



## **The Inhabitants of the Camp: *Homo Sacer* and Biopolitical Regimes in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas***

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### **Abstract**

Politicization, in general, and biopoliticization, in particular, of human beings' lives, especially those the state deems expendable, is what informs the heart of the present study. Exploring the subtle ways in which the state renders its subjects docile and at the same time divested of any subjectivity, agency, identity and human rights remarkably helps in better understanding the covert mechanisms of the biopolitical regimes operating within the ideologically-informed, discursive nexus of the sociopolitical fabric of the society. Studying Giorgio Agamben's (1995) seminal text *Homo Sacer* (1995), and his theoretical reworking of Michel Foucault's concept of "biopower" alongside Carl Schmitt's notion of "the state of exception" casts an illuminating light on how such biopolitical regimes and exclusionary states of exception operate within the narrative of V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961). Attempts at biopoliticizing and governmentalizing Mohun Biswas, the fiction's central character, play out in different contexts and manifest themselves within the fabric of both the microcosmic family and macrocosmic society wherein Biswas inhabits, not as a decent member, but as a subjugated inhabitant of a biopolitical camp. Having been biopolitically interpellated and reduced to an Agambenian homo sacer, Biswas is deemed outside of and beneath the law, life and citizenship, and therefore, within a sacrificial order, his life means nothing to the biopolitical state. However, some counter-discursive, counter-biopolitical spaces that Biswas uses to rally against the prevailing sovereignty of the biopolitical regimes of the state should be explored to further buttress or undermine the discursive and ontological potentiality of resistance against biopolitical oppressions of any sort.

*Keywords:* biopolitics, state of exception, the camp, sovereignty, ideology, human rights

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## Introduction

West Indian fiction is famous for its serious concern with a sociopolitical consciousness. V. S. Naipaul, as a representative novelist from the West Indies faced and experienced a society whose values had never been acknowledged and defined before. He therefore found it incumbent upon himself to fashion and refashion unique values and standards against which West Indian experiences could be judged (Rohlehr, 2002), while at the same time trying to bring to light the cumbersome task of the West Indians to define themselves against the discursive sociopolitical normative values imposed by the state. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* seems, at first glance, a novel whose narrative is marked by utmost simplicity and straightforwardness of presentation, far from obliquity and tortuousness, to fulfil an unmistakable effect of directness and precision (Ormerod, 1967). Nevertheless, it should be noted that Naipaul's economical unvarnishedness is far from accidental as he tries to attain many of the novel's remarkable effects through using a consistent structure of imagery and symbolism operating at the surface of the novel (Ormerod, 1967) to cast light on the infrastructural counter-ideological significations inherent in this narrative. The images and symbolisms associated with the house, family and the society in which the protagonist of the novel, Biswas, is entrapped, are central to the understanding of how an inescapable sense of social frustration, identity crisis, excommunication and ennui haunts him as a result of being victimized by an overarching and sovereign system. This novel, which is set in colonial Trinidad, is an agonizingly humorous account of a man's epic quest for the resurrection of his bruised ego, lost autonomy and fractured identity; it dramatizes the sociohistorical and sociopolitical effects of colonialism in Trinidad and the plight of an Indo-Caribbean man as he undergoes arduous trials and tribulations to redeem his individual agency robbed by the state (Ceraso & Connolly, 2009). As Naipaul (1961) once said, "the politics of a country can only be an extension of its ideas of human relationships" (Ceraso & Connolly, 2009, p. 109), whose intersections with "race, class, ethnicity and nation" (Ceraso & Connolly) and implications for their undeniable complicity with an oppressive regime of truths could be studied within a larger framework of sovereignty and biopolitics.

## Literature Review

This section offers various critical perspectives on V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, encapsulating some of the most important studies previously done on this novel and how they have shed light on different aspects of the novel and its themes: Stephen Casmier's (1995) "Black Narcissus: Representation, Reproduction, Repetition and Seeing Yourself in Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Enigma of Arrival*" thematically draws upon and inverts the myth of Narcissus so as to show that just as it is accepted that Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection (representation) in the stream, it should also be accepted that in not seeing himself, Mr. Biswas experiences the very opposite emotion—being one of inconspicuousness and self-denigration. GMT Emezue's (2006) "Failed Heroes, Failed Memory: Between the Alternatives of (V. S. Naipaul's) Biswas and (Mongo Beti's) Medza" explores how most of the contemporary critical opinion about the West Indies is

inextricably connected with the colonial attitude toward Africa and has accordingly suffered the throes similar to those of postcolonial African States. Emezue (2006) therefore studies how Naipaul, as the representative West Indian novelist and Beti, as the representative African novelist, critically respond to the ramifications of the colonial encounters of their people through the traumatic memories of their characters.

Keith Garebian's "The Grotesque Satire of *A House for Mr. Biswas*" finds problems with and deficiency in viewing this novel as either a tragic Caribbean epic about a doomed man or a comic epic about a man whose vision is farcically incommensurate with the realities of the world he inhabits. Garebian rather sees Naipaul's novel as a deterministic tragicomedy, whose protagonist is included into and excluded from the society, being forced to choose an identity and denied the opportunity to do so, at the same time. Bhoendradatt Tewarie's (2002) "*A House for Mr. Biswas* Revisited: Ethnicity, Culture, Geography and Beyond" delves into how Biswas manages to win an independence for himself, his wife and children after having survived a tragic period of rootlessness and restiveness to reestablish their roots anew. Tewarie (2002) refers to the new house a symbol of new identity and autonomy, offering new possibilities and self-actualization.

