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Letter

UK /'let.ar/, US /'let.a/

noun A written message expressed by someone to him or her and it is sealed in an envelope (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d).

READING SOUNDTRACK

Letter - By Yiruma



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PREFACE

Preface

I set myself up for a challenge of a lifetime when I selected A House for Mr Biswas as a compulsory text for students in a Commonwealth Literature course.

The challenge of tackling a novel that goes beyond 600 pages and the thought of trying to connect Generation Z with a literary masterplece which was written for a very different audience at a very different time and place consumed my days and nights. I started doubting my professional judgement. Oh, why did I choose this literary totem that I know is going to confound the students with its distant sociocultural background alone? How can I get the students to connect to the mature issues of the novel which would at first perplex them? How am I going to draw out personal responses that are unique and genuine from the students who would never have picked up this novel from the shelf in the first place?

Preface

Then I did what I always do when stuck with a professional decision. I binge watched movies with happy endings to distract myself from the pains and problems of a physical and material world. The binge led me to a 2010 movie, Letters to Juliet, which starred Amanda Seyfried. Something clicked in my mind as I watched how each letter written to the famous Shakespearean Juliet had its own heartfelt reasons for associating with this fictitious character. I knew I had to try it in my class. I wondered if and hoped that having the students write a letter to the author would draw out ardent and profound responses to the novel's themes and characters.

Preface

So the letters that you come across in this compilation give you a myriad of possible personal responses, from the complaining to the complementary, to the novel and to the main character, Mr Biswas. I believe that the letters express a different approach to relating to the novel which extends to literary appreciation. And I hope that you enjoy reading the letters as much as they enjoyed writing and sharing them.

A novel is made up of letters and, with letters, we shall respond in kind.

Dr Jill Lee Sze Seau
Chief editor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,
UPM Malaysia

Hailing from The Caribbean, few would have expected a world-class author and Nobel Prize winner to emerge from the small town of Chaguanas. However, that is the life of Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul who started from humble origins and grew to become one of the most esteemed authors in world history.

Born in the summer of 1932 to a blessed couple in a sugar plantation town on the Island of Trinidad, V.S. Naipaul's influence as a writer stemmed from an early age from his father's influence as an Englishlanguage journalist. Growing up, Najpaul's family moved to Trinidad's capital, Port of Spain where Naipaul was enrolled in a public boy's school, Queen's Royal College which served as a platform to further his studies. Before turning 17, Naipaul managed to secure a Trinidad Government scholarship to further his studies abroad where he chose to pursue an English degree at the University of Oxford. It was on this Journey abroad that he started his life as a writer. On his way to London, Naipaul gained inspiration for his later works, particularly the notes and letters at the time that became the basis for the chapter, 'Journey' in his novel 37 years later, The Enigma of Arrival.

Now, while it seems that Naipaul was set from the get-go with his smooth educational advancement and early inspirations in writing, things didn't always take a good turn for the esteemed writer. In 1950, Naipaul suffered from depression and loneliness from the time away from his family in Oxford. Still, he managed to turn things around by meeting history student, Patricia Ann Hale who comforted him during his loneliness. Eventually, they formed a close friendship, with her becoming his partner in planning his career. In June 1953, they both graduated with honours from the University of Oxford with Naipaul's paper being applauded as the best in the university by the famous 'Lord of the Rings' author and then professor of Oxford, J. R. R. Tolkien.

Even with the said success in university, Naipaul didn't go through the best of times, with his father becoming chronically ill in 1953 and passing on later that year, with Naipaul not attending the funeral due to the lack of time and money to travel back to his home country. In the later part of 1953, Naipaul suffered more with the unpromising employment prospects, both in Britain and abroad which rendered him financially depleted and caused him to borrow money frequently while working odd jobs to sustain himself.

If that wasn't enough for him, Naipaul struggled in his postgraduate studies in English Literature for 2 years in Oxford which caused him to ultimately fail his studies and later on, caused him to resent Oxford.

Moving on to 1954, Naipaul was left without opportunity which caused him to develop bad behavioural habits where he took refuge in illness but always rebuffed when help was offered to him. Things were looking tough for Naipaul and his partner, Patricia who remained the critical breadwinner for the couple but an opportunity came knocking on the door at the end of 1954 when Henry Swanzy, the producer of a BBC weekly program offered Naipaul a 3-month renewable contract as the program's presenter. Taking this offer, Naipaul remained in the part-time job for over 4 years to provide for himself and his partner.

Later in early 1955, Naipaul married his partner, Patricia Ann Hale without prior notice and consent from both families and friends with only two witnesses present for the wedding by law. It was also in the summer of 1955 that Naipaul got inspired while working his job in the BBC, to write a 3000-word story based on his memory of a neighbour he had known as a child in Port of Spain.

Fellow writers of the BBC program encouraged Naipaul to complete the story after reading it and over the next 5 weeks, Naipaul would write the first publishable book of his legacy, Miguel Street, which was a collection of linked stories of Port of Spain.

Although the book was not published right away, Naipaul's talent successfully attracted the attention of a publishing company named André Deutsch. However, there were mixed reactions about Miguel Street from the interior of the company which then prompted the publisher to encourage Naipaul to write a novel instead. Naipaul did not take encouragement too well and quickly wrote his first novel, The Mystic Masseur without any enthusiasm in 1955 where he only received £125 payment for the book. This debut novel marked the beginning of his distinct voice—sharp, ironic, and deeply rooted in his cultural heritage.

