollections of meeting Naipaul's mother in the final 'Jerry built' house. Thieme considers how the real life experience on which the novel is based was transformed into fiction, and in so doing attempts a reevaluation of Homi Bhabha's reading of the novel.

Like Thieme, who was looking for 'Mr Biswas', Harish Trivedi, too, in 'The Many Houses for Mr Naipaul', embarks on an 'academic pilgrimage'. Trivedi voices an 'Indian' standpoint, and while doing so he engages on a new exploration of the trope of the house and home. In the process, he had a *darshan* of Naipaul's successive homes,<sup>1</sup> especially the two Naipaul inhabited in the formative early years. He brings together details of Naipaul's own lineage and ancestry, his travels, and his life as adumbrated in his authorised biography, *The World is What It is* (2008) by Patrick French.

The third essay is by Vijay Mishra, who shares the history of indenture with Naipaul: his ancestors moved to Fiji while Naipaul's had gone to the West Indies. Little wonder that he puts Naipaul and the house in the exclusive perspective of 'Plantation Culture'. His research shows how space functions as a signifier both for indenture history and the loss of an earlier space from which one is unceremoniously ripped. He looks house as a metonym as well as metaphor.

Following this comes the real insider's perspective: like Naipaul, like Biswas, Vijay Maharaj is a West Indian of Indian descent. She dares venture to read *A House for Mr Biswas* through the lens of creolisation – as a respectability–reputation conundrum – to gain a better understanding of Biswas's characterisation and deepen awareness of Indo-Caribbean relationships to creolisation. This approach generates a new understanding of the literary text even as it yields insight into the many phases of creolisation, especially those developed among Indo-Trinidadians and, by extension undoubtedly, Indo-Caribbeans. It also provides a stance on Indo-Caribbean position in relation to discourse of creolisation. Furthermore, in so

<sup>1</sup> *Darshan* is a Hindi word 'to have sight, visit or view', used in the essay by Harish Trivedi (47).

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doing, it permits interrogation of creolisation theses and thereby extends the work of theorising creolisation as the fashioning of cultural identity in which all Caribbean people are involved.

In her essay, 'Foundation Acts: Enunciating a West Indian Literary Tradition', Cameron Bushnell too focuses on creolisation. A special emphasis is on the linguistic hybridity and cultural amalgamation which is part of Trinidad identity formation. This essay reads the novel as the site of the efforts of the exilic consciousness to achieve autonomy and individuation while making an unwilling and unconscious departure from the past. This essay also identifies a dual movement – towards foundation and towards exile – in both patent and covert aspects of the novel and the author's other writings and statements. This thus makes Naipaul's work foundational for future West Indian voices by establishing a new tradition of West Indian literature which makes *Biswas* a narrative of the past even while it simultaneously makes a radical break with the very past it narrates.

The next section, Text, zeroes in on the novel, each piece picking on one or another salient, defining aspect. Meenakshi Bharat's essay, 'Colonial Maladies, Postcolonial Cures', pinpoints the recurring motif of illness in the novel, which she feels 'opens a window to chronicle the history of a society that seems to be intrinsically and endemically sick' (119). This novel analysis is revelatory of how sickness is made to serve different narrative functions in the novel. Savi Munjal's argument is rooted in an understanding of fiction as historiography. She argues that to the twenty-first-century post-Foucauldian scholar, for whom the gap between fact and storytelling has crumbled, Naipaul's novel 'tells' the history of an age of political and social change, and finally celebrates the creation of a new epistemological space with the acquisition of a house for Mr Biswas. She feels Naipaul's novel provides an extremely nuanced articulation of the postcolonial concept of cultural liminality by dwelling on the inherent interstitiality of the postcolonial subject, in the character of Mr Biswas.

Debaditya Bhattacharya's essay 'A Father Among Many Others: Re-reading *A House for Mr Biswas*' is a departure from the ongoing discourse on the diasporic dilemma and its relationship with the issues of 'home' and 'belonging' in *Biswas*. He takes an entirely different viewpoint by looking at it not as an account of the 'search for communal roots' but as a record of an entry into private economies of space. He argues that the entire text is structured as a classic Freudian narrative of the appreciation of the role of the father by the parricidal subject, Biswas.

Florence Labaune-Demeule's essay analyses Biswas's spatial quest alongside the protagonist's narrative quest for personal independence. The essay looks into the question of displacement not only from the angle of Biswas's geographical quest for a house and a home to live, but also in the light of his more intellectual and sentimental pursuit of happiness through writing and painting, the only means which could help him try and escape from his surrounding stifling reality. Neil ten Kortenaar too, focussing on the acts of reading and writing in the novel, points out the importance of textuality in everyday Trinidad, in the almanac, the birth certificate, the labels of products and inbooks, newspapers and legal documents. His essay, 'Mr Biswas Finds a Home in the World on Paper', looks closely the different varieties of writing – sign painting, journalism and literary attempts – that define the life of Mr Biswas. In 'The Rhetoric of Alienation and Separation', Gregory Wilson argues that Naipaul portrays alienation from one's society as critical to one's effectiveness and understanding of both that society and oneself, particularly in his early writing when he

is situating himself as a successful West Indian author in exile.

The section 'Text and Texts' attempts to analyse *A House for Mr Biswas* in juxtaposition with other texts. Gillian Dooley sees the 'transformations of childhood memories' as a staple component of West Indian creative writing and she chooses to see Naipaul's *Biswas* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* as examples of 'looking back in anger'. Meenakshi Mukherjee compares Naipaul's novel with Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Pather Panchali*, a novel written in Bengali some three decades earlier with which it has striking similarities. She argues that the effects of colonial education were invariably mediated by the existing realities of the receiving culture. For alibis, she identifies the obvious motifs of 'The House and the Road' representing 'Two Modes of Autobiographical Fiction', seeing them as offering an entry point to the understanding of two different but similar cultures.

The last section, 'After-Text,' closes the volume with Ratna Raman's critical/fictional feminist take on the novel from the perspective of the protagonist's wife, Shama. Getting ironical inspiration from the literary spats generated by his lashing out at female authors as being sentimental and 'unequal' to him, 'No House for Shama Biswas' seeks to confront the 'misogynist sexual politics' that colour Naipaul's work.

Despite the fact that almost a dozen novels have followed *A House for Mr Biswas*, it still remains Naipaul's most notable. The warm, sympathetic recognition of the essential alienation of man given the ironical treatment enhances the achievement of the novel. In true epic style, it does what the Nobel Citation applauded in his work: it recognises him for highlighting 'suppressed histories' and for becoming the 'narrator' of what 'others have forgotten, the history of the vanquished'. This collection of accomplished essays attempts to throw rare light on the novel by accessing these suppressions and thus to find a new house for *Mr Biswas*. Together they make for an invaluable collection of fresh insights into the novel.

**Vivek Kumar Dwivedi**