Ram Prasad Rai's (2017) "Displacement as a Diasporic Experience in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*" investigates the theme of displacement and its representation as a diasporic experience in Naipaul's narrative. The article delves into the ways in which the character of Mr. Biswas grapples with the challenges of cultural dislocation, identity crisis, and the quest for a sense of belonging. It studies Naipaul's depiction of displacement, the complexities of diasporic identity, and the impact of colonialism and postcolonial dynamics on the characters' experiences. B. P. Giri's (2015) "Colonial Displacement and Subjectivity in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*" analyzes the ways in which the characters in the novel, particularly Mr. Biswas, experience displacement as a result of colonialism and its legacy. It analyzes the ways in which colonial power dynamics mold and inform the characters' identities and sense of self. The article explores how Naipaul depicts the complexities of colonial displacement and its traumatizing effects on subjectivity, illuminating the broader themes of postcolonialism and identity in Naipaul's narrative.

William Ghosh's (2017) "The Formalist Genesis of 'Postcolonial' Reading: Brathwaite, Bhabha, and *A House for Mr. Biswas*" explores the formalist approach to postcolonial reading through the works of Kamau Brathwaite, Homi Bhabha, and V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The author examines how these theorists and the novel engage with formalist elements such as language, structure, and narrative techniques to address postcolonial themes and representations. The article highlights the significance of formalist analysis in understanding the complexities of postcolonial literature and its relationship with literary traditions and conventions. However, none of the above-mentioned studies done on this novel, among many others, seems to have benefited from the novelty that the present study does in its perspicuous analysis of Naipaul's narrative in light of an amalgamation of Foucault's Biopolitics and other anti-(neo)liberal theories of the recent decades. By

combining these frameworks, this study aims to shed new light on the novel's themes and enrich the existing scholarly discourse on *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

### **Theoretical Framework: Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* and Biopolitical Regimes**

Giorgio Agamben (b. 1942), an influential Italian thinker, whose paradigmatic work, *Homo Sacer* (1995), was published before the tumultuous events of 9/11 and the ensuing "war on terror," astutely addresses the multilayered incarnations of the mechanics and paradigms of state sovereignty and political power in the contemporary society, focused his reflections and erudition on the constitution of social, ethical and political assumptions regarding the state of society today and the position of an individual within its very fabric. Borrowing from and building on Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and Carl Schmitt's theorization of "the state of exception," Agamben (1995) investigates with great range, precision, and perceptiveness the covert or implicit presence of biopolitical regimes within the history of traditional political theory, shedding light on the intricate political and legal discursive structures of the modern societies and nation-states. His groundbreaking contribution is to teasing out the ways in which biopolitical regimes of power, exercising control and exclusion, differentiate between, on the one hand, those whose lives are worth being protected, and when the occasion arises, sacrificed, and those who should be robbed of all basic human rights, even the right to live, on the other (Ojakangas, 2005).

Agamben (1995) also alludes to Aristotle's concept of man as a political animal, extends his analysis to the discussion of the history of Western sociopolitical philosophy vis-à-vis sovereignty and the state, and finally concludes that all throughout the scrutinized historical annals and treatises, the conception and materialization of sovereignty as the exertion of power over "life" has always been covert and implicit. This covertness, according to Agamben's arguments, has to do with the inseparable relationship between sovereignty and the sacred, or the state of sanctity. Agamben draws on Carl Schmitt's "state of exception" to refer to the exceptional and discriminatory status of the ruler as an exception to the discursive structures and all the rules he wantonly imposes on others and later excludes the ones he deems deviant and noncompliant from the sphere of social privileges and prerogatives (Reynolds, 2014).

Agamben's (1995) seminal text, *Homo Sacer*, is a good manifestation of the deployment and appropriation of Foucault's notion of biopower; however, while Foucault is interested in the nonstate, diffusive and multi-loci power exercised by and through the various bodies within the discursive web of the society, Agamben pays particular attention to the ways in which the biopolitical regimes of the sovereign state embark upon deploying the power at their disposal to reduce and (bio)politicize the life of a certain group of its subjects towards a disdained and animalistic politics of subject-life formation (Vaughan-Williams, 2012).

There is an unmistakable sense of ambivalence with regard to the conception of *homo sacer* in Agamben's (1995) theoretical lexicon: he employs

‘sacer,’ meaning sacred in a negative light, connoting a sense of dirtiness. It means something highly esteemed and imbued with inviolable sanctity inasmuch to designate someone whom one should not come into any contact with, and someone who is ostracized from the society and all of its discursive circles. In other words, he brings into light the indissociable relationship between the sacred and the taboo: the sacred is one who can be paradoxically killed but not sacrificed. This strange inverse exaltation of the sacred means first seeing it as a being a necessary part of the system; counterintuitively however, he or she can be taken out of that system via killing without repercussions and with full impunity as such beings have been reduced to life only creatures (Cain et al, 2018). He views this inherent paradox as the crux of the discursive mechanisms through which modern individuals are shaped and do operate within the fabric of the sovereign society that imposes biopolitical control over the naked lives of the *homo sacers*.

To further elucidate what he specifically means by ‘life’ in his appropriation of Foucauldian biopolitics and conceptualization of *homo sacer*, Agamben (1995) makes references to Aristotle’s *Politics* so as to draw a fine distinction between the two different, yet relevant conceptions of life: one is *zoe*, which refers to the physical and fleshly life of the body and its corporeal materiality, also called “bare life” or “naked life” by Agamben (1995). The other is *bios*, which refers to the life fashioned by an individual as a result of his or her cumulative discursive interactions with other individuals and discourses (Gratton, 2011). The “threshold to modernity” is reached precisely when bare life (denoted by the Greek *zoe*) enters politics, at which point the “state of exception comes more and more to the foreground as the fundamental political structure and ultimately begins to become the rule” (Gratton, 2011, p. 602). The employment and appropriation of power in the name of proliferation, productivity, generativity and ultimately life, materialized in biopower wielded and exercised by the biopolitical regimes of the modern sovereignty, is how the state manages to control and proliferate individuals’ lives (Cain et al, 2018).