His other early works soon followed the publication of his first novel such as his first comic novel, The Suffrage of Elvira which Naipaul was prompted to write in 1956 after the dissatisfaction of the electoral results in his home country, Trinidad. Next was the publication of his first publishable novel, Miguel Street which was finally published in 1959, 4 years after its completion.

Naipaul's work would soon receive critical acclaim with The Mystic Masseur being awarded the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1958 and Miguel Street winning the Somerset Maugham Award in 1961 in which W. Somerset Maugham himself approved the first-ever selection of a non-European for the award.

Naipaul's next novel, A House for Mr. Biswas would soon become his most celebrated work as he started writing the book in 1957 and took 3 years to complete before being published in 1961. This novel featured Naipaul's imagined version of his father's life from childhood memories and served as a tribute to his late father. This novel also cemented Naipaul's reputation as a major literary figure and remains his most celebrated work as a landmark in Naipaul's career.

By the 1960s, Naipaul had started delving into themes of migration, displacement, and cultural identity. His later works like The Mimic Men in 1967 and In a Free State in 1971 showcased his growing preoccupation with the human condition in a postcolonial world. In a Free State, a series of interconnected narratives exploring exile and alienation stood out prominently and in the end, won the Booker Prize in the same year as the work's publication, thus solidifying his standing as a global literary titan.

Naipaul's travels around the world also became central to his writing as he turned his incisive gaze toward diverse cultures and histories. His nonfiction works, such as The Middle Passage in 1962 and Among the Believers in 1981 explored the complexities of the postcolonial and Islamic worlds with a candour that often sparked controversy. His critics accused him of being unsympathetic, while admirers praised his courage and intellect.

Following his works, Naipaul received numerous awards to his name. The most prominent being the Nobel Prize Award in Literature which he won in 2001 due to his outstanding novel, Half a Life. Other notable awards were the Trinity Cross in 1990 which was Trinidad's highest honour to Naipaul and also in that same year, he was bestowed knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II. In recognition of his outspokenness towards the views of colonialism, he was awarded the Jerusalem Prize in 1983 which was awarded to writers who dealt with themes of human freedom in society.

With numerous achievements under his name, Naipaul remains one of the most decorated authors in history but in the end, he is only human. In August 2018, Naipaul unfortunately passed on but the legacy that he left behind would always continue to provoke, inspire, and challenge readers and thinkers alike. To summarise V.S. Naipaul as a writer, he was a man who refused to conform, unafraid to tackle uncomfortable truths and confront the ambiguities of existence. Even today, he remains a controversial existence to the world of literature and whether celebrated or criticised, his works stand as a testament his profound insight and to uncompromising dedication to his craft.

Gregory Shane Ethe Raj

English Language and Communication student

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INTRODUCTION TO A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS

V.S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas is a novel that explores deep themes of identity, belonging, and the search for independence. First published in 1961, the story is set in Trinidad and Tobago, but its themes speak to people from all over the world. Through the life of Mr. Mohun Biswas, Naipaul tells a story of a man who struggles to find a place for himself in a world that often seems to hold him back. The novel shows how important it is for us to have a sense of home—both in the physical sense and in terms of our identity. It also shows how difficult it can be to build that sense of home, especially when life is shaped by things like family, society, and history.

Mr. Biswas spends much of the novel dreaming of having his own house. This dream is not just about a physical structure, but about gaining control over his life and his future. He wants to escape the many pressures around him and build a life where he can be truly himself. At the same time, the novel shows how this pursuit of freedom is not easy. Mr. Biswas faces many challenges, both external and internal, that make his journey complicated and often painful. But the novel also portrays his determination and the humor he finds in the tough situations he faces.

This book is a collection of letters to Mr. Naipaul from our Commonwealth Literature students, that is, their reflections and comments after reading A House for Mr. Biswas. We noticed that each student brought his/her own unique perspective to the story. Some saw it as a powerful reminder of how difficult life can be when we are struggling to find our place in the world. Others were struck by the humor in the story and how Naipaul was able to show the complexity of his characters. The students' reflections share a wide range of insights, showing how different readers can connect with the same book in different ways.

For many of the students, the novel was more than Just an academic exercise. It became a way to think about their own lives and the challenges they may face in trying to define who they are and where they belong. Even though Mr. Biswas's life was shaped by the specific history and culture of Trinidad, many of the students saw parallels in their own experiences. They identified with his desire for freedom, his frustrations with society's expectations, and his search for a place that felt like home.

In reading their thoughts and reactions, we were reminded of the power of literature to help us understand our own lives better. The novel's themes of independence, family, and social expectations are not limited to one time or place. They are universal, and the students' reflections show how Naipaul's story can speak to people from different backgrounds and walks of life.

The pages that follow offer a glimpse into the rich discussions we had in class about the novel. Some students wrote about how the novel made them think more deeply about family relationships, while others focused on how Naipaul's writing style added to the story's meaning. Each comment is a small window into the ways we can all learn from a novel, not just about the characters in the book, but about ourselves and the world around us.

This collection is a way to share the ideas and reflections that came from those conversations. It shows how reading a novel like A House for Mr. Biswas can spark deep thinking and open up important discussions about who we are, where we come from, and what we hope for in the future. We hope these reflections will help you see the novel in a new light and inspire you to think about the themes it raises in your own life. Whether you are reading the novel for the first time or revisiting it, the voices of these students will challenge you to think differently, to question assumptions, and perhaps to see Mr. Biswas not as a figure of failure, but as a symbol of all those who dare to dream of a home, of a life, of a self that is truly their own.

Assistant Professor Dr. Genevieve Flores Dipolog
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WRITERS' LETTERS



Navigating the Unsteady Path: A Reflection on Hope and Disappointment in A House for Mr. Biswas

By Adani Binti Mohamad Zaidi

Navigating the Unsteady Path: A Reflection on Hope and Disappointment in A House for Mr. Biswas

Dear Mr Naipaul,

I have recently indulged myself in your writing, A House for Mr. Biswas, and I must say, it evoked a variety of mixed feelings. In the beginning of the book, you made it seem as if 'hope' would be the main focus through Mr. Biswas' success in getting a house while finding his worth, belongingness, and identity with it. However, I can see that the following chapters illustrate the pronounced representation of failed ambitions as an equal to hope.

This representation had irked me initially as the plot was fluctuating constantly. You made it seem repetitive and dull as the readers go through the second chapter, 'Before the Tulsis' when it is shown to them through Mr. Biswas' struggle to find his place in the community.

You first show the readers that Mr. Biswas had finally gotten some sort of formal education just to rip it away from him only to introduce him to become a pundit but rather than let him thrive, it was just another opportunity for him to be shunned by society.

This pattern goes on repetitively in the chapter even until the end, when he finally found a job suited for him which nurtured hopeful thoughts of love and marriage. Yet, these hopes quickly perish in the next chapter where he finds himself unhappy with his new wife, family, and life.

I hope you can understand where my frustration comes from, not only with the back-and-forth plots but with Mr. Biswas' character as well. His own growing frustration, constant need for belonging, and occasionally irritable actions had aggravated me to no end.

However, as I delved into the writing, I realised that this pent-up anger did not come from mere annoyance, but perhaps from empathy? Even though I barely like his character, I could see how easily I empathised with him when I witnessed his moments of high ambitions and hope just to be met with despair.

When I questioned the source of this empathy, it was clear that I could occasionally see myself in Mr Biswas. In Mr. Biswas, I see a reflection of my own aspirations. It serves as a reminder for the moments when I have Just barely reached my hopes and dreams, only for it to be met with the harsh realities that life often presents. All of his hopes and failed ambitions further prove his humanity and the similarities that he shares with my imperfect self.

This revelation brings with it a sense of comfort, a reassurance that the turbulence I face in my own life is not a sign of failure, but rather a testament to the complexity of the human experience.

It also seemed to hit me that this fluctuating pattern is how you show the readers that while there is constant failure in Mr Biswas' life, it is simultaneously filled with hope as he never gave up on what he wanted the most; a house. Mr. Biswas' life, with all its ups and downs, mirrors the reality that many of us face: the relentless pursuit of our dreams, the moments of hope that sustain us, and the inevitable setbacks that threaten to derail us.

I admire the way you easily show the two sides of having a dream. This is what this novel is to me so far; it is a symbol of both hope and failed ambitions. I got to witness Mr Biswas' journey and though it was vexing at times, I could learn a lot from it. Through Mr. Biswas, I have learned that the pursuit of ambition is not a linear path to success, but a journey filled with both light and shadow, hope and despair, success and failure. And it is this journey, with all its trials and tribulations, that ultimately defines us and gives our lives a purpose.

So, to you I say, "Thank you Mr Naipaul".

Warm regards,

Dani

Adani Binti Mohamad Zaidi



Seeking Roots in Shifting Sands: A Universal Quest for Recognition and Belonging By Anonno Afroz

Seeking Roots in Shifting Sands: A Universal Quest for Recognition and Belonging

Dear Mr Naipaul,

I can relate to your novel - A House for Mr. Biswas more than most other people because I come from a culture where similar traditions are practised, and where similar incidents occur every now and then. To me, this is not an unusual thing at all. Yes, the plot and the story are different but the main theme and the motivation for Mr. Biswas's quest for recognition and owning a house is something I can see in every struggling boy or man in my country. I don't know about others but to me, your novel is as realistic as a universal truth.

I have seen thousands of people who were born into very poor families and who lived from hand to mouth, and all the children from those families have the same passion and hunger for success and

recognition in society from the very day they learn

to understand the cruelties of this world.

I feel that the story of Mr. Biswas is one where he was looking not just for success or a house, but rather he wanted to prove that even though he was born with nothing, he would die with a social status and a house that he could call his own. And he didn't want to prove this to anyone else, he wanted to prove this to himself and that was the driving force that pushed him to do all the things he did.

So, does the novel confirm the possibility of hope and order instead of failed ambitions? Yes! The novel shows the struggle of a person who has no heritage, no father, no identity, and no money. A person who was stuck in an unwanted marriage and was suffering in almost every way. Yet he did everything to change his status from a "Nobody" to a person who had a social status and who could provide shelter and a name for his wife and children, things he didn't get as a child.

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I have a question for you though, "Did you want to portray Mr. Biswas to be a person who did everything to satisfy his thirst for social recognition for himself, or did you want him to be a man who died trying to provide everything for his family, things that he never got as a child?" Either way his journey was one that was fueled by his sheer willpower and hope!

I believe many of us readers think of him as a madman, but I think that they can only understand and justify his actions if they walk in his shoes. I don't know if the things he did were right or wrong but imagining myself as a man who didn't even have an identity paper, I would definitely do anything and everything to secure a future for my family and provide what I didn't get when I was a child!

I actually have a lot to say regarding this but I think that won't be possible today. But beyond all judgments of right and wrong, a part of my heart says that Mr. Biswas did the right thing to secure his family a home.