Agamben’s (1995) percipient observation about the state of individuals within the biopolitical regimes is marked by his insistence on the exclusion of the ostracized, bare-life *homo sacers* so as to formulate and define the life of other worthier citizens. This exclusionary ‘state of exception’ paradigm, according to Agamben, operates through various layers of the biopolitical society, wherein protections, rights and privileges are monopolized for some and proscribed for others. The privileged individuals benefit from a *bios* version of life, protected by the state and the law; the excluded *homo sacers* however, are divested of all their basic rights, robbed of citizenship, and ultimately ousted from the legal, social and political sphere of the society and banished to the extraterritorial ‘camps’ of the biopolitical regime. The camp, as opposed to prison, is the space that abides by to the originary structures and basic tents of the law. This can be demonstrated by the fact that “while prison law only constitutes a particular sphere of penal law and is not outside the normal order, the juridical constellation that guides the camp is martial law and the state of siege” (Agamben, 1995, p. 20).

Introducing some into the biopolitical camps poses a serious threat to their human rights and citizenship, depriving them of the right to a live a full life. The biopolitical power wielded by the state of exception and imposed onto the inhabitants of the camp—*homo sacers*—is state-approved, yet extraterritorial (Cain et al., 2018). That is, this biopolitical regime of power can do almost anything to harm and denude the inhabitants of the camp as this power is given the *carte blanche* by the state to operate in whatever way it sees fit, and is, in the meantime, situated outside the common legislated jurisdictional territory established by the law—meaning that it is accorded the leeway to execute whatever atrocities it deems necessary to keep the inhabitants in place and is constantly exonerated from punitive mandates of the law (Cain et al. 2018).

Taking the modern *homo sacers* as the inhabitants of the extraterritorial camps of the biopolitical regime, some analogies can be made between Agamben and Hannah Arendt's theories with regard to totalitarian regimes and the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis against the German Jews: just as the Jews were stripped of their most basic human rights before being sentenced to the horrendous concentration camps, so too are the *homo sacers* inhabiting the biopolitical state (Peters, 2014). Accordingly, Agamben (1995) draws the following conclusions: 1- "The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion). 2- The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoe* and *bios*. 3- Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West" (Peters, 2014).

In the modern era, according to Agamben (1995), the prevalence and permeation of the discourse of rights and the rise of biopolitical power has played a significant role in legitimizing the wanton atrocities of the political regimes in that the concept of rights serves a dual function, like a two-prong sword (Cain et al, 2018). "The paradox of sovereignty" and the rights it grants consists in the fact the "sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order" (Agamben, 1995). On the face of it, rights can be viewed as a liberating agent; however, within a biopolitical regime, argues Agamben, rights place the recipient of those rights within the legal manacles of the system and therefore make that subject accountable to the juridical-legal mandates of the state. The fact that there is almost no real life outside the premises of the biopolitical rights is undisputable, but at the same time, entitlement to and entrapment in the rights, more often than not, perpetuates and bolsters the sovereign regime rather than undermine it (Agamben, 1995).

An interesting point of contention raised by Agamben (1995) is that the very essence of rights within the biopolitical regimes is contradictory and does not make sense, no matter from what perspective it is looked at. The biopolitical regimes of the tyrannical state are the granters and enforcers of the very same rights that are meant to protect people from the same state that has given them those rights (Cain et al, 2018). This seems preposterous and insensible, argues Agamben. That is also why the rights one is being accorded as a result of being a citizen are accompanied by other more fundamental rights one is able to avail oneself of as a

result of being a human. In this light, the supposedly human rights bestowed and upheld by the state for citizens are no longer efficacious in protecting those *homo sacers* the state excludes from the premises of its lawful jurisdiction (Cain et al, 2018).

### Discussion and Analysis

#### **Biswas: A *Homo Sacer***

#### ***Biswas's Family as a Biopolitical Camp***

V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, a "fictive biography" (Ramchand, 1969, p. 60), depicts Biswas as a man born of a poor, laboring-class parentage in a small town. From the very beginning, his way of life is dictatorially predetermined; that is, being a member of an underprivileged, lower-class family who has to lead an impoverished existence, working tirelessly and doing backbreaking labors to ultimately build the very house that symbolizes "status and stability" that he desires (Sinfield, 2004, p. 148). This unescapable exclusionary state of exception enforced by the locus of the family is always present with Biswas. This biopolitical narrative is given forceful expression in the laborious lifetime of hard labor that Biswas has to go through as an overworked apprentice in the business of sign-writing or working as a journalist. Significantly, all these inferior, toiling positions play crucial roles in shaping Biswas's ultimate destiny. For example, during the time he was serving the sign-writing business he met his future wife or it was during the time he was working as journalist that he became able to find residence and set up household appliances for himself.

From the moment Biswas was born, the idea of family as an inescapable biopolitical camp significantly influences his life's path. Yet it is notable that in spite of showing that overarching power dominates Mr. Biswas, the narrative is at times critical of his character. In the words of Alan Sinfield (2004), "the presentation of Mr. Biswas is a strange mixture of sympathy and satire, inwardness and distance," making the narrative voice appear "split between identification with Mr. Biswas and near-contempt for him" (148-9). The narrative voice, in various parts of the novel, emphasizes that Biswas was born into this world in a family wherein everything is predetermined and great expectations are held. These expectations influence every single aspect of Biswas's life, such as the course of life he should conform to and even his physical appearance. However, these illegitimate expectations are quickly defied by Biswas's abnormal physique, causing many troubles for the newborn baby as he is rendered unworthy of life:

"What is it?" the old man asked. "Boy or girl?"

"Boy, boy," the midwife cried. "But what sort of boy? Six-fingered, and born in the wrong way."