Regards,

Franco

Anonno Afroz





The Non-fiction in Fiction By Chan Kuang Zheng (Hada)

The Non-fiction in Fiction

Dear Mr Naipaul,

We may not know each other, but we live in the same classification of society - the Commonwealth. There is a saying that I like, 'the essence of an empire must be shared equally amongst all of its citizens'. In your book, Mr. Biswas's life was portrayed as illomened and the readers are often reminded of it. However, while I read through Part One, there are traces where hope and order stand out ahead of falled ambitions. While I'm more than willing to point out the scenarios that forecasted the failed ambitions, I think it'il be more unbiased of me to amplify the hope and order that I assumed you've tried to portray through the story.

In Chapter 3, the readers come to discover Mr. Biswas's lettering and sign-painting skills. Although not a huge asset, it is something that belongs to the young Biswas, which gives him the hope of earning money on his own. Besides that, Mr. Biswas forged a stronger bond with Shama and changed his belief through the Aryans. But this seems to be the only spark after a series of miserable happenings, such as those that accumulated in the previous chapters. Mr. Biswas's father died trying to save him, which ended up causing his childhood to be disordered. Furthermore, little Biswas along with his mother, later separated from the other two brothers and became estranged. Initially, I thought you were just projecting your miseries onto the characters you created. I had that asinine thought that no authors would kill their main characters instantly. Of course, you didn't, all you did was just torture them.

You added more suffering in The Chase, Mr. Biswas was swayed by Moti, the swine due to being illiterate. He hired Moti Intending to recover his debt from a customer, but Moti ended up suing him instead. This caused Mr. Biswas to lose a court case which forced him to settle the debt out of court. While reading this part, it struck me with a sense of empathy, as Mr. Biswas was never taught the things that books don't tell. In a relatable way, he was very sceptical of everyone, while also being desperate to best anyone. I feel blessed to have grown up in a household where I'm told to trust only those who are worthy. Thanks to that, I learned to forge wholesome bonds.

In 'Green Vale', Mr. Biswas's firm decision to get a house brings out the theme of hope in the story. He got Mr MacLean who promised to build him a house on a budget. And although that little house is wrecked, it isn't flattened, portraying Mr. Biswas's unyielding spirit, clinging onto a bottled faith. When I discovered this bottled faith, it re-moulded my values as a person. I have lived my whole life as someone hollow, with no dreams or goals in life. I have finally learned to pursue the search for a dream. I believe it is this single thread of hope that will pull me together in the darkest of days.

At the end of the day, these are my interpretations of how hope and order are portrayed in your story. While certain things are not relatable to our current Commonwealth, I still find part of the Trinidadian society similar to most Southeast Asian societies. Mr Biswas's desire for autonomy in a family is commonly found in Western cultures today, and it can be assumed that our southeast-Asian culture has been influenced by this culture since the colonial era. What Mr Biswas did was way ahead of his time, for his place in the Trinidadian society, which is closely tied to the traditional Hindu culture. And that is something which I am awestruck with, the continuum that can still be found almost a decade apart.

While I haven't finished the story, I think Mr. Biswas is portrayed as the "weakest Trinidadian man" by you. If there's one thing I've learnt from Mr Biswas himself, it's that "people will pay for the things that are robbed from them". This sums up Mr Biswas's journey and will continue to stay with me until the dystopian future I cannot avoid.

With regards,

Hada

Chan Kuang Zheng

(Hada)



Tug-of-heart By Chang Yu Qian

Tug-of-heart

Dear Mr. Naipaul,

I would certainly say that throughout Biswas' life of ever-changing events, there were several scenarios that reignited the reader's hope that Mr. Biswas could fulfill his desire of being an independent, wellrespected person. After all, he wanted to work hard to escape poverty and strive to achieve independence. When I started to read this novel, I began with the thought that the protagonist Mr. Biswas would go through hardships and finally be rewarded with welldeserved achievements just like how most of the hard work-reward stories would generally progress. And he did achieve the sense of independence he always wanted, but at what cost? Was the journey worth it? Before I give my thoughts on it, allow me to lay down some of my findings for Mr. Biswas' moments of hope and failed ambitions.

In the beginning of "Before the Tulsis" chapter, he was of no status as he had no birth certificate that would have served as a testament to his existence. It was not until his classmate and good friend Alec became his beacon of hope that he was inspired to cultivate himself. This sparked new interests such as signpainting and word writing which led him to perform sign-painting tasks with Alec. Other than that, Biswas would visit his mother's sister. Tara during his off-work hours. Her husband Adjoha owned several volumes of the "Book of Comprehensive Knowledge" and allowed Biswas to read them, providing him with an avenue to learn about common knowledge such as science, history, geography and religion. This was a great moment of hope after learning the story that his birth was like a bad omen as predicted by a pundit in the beginning of the novel.

In the 'Chase' chapter, Biswas and his wife, Shama moved out from her family's house in Arcawas which was called the Hanuman house and lived a separate life in a remote village called the Chase. Here, he was given the opportunity to run a goods shop operation owned by the Tulsi family. He believed this is a new chance for him to be his own person of freewill and make his own decisions because back in the Hanuman House, he experienced the powerlessness in having no voice within Shama's family although he was her husband, as it was not his own house. Now that Biswas became the new head of his family, Shama was no longer required to be a reserved family member who must be constantly submissive to show loyalty. From this, the married couple had more freedom and autonomy to manage their new place and the goods shop.

In the 'Green Vale' chapter, he was offered by Seth who manages the Tulsi's estate businesses yet another chance to work as a sugarcane overseer with a decent amount of pay after the incident of burning down the goods shop in the Chase. Though the place he stayed was a mere tiny room within shared barracks, it was close to the Tulsi family's house where Shama and her children were staying during the time so that they could visit him. His new job also enabled him to save enough for building a rudimentary house in the Green Vale so that the family could move there.

As frustrating as it could be, these possibilities of hope that led to some of his late accomplishments such as being able to provide for his children, did not do well to compensate for the failures of Biswas which confuses me as to whether this novel is meant to be on a more optimistic-amidst-tribulations kind of tone or a nerve-wrecking journey.

In the chapter, "Before the Tulsis" when Biswas hadn't met Shama, a Pundit named Jairam took Biswas in for apprenticeship, though it was not in his interest to be one to begin with. Sadly, he was immediately expelled because he desecrated a sacred object. He was afraid of walking to a latrine in the night, so he defecated on a handkerchief before throwing it out of his verandah carelessly, which happened to land on an oleander tree plant used for deity offerings. I was relieved to see Biswas leaving the religious pathway at first but he did not leave on his own terms. He did not even have the chance to learn anything before making his own choice of discontinuing this path. Not long after, he got a job at a rum shop owned by Adjoha, which was managed by his brother Bhandat at the time. Bhandat was a dishonorable person known for his wild antics such as being a drunkard, physically abusing his wife, and being rumored around town to have a mistress of another race.

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Biswas also knew about Bhandat's stealing of the rum shop earnings but was constantly threatened by Bhandat to not rat him out. It was during a weekend when Adjoha went to his relative's funeral along with his family as well as Bhandat's, that Biswas was left alone to having the rum shop to himself. It was a surprise when Bhandat returned to the shop early. Drunk, Bhandat falsely accused Biswas of theft and gave him a taste of society's cruelty as Bhandat beat Biswas up and kicked him out of the rum shop, taking away the opportunity to earn money from Biswas. No matter how much Biswas explained to Tara, who was one of the only people to offer him compassion and affection, she did not believe his word and took Bhandat's side instead. Honestly, I don't think I have witnessed any worse-case-scenario more depressing than this.

In the 'Chase' chapter, he failed in maintaining the Tulsi family' shop business properly. He blindly sold the townspeople shop items on credit and trusted them to pay back when he could have rejected those customer's frequent requests for putting the shop items on tab, resulting in heaps of accrued shop debt. He also missed out important details in accounting affairs which led to a series of lawsuits directed towards the shop which troubled Biswas further and cost him his savings. It turned out that these troubles were schemes made by Mungroo, expert stick fighter and professional scam artist who led a band of extortionists and deceived gullible townspeople for quick cash. He was one of the creditors who often refused to pay Biswas' shop items and took advantage to mark Biswas as an incompetent business owner in the eyes of the Tulsi family, which actually worked.

Seth, a respected husband of Shama's sister, Padma of the Tulsi family and manager of the Tulsi's several businesses, finally convinced Biswas to make a fake report about Mungroo's threat to murder Biswas while they insure and burn the shop down after some time to regain a small amount of money back and prevent accruing debt. Though the Tulsis welcomed Biswas and Shama back to their house to stay, Biswas was a disappointment in their eyes and they had lost much respect towards him.

In the 'Green Vale' chapter, Biswas' relationship with his wife, Shama grew tense. As she announced her pregnancy, Biswas became so anxious he made every effort to avoid talking or making contact with his family whenever they visited him. Living in prolonged isolation in Green Vale and the situation of his rudimentary house worsened Biswas' depression and self-doubt.

This in turn, made him resent his wife because he could not bear the thought that she was more skillful than him in many aspects of life. He showed passive aggressive behaviors in front of his family whenever they visited him. The many unresolved confrontations between Shama and Biswas accumulated, which led to Biswas accidentally punching her stomach in a flash of anger. Fortunately, she did not sustain any mortal wound and women from the barracks quickly came to help Shama up while advising her to return to the Tulsi family with her children. The constant conflict that led to this moment, ruined their already damaged relationship as a married couple and it was this moment where readers like myself questioned the character and integrity of Biswas.

Each possibility of hope for Biswas seemed to be quickly diminished either by a preceding or a following negative event, mostly never in the favor of Biswas.

In a sense, it is like performing a tug-of-war in the reader's mind. The novel's progression created the hope that things will be better for Biswas but things often went south instead.

Therefore, I may say that you, as the author of this book, might have written the life story of Biswas with glimpses of hope, along with the cost of failed ambitions. Slowly, his hidden aspirations such as making the right decisions, being an actual independent person on whom the family could rely on, building a healthy family with emotional stability and developing his own integrity, all seemed to be slipping away. In fact, his aspirations slipped even further away from his heart the more he wanted to achieve them. In contrast, what replaced the remaining void in his toiling life were tangible ambitions.

Biswas' isolated stay in the Green Vale with a new job drove himself to a state of depression and mistakenly pushed away the ones who showed care for him. He had built a structured house, yet it was incomplete due to the cheap materials he bought which developed a false sense of safety and was ultimately destroyed at the mercy of a lightning storm. He also attained a superficial sense of pride from his soughtafter social status which was marrying Shama who came from the prestigious Tulsi family, except that his expectations fell short and they were not as wealthy as he thought, not discounting the part where the Tulsi family merely see Shama's marriage with Biswas as a business contract to exploit his loyalty. What he thought was a title belt that would earn him his respect from other people, cost his autonomy to achieve independence.

As a reader accompanying your character in his tug-of-heart journey towards fulfillment, I cannot help but develop a strong sentiment for Biswas because he was tragically misguided in his early stages of life to a point he could not determine properly the right choices for his wife, his acquaintances, the Tulsi family, his children and even himself. His conduct and actions were seen as misleading, self-serving and unconventional in the novel. Many of the times he did something that he thought was doing others a favor, the result was often letting them down instead.