The old man groaned and Bissoondaye said, "I knew it. There is no luck for me." (Naipaul, 1961, p. 5)

From the very moment he makes his entrance into this world as a human being, an oppressive space apart from the legal and political realm is inviolably



written and determined for Biswas: a boy “born in the wrong way” and a boy who brings “no luck.” This embryonic space gradually develops into a fully-fledged biopolitical camp that begins to impact almost all facets of Biswas’s troubled life. The allegations made by a pundit who greatly strengthens the belief that Biswas’s ill-fated birth is an all-afflicting plague contributes to the intensification of this politicization of life in the form of the exclusionary practices of a state of exception. When the abnormality of Biswas’s hand is concerned, the pundit refers to other features of his physical deformity:

At last, he said, “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 a spendthrift. Possibly a liar as well. It is hard to be sure about those gaps between the teeth. They might mean only one of those things or they might mean all three.” (Naipaul, 1961, p. 5)

Accordingly, behind-the-scene shenanigans takes centerstage in Biswas’s family under the guise of a so-called pundit. The pundit’s comments on and interpretations about Biswas’s appearance are all shallow in insight and bereft of any meaningful essence; his predictions about the newborn’s future are all marked by imprecision and intended to shade the truth. Given the pundit’s authoritative stature and ideological power among the native residents, his ominous prophecies are naively accepted by Biswas’s parents and, as a consequence, these irrational prophecies grow into and act as a forceful biopolitical agent, negatively shaping and denigrating Biswas’s future life, stripping him of all his rights and privileges. Noteworthy and astonishing in the pundit’s claims is the fact that his prophecies and interpretive comments are founded upon mere speculation about the future growth of Biswas’s teeth: “He will have good teeth but they will be rather wide, and there will be spaces between them” (Naipaul, 1961, p. 4). This comment clearly shows that his prophecies and interpretations are obviously not based upon even the most basic tenets of sane observations, putting a stamp of affirmation on the superstitious nature of the pundit’s allegations.

Unfortunately, however, the pundit’s unfounded allegations are blindly accepted by Biswas’s family, who represent a microcosmic space for the larger biopolitical camp, legitimizing the overarching religious and political regime. The pundit’s unquestioning authority among people is itself illustrative of the presence of a kind of biopolitical camp within the fabric and setting of the society Naipaul wisely critiques. Such a position is perceptibly at work in composing and constructing an account of life for an infant named Mohun Biswas. With the authorial license accorded to pundits, it is no surprise that the pundit is not only accepted as accountable and trustworthy by Biswas’s parents, but is also requested to make more prophecies and prescriptions about the infant and his ominous future, shaping and dictating his reduced-to-bare-life existence:

“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.”



“Never bath him?”

“I don’t mean exactly that.” He raised his right hand, bunched the fingers and, with his head on one side, said slowly, “One has to interpret what the book says.” He tapped the wobbly almanac with his left hand. “And when the book says water, I think it means water in its natural form.”

“Natural form.”

“Natural form,” the pundit repeated, but uncertainly. “I mean,” he said quickly, and with some annoyance, “keep him away from rivers and ponds. And of course, the sea. And another thing,” He added with satisfaction. “He will have an unlucky sneeze.” He began to pack the long leaves of his almanac. “Much of the evil this boy will undoubtedly bring will be mitigated if his father is forbidden to see him for twenty-one days.” (Naipaul, 1961, p. 6)

The pundit’s prophecies about Biswas’s life poignantly result in the devastation of the entire family. A few years later, Mohun takes a neighbor’s calf to meadowland, and accidentally approaches a stream. Because of the pundit’s inhibition, the boy has never come close to a stream or any watercourse “in its natural form”; for that reason, he becomes confused and leaves loose the rein of the calf and it goes away. Subsequently, fearing the prospects of having to suffer the severe punishments of his father, Mohun goes into hiding. At this point, given the feelings of fatal danger, Mohun’s father presumes that his son is in imminent danger of being drowned into the stream. In his abortive attempt to rescue Mohun from drowning, the father is drowned himself, partially fulfilling the pundit’s superstitious and fallacious prophecies. At the end of this tragic accident, the family is permanently crippled and emotionally bankrupt, sabotaging the lives of its members. The leading biopolitical role that the pundit plays in creating docile and governable *homo sacers* and members of the camp instead of citizens accorded legal and juridical rights finds a symbolic expression in the mirror that he recommends to Mohun’s father. In instructing him in ways in which to treat and rear the abnormal boy, the pundit encourages using a mirror, an act which implies the sheer repetition of stupidity:

“On the twenty-first day the father *must* see the boy. But not in the flesh.”

“In a mirror, pundit?”

“I would consider that ill-advised. Use a brass plate. Scour it well.”

“Of course.” (Naipaul, 1961, p. 6)

As a matter of fact, “a brass plate” can be taken to implicitly account for the employment of mirror. Although Mohun’s father advocates using mirror, the pundit objects and suggests a more backhanded way of using mirror. This is probably suggestive of the fact that the process through which a bare-life homo sacer is produced ought to be regulated more unconsciously. By virtue of the communication of Mohun and his father through mirror, he unconsciously comes to the realization that he should unselectively obey the regulations and biopolitical

regime set forth by the father. This compliance is later brought to light more evidently when the adult Mohun decides to serve a pundit's apprenticeship. However, given his disobedient nature that tends to defy authority to have his own individual voice, Mohun is soon excommunicated from the circle on bad terms. A crucial fact that denotes the substantial role the pundit performs in the society is that it is he who decides on the name for the newborn. Mohun's father is enthralled by the pundit's presence; he begs the pundit to pick a name for his son. When the pundit proposes that "a perfectly safe prefix would be *Mo*," they ultimately choose Mohun. V. S. Naipaul describes the circumstances in this way:

The pundit was surprised and genuinely pleased. "But that is excellent. Excellent. *Mohun*. I couldn't have chosen better myself. For Mohun, as you know, means the beloved, and was the name given by the milkmaids to Lord Krishna." His eyes softened at the thought of the legend and for a moment he appeared to forget Bissoondaye and Mr. Biswas. (Naipaul, 1961, p. 7)