After reading the unpleasant parts of Mr. Biswas' life, it made me think that Mr. Biswas knew better to reflect on his own flaws and be a better person. How could a man fail so much in life without pausing to rethink his ways?

After much contemplation, I was reminded of how he grew up with so much at stake that it seemed like his mindset was wired to be in survival mode, constantly seeking a temporary hope that would not last long. It reminded me of the early days without advanced technology and complex infrastructure where a lot of men were born underprivileged. All they focused on was to do whatever it took to earn a living so that there would be a future for the next generation. "Hard times make strong men, strong men make easy times...". This phrase from a quote by American novelist Michael Hopf popped up in my mind. If I must guess, perhaps your idea of a strong, independent man was Biswas going through those failed ambitions and making personal mistakes without knowing how to deal with them, even to the point of unintentionally hurting closed ones.

You would rather write about your father as an individual with weaknesses who did not know better than to write him as a rational person who always had a plan, a person who knows exactly how to deal with life. Yet, you believed in your father when he did not, just like how Biswas' son: Anand did not completely resent Biswas and believed in Biswas even at his lowest points. That is indeed hopeful given that you wrote this book in dedication to your father. For me, that is what makes Biswas human and a person I can truly empathize with. For that, I thank you for opening up my heart to understand the flaws of a man and a father, Mr. Naipaul.

I do have an honest question for you before I conclude. Do you have a love-hate relationship with your father?

How do you feel about your relationship with him, given that you spent much time writing about the ups and downs of Biswas who was inspired by your father? It must have been painful digging up the past and reliving it as you pen down those experiences onto your blank sheets. I would be genuinely interested in hearing about your story with him in your younger days including the relationship dynamics of you two.

I will keep it between us if it calls for confidentiality, you have my word.

For now, I thank you for the wonderful journey of the novel, "House of Mr. Biswas" and eagerly await your kind response to my concerns. Be well.

Yours truly,

Yu Qian Chang Yu Qian



A Change of Heart

By Hawraa Hasan Hayder Al-Mohammed

A Change of Heart

Dear Mr. Naipaul,

At the beginning of your novel, the Prologue, I felt connected to Mr. Biswas when he was described as a person yearning for isolation from the disagreeable individuals surrounding him and wanting to settle down in a house of his own. His reasons, in my eyes, were justifiable. You see, Mr. Naipaul, I come from a culture that shares traditions similar to those of Mr. Biswas. For as long as I can remember, I would wake up to the screams of my younger cousins and the demanding tones of my elder relatives every morning and go to sleep with the same commotion.

Manuarti -

Hence, I deeply understand Mr. Biswas's determination shown in this quote "And now at the end he found himself in his own house, on his own halflot of land, his own portion of the earth." I appreciated his insistence to do whatever it took to escape that situation, cancel all the noise, and unwind in the comfort of his own house. While I respected his ambition to search for tranquility, that strong sense of understanding soon faded as the chapters progressed. Because, during his journey to gain peace, Mr. Biswas either Intentionally or involuntarily wounded the people around him. For instance, Mr. Biswas might indeed have loved his wife, Shama, genuinely at first, which is apparent in this description of her when Mr. Biswas saw Shama for the first time:

"And decided that the most attractive was a girl of about sixteen, whom the others called Shama, he was enchanted by her smile. So enchanted, that after a few days he would very much have liked to do the low and possibly dangerous thing of talking to her." But Mr. Biswas became selfish; he grew greedy, wanting more than love; he wanted Shama's family wealth. And suddenly, just like a cool breeze on a hot summer night, his love and respect for Shama vanished when they married, "Mr. Biswas had no money or position. He was expected to become a Tulsi. At once, he rebelled. Pretending not to know what was expected of him, he finished the signs for the Tulsi Store and decided that the time had come to escape, with Shama or without her. It looked as though it would have to be without her."

Daminette

And just like that, Mr. Biswas abandoned all that love and endearing affection solely because he did not want to work. That was the first incident that made me question his prior dedication as a man of strong will and great ambition.

From that moment onwards, my views of him changed. Playing the victim at every point of the novel in the name of hope is absurd. I will give you an example: Mr. Biswas came from work one night and had this conversation with Shama:

"How the gods, eh?"

Shama wouldn't reply.

"And how the Big Boss getting on today?" That was Seth.

Shama wouldn't reply.

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"And how the old queen?" That was Mrs. Tulsi. "The old hen? The old cow?"

"Well, nobody didn't ask you to get married into the family, you know."

"Family? Family? This blasted fowlrun you calling family?"

Indeed, no one twisted his hand into marrying Shama, so why was he treating her this way? Why was he cruel to Shama and her family? Why was he angry? Just because her family had wealth and he happened to marry her does not mean he would be treated as a king. "This is gratitude. You come here, penniless, a stranger. We take you in, we give you one of our daughters, we feed you, we give you a place to sleep in. You refuse to help in the store, you refuse to help on the estate. All right, But then to turn around and insult us!"

Danjunt

Mr. Biswas gave degrading nicknames to the Tulsis, argued at every little convince, and was not satisfied with anything. He wanted everything to be served to him on a golden plate, which infuriated me the most.

I do pity Mr. Biswas; he had a rough upbringing, but that is not enough reason, in my opinion, for him to drag someone else into the mud. He wronged Shama and his children for his selfish needs, I do not believe a character who wants to achieve peace within himself and wants to be acknowledged within a community would behave in such a manner. With every chance he got to redeem himself, Mr. Biswas would act irrationally, feeling self-absorbed and careless of others around him. This conversation serves as a great example: "Shama had disapproved from the first and never gone to see the house.

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When Mr. Biswas asked her, "Well, what you think?"

Shama said, "Think? Me? Since when you start thinking that I could think anything? If I am not good enough to go and see your house, I don't see how I could be good enough to say what I think." "Ah!" Mr. Biswas said.

"Swelling up. Vexed. I bet you would be saying something different if it was your mother who was spending some of her dirty money to buy this house." Shama sighed." Mr. Biswas seems to have had one sole goal: to buy a house and get as far as possible from the Tulsis. While his reason is somewhat justified, there was no need to speak like that to his wife. Lastly, I do not think I will come to like Mr. Biswas, even if I read on till the end. A character blinded by greed and selfishness like Mr. Biswas cannot make a drastic change toward the end.

Damanto

Maybe I was harsh with my Judgment, however, Mr. Biswas did not show a redeeming point that could win me over. With all that said, I hope Mr. Biswas at least made amends and asked for forgiveness before his passing.

Regards,

Hawran

Hawraa Hasan Hayder Al-Mohammed

Ganganti'



I Have So Many Questions For You

By Leng Phooi Jing

I Have So Many Questions For You

Dear Maker of a confusing man (Dear Mr. Naipaul),

I have so many questions for you. Do you see yourself in this novel that you wrote? Is this novel to you, an escape from reality or the mirror to your reality? Do you often see the death of a falled ambition as the birth of hope? Or is the death of a falled ambition just a death? I have so many questions for you.

Because to me, the death of a failed ambition is the light at the end of the tunnel. It will give birth to reform, and things will get better from there.

Generally, I do think that Mr. Biswas is a person stereotyped as having failed ambitions. This is so well presented in his journey of finding a house as he failed repeatedly. But I somehow found out that it was not the image that you intended him to have. What you want people to see in him is the exact opposite: you want people to see him as the symbol of hope. You want people to see him getting up again every time his house had failed him. And this is obvious enough to the point that we do not have to use a philosophical point of view to explain it.

If you did not intend to make him a hopeful character, why does he keep trying on a journey that seems impossible and is most likely impossible? Why does he keep getting up and why does he keep his hope flaming and goals focused? If he is meant for chaos, why is his hope to find a house so in order? Are you trying to tell us that Mr. Biswas has always been a symbol of hope? That this impression is somehow tainted by the people around him and the society that he lives in?

I want to be skeptical about him representing hope because how could someone who has so much hope experience so much pain? However, I can't help but see it so clearly. He does have hope.

But this hope is weighing down on the people around him. Maybe he is too obsessed with this hope to the point that it has deformed. The hope deformed and it does not look like hope anymore. It looks like pain.

Could you please tell me what you had in mind when you shaped him? Who is he? Is he a part of you? I have so many questions for you. Reading this novel of yours,

Is equivalent to dissecting my sob story again,

A whole pool of losses,

And a few drops of gain.

Can we agree that it was a lick of the wound,

When some stories blend with ours like a
harmonious waveform?

How do I separate my pain from theirs,

When we have such similar feelings donned?

Are you a part of what you create,

Or are you not?

When they were born from your womb,

Are they what you want people to remember you by

your tomb?

Are we creating bliss or an abyss,

As we create?

Can the two co-exist without starting sore wars in our heads?

So do hope and pain,

Can they coincide justly as mine?

My brain tells me they can't,

But my heart tells me otherwise.

If hope and pain do fall on Mr. Biswas at the same time,

Hey, then I guess this story is trying to teach me: that's really just the way of life.

Someone who knows how hope deformed into pain,

Leng Phooi Jing



Brick by Brick: Finding Hope in A House for Mr. Biswas

By Tanageswary AP Valmurugan

Brick by Brick: Finding Hope in A House for Mr. Biswas

Dear Mr. V.S. Naipaul,

THE IT

I am writing to you in response to your novel A House for Mr. Biswas. Your work has had a profound impact on me, offering a narrative that delves deep into the resilience of the human spirit. It has encouraged me to reflect on the challenges I face in my own life and the importance of hope, even when the odds seem stacked against us.

I agree to a significant extent on the assertion that the novel confirms the possibility of hope and order, instead of failed ambitions, particularly in Chapter 5: Green Vale. It made me reflect on the challenges that everyone faces at some point in their lives. To me, this chapter was crafted to inspire feelings of hopefulness and the belief that things could improve, even in the face of difficulties.

In this chapter, Mr. Biswas and his family move to a new place called Green Vale, a decision which I imagine must have been tough on them. From my perspective, the skepticism and jealousy from the other workers added to the strain of their already difficult circumstances. Yet, despite these challenges, Mr. Biswas's determination to save money and build a home for his family filled me with admiration. His persistence made me reflect on my own aspirations and the importance of perseverance, no matter how distant our dreams may seem.

I was particularly moved when Mr. Biswas, despite his struggles, bought a beautiful dollhouse for his daughter, Savi. Even though it was destroyed, the gesture symbolized his enduring hope and love for his family. This made me think of the times I've tried to bring joy to my loved ones, even when things weren't going well. It is a powerful reminder that our efforts to show love and hope are what truly matters, even if the outcome is not what we expect.

Shama's destruction of the dollhouse, though heartbreaking, became a turning point for Mr. Biswas. His decision to leave his family temporarily underscored the fragility of his dreams and the tumultuous nature of his relationships.