The above extract clearly draws attention to the fact that the authority the pundit has derives largely from his adherence to and engagement with religion as a domineering discourse, by virtue of which he can easily exert influence on all negotiations and exchanges. The reasoning that the influential pundit employs to justify his deeds and statements in this situation as well as his constant allusions to "the long leaves of his almanac" all serve as vibrant denotations of how instrumental a project religion is in the society that Naipaul tries to portray. Though Biswas shows reaction against the domineering discourses in his adulthood through especial manners and styles of life he assumes, his conducts show a sort of artificiality, or what Keith Garebian (1984) calls "dandyism" (495), which is the result of his inability to develop a true, solid sense of self because of the presence of instrumental discourses that dominated him all through his life. Though the dandyism in question is aimed to be "rebellion of sorts," it turns out to be "foolish because the display isolates Biswas as a self-caricature" (Garebian, 1984, p. 495).

### ***Biswas's Society as a Biopolitical Camp***

In the previous part, the determinative role family played in composing a biopolitical camp for Mohun Biswas in a local setting was discussed. It was clearly shown how the dominant presence of the pundit impacted and controlled the thoughts, feelings and ultimately the decisions of Biswas's family and how such a supreme authority is deeply ingrained in a wider discursive web of biopolitical power. Finally, it was reasonably concluded that from the very early days of his life, Biswas was troubled by the unescapable omnipresence of tyrannical biopolitical camps which were intended to rob him of his distinctive voice and individuality with the aims of shaping a *homo sacer*, not an entitled citizen, out of him. These examinations imply that the biopolitical power adopted by the society exert their massive impact on every single facet of society including even domestic settings such as family. This might portray the relationship between society's biopolitical oppressive regimes and domestic settings; however, there are other examples which

can cast light on the issue. To better understand the relationship in which the existence of society's normative conventions is more tangibly felt in imposing prefabricated identity to people and in viewing them as subservient *homo sacers* instead of decent citizens, one should take note of the time when the narrator makes references to the way in which Tara, an affluent aunt, treats Biswas in two contradictory ways. Since Biswas has the role of Brahmin, he is given a variety of identities at different points:

As for Dehuti, he hardly saw her, though she lived close, at Tara's. He seldom went there except when Tara's husband, prompted by Tara, held a religious ceremony and needed Brahmins to feed. Then Mr. Biswas was treated with honour; stripped of his ragged trousers and shirt, and in a clean dhoti, he became a different person, and he never thought it unseemly that the person who served him so deferentially with food should be his own sister. In Tara's house he was respected as a Brahmin and pampered; yet as soon as the ceremony was over and he had taken his gift of money and cloth and left, he became once more only a labourer's child –*father's occupation: labourer was the entry in the birth certificate* F. Z. Ghany had sent—living with a penniless mother in one room of a mud hut. And throughout life his position was like that. (Naipaul, 1961, p. 21)

In this part, Naipaul gives a remarkable description of the two opposing identities given to Biswas in two different circumstances. Although Biswas is normally a manual worker, he assumes the role of Brahmin. Thus, he is well treated and well nourished. This decency and position actually derive from his compliance with an institutional and traditional code of conduct which is made sacred by the unimpeachable biopolitical regimes of the society. In "religious ceremony," Biswas is co-opted as a part and parcel of a project that the society in question approves of. As a result, he is generously offered decent clothes, sufficient food and good place to be seated. It is worth highlighting that in this participation Biswas is well familiar with and aware of the ritualistic spirit of ceremonies and does not take them for granted. The narrator remarks on this crucial point very evidently: "Mr. Biswas had never questioned the deference shown him when he had gone to Tara's to be fed as a Brahmin and on his rounds with Pundit Jairam. But he had never taken it seriously; he had thought of it as one of the rules of a game that was only occasionally played" (Naipaul, 1961, p. 31). It is this perception that instigates his severance and estrangement from Pundit Jairam and abandonment of religious commitments. The following excerpt clearly indicates the fiercely rebellious temperaments of Mr. Biswas in this regard:

The assumption of the Brahmin identity is superficial, false and fleeting, and Biswas has to return to the reality of his life, a reality which is in marked contrast to the superficial, honorary existence. Biswas's rejection of his understudying to Pundit Jairam is symbolic of his rejection of the superficial life. The incident marks the beginning of his psychological problems, for he is not only physically but also religiously constipated. (Naipaul, 1961, p. 46)

Biswas is a rebel and nonconformist in nature who boldly rejects the artificial and frivolous life that the tyrannical biopolitical regimes he is troubled by have created for him. Although Biswas might have benefitted from his shallow and nominal role, he rejects them all. The reason behind this non-compliance and bold rejection is that he is more interested in becoming a true, distinctive citizen, not a biopolitically-informed *homo sacer*. It is in effect this characteristic feature in Biswas which fashions him to serve as a representative figure for the counter-discursivity of dominant discourses rather than a mindless devotee of society's biopolitical regimes. The three things that he believes he must achieve, namely a house to be owned, a son to be acknowledged, and a self-consciousness to be achieved through writing, are "things that set him apart from those around him" (Ten Kortenaar, 2011, p. 111), disentangling him from the tyrannical biopolitical regimes.