The scene brought forth the reality that pursuing one's dreams often requires difficult choices. It also made me ponder on the sacrifices I may have to make on my journey. Yet, in the end, It was Mr. Biswas's unwavering resolve to reclaim his life that inspired me. His ability to see beyond his current struggles and continue striving was a testament to his resilience, a quality I aspire to emulate in my own life.

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Mr. Biswas's interactions with Mr. MacLean and his efforts to approach Tara and Ajodha for a loan further highlighted his determination. Despite the setbacks and the reluctance to ask for help, Mr. Biswas pressed on. I saw in him a reflection of the tenacity that we all need to cultivate. His story reminded me that no matter how many doors close, there is always another way, another opportunity waiting if we dare to seek it.

Chapter Five encapsulates the essence of perseverance amidst hardship. Your portrayal of Mr. Biswas's journey not only highlights his struggles but also celebrates his strength and determination. This chapter reminded me that life, with all its ups and downs, is a continuous journey of building hope, brick by brick. Your writing has captured the delicate balance between struggle and resilience, and for that, I am deeply grateful.

Thank you for creating such a compelling and inspiring novel. A House for Mr. Biswas has not only provided a narrative that resonates with my own personal experiences but has also reinforced the belief that hope and determination can lead to meaningful change.

Your work has given me a new perspective on life's challenges and has inspired me to pursue my own dreams with renewed vigor.

With appreciation,

MBIL

ana

Tanageswary AP Valmurugan





Reflections on Familial Relationship, Financial Independence & Rays of Optimism From A House for Mr. Biswas

By Tan Hui Jin

Reflections on Familial Relationship, Financial Independence & Rays of Optimism From A House for Mr. Biswas

Dear Naipaul,

Here is a letter to you. First things first, to write about you, somehow I think I need to know more information or even, to see you in real life. However, I do not have an opportunity to meet you in person. Because if I do, I may be able to describe from my perspectives of what kind of person you are, what qualities or attributes you have, what motivates you to write novels, to be an author and so forth through my observation skills as well as my personal engagement with you.

But nothing is bleak. Yeah, I would like to emphasise again, "nothing is bleak" because I can use this golden opportunity to pen down how I felt and what I have learned after reading one of your novels called A House for Mr. Biswas.

On January 4, 2024, it was the date that I first started on Commonwealth Literature class and I was tasked to read the Prologue section of your novel as homework which was assigned by Dr. Jill. Eventually, I came to know you as an acclaimed author and from my memory that I could recall, it was my first time reading a novel about a house, a house of your father, Mr. Mohun Biswas and it was his never-ending quest for a house as his prized possession to be called 'his' during the postcolonial period.

Naipaul, as a novice in literature that I was and am, I couldn't comprehend much from what you wrote in the Prologue as well as in the subsequent chapters of the novel. But whenever I think about a house, the mental image in my mind would lead me to 'home' as the togetherness of family ties which I think, your father may feel the same. A house is a home that brings the sense of togetherness with you, your mother, Shama and other family members. A house is a building block that builds the foundation of a warm home. Similarly to me, a house feels homely, feels warm, feels love-filled, so much so that it can unite my family members because deep down, I appreciate and value togetherness in a familial relationship.

In addition, a house is also a representation of order and stability in creating a solid bonding with my family members. A house of one table where all family members are intact and happily eating and chatting together with laughter that every day is a reunion dinner, not just during Chinese New Year. There is a saying that goes, "A house of one family lives in order and harmoniously." So to say, whenever I think about a house, it directs me to a home of my family and it could be that your father desired the warmth and harmony of a family through a house as much as I do.



Secondly, when your father married your mother, Shama and had you as his son, his identity had changed whereby he was already a family man, and it wasn't a surprise that he would like to be a provider to his family by having a house. Not just having, but owning it under his name as his legacy. This is because as a man, he would like to be financially independent rather than relying on your mother's family, The Tulsis. Having said that, I also have a thought of possessing a house because having a house provides me with security and it is a valuable asset not only to myself but that, as a woman, I can be a provider to my family too.



Naipaul, your father's story has taught me that I can train myself to be financially independent (which means self-reliant) in acquiring a house and not to forget a lesson – to acquire it by my own means. Or else, my family members would have to help out to settle the outstanding debts, not unlike the bitterness that you and your mother tasted.

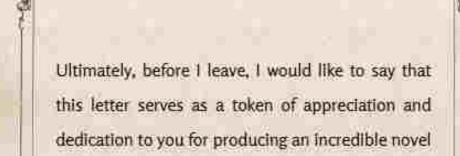
Last but not least, I admire your father's unwavering optimism and perseverance that despite rain and thunderstorms destroying his house at Green Vale, he had a 'never-give-up' attitude and remained hopeful until he achieved it. His unyielding spirit was a true testament that he created a miracle for himself for owning a house of his before his passing.



Thus, I reflect that no matter how hard a situation is, even if it is unfavourable to me (that is way below the rock bottom), I must instil hope in myself to believe that there is light at the end of a tunnel. I must be willing to fight until the end rather than surrendering to failures, setbacks, haters and naysayers because one day, I will triumph into the sky as long as I never say die. I will not give up on my dreams. Darkness is never forever but even if there is continuous darkness in my life, stars and moons are the shining symbols of optimism which keeps me going in the phase of adversity.

Regardless, the story of your father about his house indeed has evoked the emotion in me that my house is my home and it has also taught me several lessons about myself, my ambition and my family as a whole. With that, I couldn't be thankful enough for you narrating it through your novel.





- a letter to thank you for a lifetime's gift.

Thank You.

With love,

Hu Jin

Tan Hui Jin





Letters to Neipaul

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