Another distinctive point at which society's biopolitical regimes in the novel come to a conspicuous fore is the school where Biswas goes to. This site which serves educational purposes actually typifies and resembles the misguided modernizing project that the imperial power has incorporated in its colonizing and exploitative biopolitics to exert as much tacit coercion and control over subjects as possible. Significant as a figure in this center is Lai, a teacher who accurately typifies the exploitative, yet productive project of the educational biopolitical regime of the school as a camp. Naipaul informs his readers of the fact that Lai originally comes "from a low Hindu caste" who "converted to Presbyterianism" (Naipaul, 1961, p. 17). The profoundly important implication of this is that Lai has subjected himself to the changes and manipulations that the pervasive imperial hegemony desires to bring about. While he disregarded his Indian origin, he has now been given the critical enterprise of enforcing the new religious biopolitical tyranny in the form of education and indoctrination from an early age of students. Consequently, the readers realize the ways in which Lai "held all unconverted Hindus in contempt" (Naipaul, 1961, p. 17). Lai's attempts can be interpreted in the way the ruling power looks at "the structure of the Hindu community in Trinidad" and in the way such a power makes every effort to compel them to falsely assimilate the concocted notion "that they are inferior and without history" (p. 31). The following lines bring to light the ways in which Lai as a representative figure of the domineering biopolitical regime in the Canadian Mission school endeavors to enforce the rules:

As part of this contempt, he spoke to them in broken English. "Tomorrow, I want you to bring your both certificate. You hear?"

"Both sutificate?" Bipti echoed the English words. "I don't have any."

"Don't have any, eh?" Lai said the next day. "You people don't even know how to born, it look like." (Naipaul, 1961, p. 18)

As the above extract vividly shows, Lai is a figure whose role transcends the simplicities of just a teacher; he can also be taken to be a figure who represents the dominant power and thus imparts and publicizes the colonization and modernization project of that hegemonic biopolitical system. The ways Lai behaves toward Biswas and fellow "unconverted" students unambiguously indicate that he is

assigned to perform some ideologically biopolitical roles in the school as an integral part of the hegemonic and colonial enterprise. In effect, he constantly remarks on and alludes to the matters which are very crucial for the colonial project of the hegemonic system. By being scornful of students' religion and race, which are now minor voices of the society, Lai strives to encourage them to join into the dominant and hegemonic biopolitical regimes that the new colonial system has inhumanely formulated.

Such an exhortative action leaped into by Lai, which is also carried out in larger scale by the dominant biopolitics of the system, is clearly indicative of the fact that in the colonization and modernization project of the political system there is no chance for the minority to survive. The narrator provides a vivid description of the wanton annihilation of the social standing and hierarchy of Hindus in the colonized Trinidad. As a consequence of such a sinister and abusive project, some people are obligated to consign their religion, faith, custom, tradition and mother tongue to oblivion and unselectively internalize the systematic and ideological belief that those who are by any means affiliated with the past are barbarically primitive and uncivilized in nature. As referred to by the narrator in the novel, since the underprivileged students are not able to fully grasp the colonial "broken English," Lai, as the authoritative and officious voice, is given full authority to condemn them "don't even know how to born" (Naipaul, 1961, p. 18). Regarding the matter of certificate as touched upon by Lai, the colonial biopolitical system aims at concocting and conceptualizing "a new ranking based on individualism which values the free initiative of individuals" (p. 31). Mohammad's argument might be true to a point; however, the individualism in question seems to be an affectation and, in the end, it is principally concerned with the purposes of rendering individuals docile by compelling all the people in the society to bow to the colonial decree. This unquestioning obedience is exacted from people in return for giving them birth certificates. As a matter of fact, it is a biopolitical, colonial project that decrees if anyone desires to live as a normal part of this society, they must get a birth certificate, the prerequisite of which is absolute and unthinking conformity to the hegemonic decree. This also serves as an implied caution: if Biswas wants an opportunity to pursue his studies, he must fully abide by the regulations of the colonially biopolitical regime and obtain a birth certificate.

The rites carried out in schools exhibit the propensity to incorporate students into the reigning system's biopolitical camps to reduce them to *homo sacers*. Take, for instance, Naipaul's depiction of the scene in which students ceremoniously chant a song: "The chanting of the children pleased Lai. He believed in thoroughness, discipline and what he delighted to call stick-to-it-iveness, virtues he felt unconverted Hindus particularly lacked" (Naipaul, 1961, p. 19). This ceremonial chanting in the Mission School is intended to instill a sense of order, compliance and discipline into the so-called "unconverted Hindu." The far-reaching implication of this is that biopolitical regimes plainly demonstrate themselves in different ways to fashion their controllable and educable inhabitants of the camp who are rendered subservient. This method proves more effective when the narrator

states that the song is later reserved in the banks of Biswas's unconscious mind and he continuously chants the lines:

In the snowy and the blowy,

In the blowy and the snowy.

Words and tune were based, remotely, on *Roaming in the Gloaming*, which the choir at Lai's school had once sung to entertain important visitors from the Canadian Mission. (Naipaul, 1961, p. 60)

This indelible and disproportionate impact upon Biswas indicates that the biopolitical enterprise and colonial project of the colonial land is so si

nister and insidiously powerful that it adversely affects Biswas who, on the face of it, is a defiant character. In addition to song and music, there are numerous other instances within the novel which account for the biopolitical project of colonial powers to mold characters and fashion submissive nonpersons who are deprived of their individuality to do anything of their own volition. For instance, in a very decisive section of the narrative, Lai teaches students mathematics in a very severe and punitive way. The lines that follow very clearly show the barbaric way he teaches them through outward expression of bitterness and resentment:

"Stop!" Lai cried, waving his tamarind rod. "Biswas, ought twos are how much?"

"Two."

"Come up here. You, Ramguli, ought twos are how much?"

"Ought."

"Come up. That boy with a shirt that looks like one of his mother bodice. How much?"

"Four." (Naipaul, 1961, p. 19)

In the above extract, Lai allegorically teaches something mathematical which is innately associated with orderliness and question and answer. During his teaching, he employs "tamarind rod" and belittles the students. He recurrently asks the question "ought twos are how much?" It is very crucial to note that such misdemeanors are towards the supposed "unconverted" students. These all indicate that Lai is there at school to serve the purposes of an agent to transform minor discourse into the predominantly ideological and biopolitical apparatuses to perpetuate the abusive cycle of discipline and punishment. To this end, Lai is even authorized to mete out corporal punishment and commit physical harassment: "He caught hold of Mr. Biswas, pulled his trousers tight across his bottom, and began to apply the tamarind rod, saying as he beat, "Ought twos are ought. Ought oughts are ought. *One* twos are two" (Naipaul, 1961, p. 19). Moreover, Lai arrogantly advises and requires students to impart his teaching to their families. At the same time as conversing with one of the students about his sister-in-law, "Lai seized the boy and started to use the tamarind rod—"I want you to tell her that ought twos don't make

four. I want you to tell her that ought oughts are ought, ought twos are ought, one twos are two, and *two twos are four*” (Naipaul, 1961, p. 20).

Lai’s determined persistence can be interpreted as a trait transcending pedagogical responsibilities. In an indirect way, he strives to make the “unconverted” students realize that within the biopolitical discursive web of the sovereign system’s ideological power “one twos are two” and nothing else. He even requires them to pass on this biopolitical ideology to their families. The presence and agency of Lai are principally aimed at serving the sociopolitical and ideological agendas of the colonial-biopolitical project; this ideological presence of Lai’s is later revealed more blatantly by the colonial materials the school tries to teach: “Mr. Biswas was taught other things. He learned to say the Lord’s Prayer in Hindi from the *King George V Hindi Reader*, and he learned many English poems by heart from the *Royal Reader* (Naipaul, 1961). All these materials are the brainchildren and derivatives of the biopolitical tyranny which desperately tries to force its oppressive ideology upon its *homo sacers*.

### ***Biswas’s Minor Status: A Defiance of Biopolitical Tyranny***

In the previous part, the ways in which the biopolitical system and its hegemonic discursive web of ideological power of the reigning system react to and oppress Biswas and other “unconverted” students were shown and discussed. These Hindu people are tangible and representative instances of the presence of minor voices in the novel that are inhumanely deemed inappropriate and insufficient through the prejudiced lens of the biopolitical regime. At this point, the issue that grows in significance and merits further attention is the extent to which these biopolitical camps and exclusionary states of exception have succeeded in supplanting and discarding the minor discourse. Notably, the narrator subtly refers to this matter. As touched upon before, when Biswas was invited to attend religious rites as a Brahmin, “he had never taken it seriously; he had thought of it as one of the rules of a game that was only occasionally played” (Naipaul, 1961, p. 31). Furthermore, when the narrator touches upon Biswas’s involvement in and contribution to Mission school, he lastly declares, “At Lai’s dictation he made copious notes, which he never seriously believed, about geysers, rift valleys, watersheds, currents, the Gulf Stream, and a number of deserts ... The history Lai taught he regarded as simply a school subject, a discipline, as unreal as the geography” (Naipaul, 1961, p. 20). The remarks made by the narrator intimate that Biswas remains a secluded and aloof figure all throughout the novel’s narrative.

Contrary to Lai, who succumbed and fell prey to the ideological snares of the biopolitical system and became an inhabitant of the camp, Biswas flouts the authority and endeavors to preserve his native identity in that he preferred his native individuality to the biopolitical subjectivity. So, the implication runs, Biswas is a shrewd character who counters propagandas and biopolitical agendas of the states of exception. This line of reasoning is substantiated by the narrator when he expresses that “And now Mr. Biswas began to make fresh calculations, working out over and over” (Naipaul, 1961, p. 254). The same touch of counter-biopolitical and counter-



discursive sentiment can also be detected in Biswas's classmates. The narrator puts the readers in the picture about the fact that "They tore off their shirt buttons, exchanged them for marbles and with these Alec won more, struggling continually to repair the depredations of Lai, who considered the game low and had forbidden it in the school grounds" (Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* 21). Students strive to rally against the politicization of their lives and stand up for their native manners which were suppressed and pushed to the margins by the biopolitical regime, an act which is indicative of the students' tireless struggles to preserve their local heritages.

Regarding the matter of minor status, the narrator informs the readers of the fact that Biswas's family origins can be traced back to Hindus and that they belong to Brahmin social caste. The ideologically oppressive narrative created and promoted by system's discursive web of biopolitical discourses causes their Brahmin social caste to be supplanted by a tyrannical ideology. Such a dramatic social transformation acutely impacts the identity of Biswas and other fellow people. Undergoing such a transformative transition for Brahmins means a transition from ideological narratives of the biopolitical regime to minor status. Since the emergent ruling class scornfully belittles Brahmin as a peripheral class, Biswas has to suffer the agony of bare life and non-personhood within the confines of a biopolitical camp. Unsurprisingly, Biswas is not deemed an outsider or an expelled character in his own native land. The transformative transition in question also leaves its most lasting impacts upon the homes the newly minor people reside in. In a very florid gesture, the narrator describes the ways in which Mr. Biswas passes by and in the meantime depicts the setting his fellow men dwell in:

His way lay along the County Road and the Eastern Main Road. Both were lined for stretches with houses that were ambitious, incomplete, unpainted, often skeletal, with wooden frames that had grown grey and mildewed while their owners lived in one or two imperfectly enclosed rooms. Through unfinished partitions, patched up with box-boards, tin and canvas, the family clothing could be seen hanging on lengths of string stretched across the inhabited rooms like bunting; no beds were to be seen, only a table and chair perhaps, and many boxes. Twice a day he cycled past these houses, but that evening he saw them as for the first time. From such failure, which until only that morning awaited him, he had by one stroke made himself exempt. (Naipaul, 1961, p. 21)

The narrator's descriptive words are saturated with an unmistakable sense of estrangement and unfulfilled aspirations. What the narrator gives verbal portrayal to is actually the condition of people reduced to *homo sacers* with bare life only, for whom there is no legally and socially habitable space in the discursive and hegemonic enterprise of the reigning hegemony, except for the biopolitical camp. This exclusionary state of exception, marked by deprivation and seclusion, is given symbolic representation in the "incomplete" and "unfinished" building that Biswas sees while cycling. Though Mr. Biswas is a member of minority, he resolutely persists in his struggle and makes every effort to have his own voice and thereby define and assert his individual identity. This counter-biopolitical quest for identity and individuality finds its symbolic resonances within Mr. Biswas's quest to have a

house for himself, an act which is indicative of his attempts to stand up for and stake out a claim on the retrieval of his rights from the discursive web of biopolitical power that downplayed and disparaged his existence. According to Bruce King (1974), Biswas can be regarded as an emblem of the *bio-politicized* colony which tries to restore its independence but is subjugated because of the anarchic and tumultuous atmosphere which the tyrannical biopolitical regime has established in the island.

The biopolitical state of exception in the island depersonalizes Biswas and his fellow men, strips them of their citizenship and reduces them to bare life in that it views them as rootless and without history, thereby preparing them to be banished to the biopolitical camps. To challenge this biased conception, Biswas begins a journalistic career to find and secure for himself a distinctive history, identity and a dissenting voice so as to lend them to the promotion of confrontationist and anticolonial and counter-biopolitical causes of his people. Since Biswas is denied any legal and territorial place within the proper jurisdictional realm of the state and is expelled from the biopolitical citizenship-granting project of the oppressive regime, he is financially crippled, *biopolitically* dislocated and has a fragile status and identity. His introduction into the Tulsis family does not only bring identity and economic advantages for Biswas, but also courts terrible disasters, one of the most remarkable of which is the fact that his offspring have to carry Tulsis names. This is a clear indication of the refutation of Biswas's identity as a representative of minor voice. Biswas tirelessly struggles to restore his identity as a counter-biopolitical gesture; to this end, he contemplates leaving Tulsis behind. Nevertheless, given the lack of support for the provision of his family with decent appliances and shelter, his idea of abandoning the Tulsis fails. Through transformation of social standing—the transition from rural life to the urban life—the way is paved for Biswas to have his own house so as to retain and express his individuality and dissenting voice, thereby emancipating himself from the biopolitical camp of the regime. In his *Philosophy in the West Indian Novel*, Earl McKenzie (2009) contends that the novel is a narrative that recounts the life of subaltern people of no fixed abode who feel out of place and thus make a great effort to turn the West Indies into their home. These dispossessed, *biopolitically* oppressed nonpersons are reduced to minimalist conditions of *homo sacers*, but are in constant search of home and identity.

Biswas's biopolitical encampment and non-personhood within the prevailing discursive web of biopolitical power structure of his time results in the formation of a fragile and erratic identity for him. His hostile reaction is defiance, nonconformity and callous insensitivity to the decrees of the reigning system and his antiquated past. His journalistic undertaking is a good instance of the expression of such an insensitivity. Important to note, Biswas never succeeds in asserting and exercising his independence through the possession of a house until the *biopoliticizing* and *homo sacers'* encampment project of the sovereign system undergoes a shift of paradigm. This proves the powerful and compelling nature of the biopolitical epistemic violence by which Biswas and his fellow people are afflicted. It is the shift of paradigm from feudalism to capitalism that aids Biswas in

retaining his autonomy; it is this shift in effect, rather than Biswas's single-handed efforts, that earns respect for a becoming voice.

### Conclusion

Giorgio Agamben's (1995) study of *Homo Sacer* and biopolitical regimes scrutinizes the ways in which (bio-) political power is imposed and exercised on bodies and life. Agamben argues that modern societies have developed into biopolitical regimes and exclusionary states of exception that govern and police populations through oppressive and nonhumane mechanisms such as surveillance, discipline, and exclusion. These regimes *biopoliticize* lives, turning life itself into an object subject to biopolitical control. Agamben's critical background provides a framework to analyze the ways in which power operates within societies, specifically in relation to the regulation and *biopoliticization* of human lives. It poses thought-provoking questions about the nature of sovereignty, the boundaries of the biopolitical, and the implications of biopolitical regimes for individual freedoms and rights. It helps unmask the oppressive mechanisms of surveillance, discipline, and exclusion that govern populations. By analyzing the ways in which power operates within societies, one can gain a deeper understanding of the regulation and *biopoliticization* of human lives.

Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* portrays a figure, named Mohun Biswas, for whom defiance is a trademark. Although his rebelliousness goes counter to the prevailing temper, he does not waver in his cause. This resisting figure strives to emancipate himself from the shackles of the biopolitical camps of the sovereign state that have imprisoned him since his birth. The first biopolitical camp which he is compelled to inhabit comes from a domestic setting and is enforced by his parents and local fraudulent pundits. Ill-founded superstitions play a key role in the questionable decisions that his parents and pundits make in shaping Biswas's ultimate destiny in a very anomalous and unwise way. Biswas has to constantly confront such inescapable camps concocted by biopolitical regimes and further buttressed by the colonial power both at school and in society. In the face of all these unjust treatments, however, Biswas adds his own critical and dissenting voice to the suppression of the growth and perpetuation of ideological biopolitics that render free individuals as *homo sacers*: inhabitants of the biopolitical camps. All such evidence supports the argument that Biswas serves as a catalyst for challenging the oppressive nature of biopolitical ideologies. His refusal to succumb to the role of a *homo sacer* within the biopolitical camps demonstrates the transformative power of resistance and the potential for emancipatory counter-biopolitical movements. Once more, Biswas's life displays the biopolitical incommensurability of minor voice in the colonial Trinidad. It is ultimately a shift of paradigm in society from feudalism to capitalism that earns some respect and attention for the underprivileged *homo sacers*, who are unsympathetically cast adrift in the biopolitical camps. Biswas is eventually able to have his own fixed, autonomous home, which secures for him a symbolic sense of liberty and individuality, albeit minimal and ephemeral, to relish anew.

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