Anger, for all its negative aspects, can provide creative urges which produce works of art of great power. The anger of the adult writer is often directed against the forces which tried to control and repress that writer as a child, so that the novel written in anger is frequently in essence, even if not in detail, autobiographical. Dickens' novels, for example, often deal with the child victim of industrialisation - dramatising again and again his own unhappy childhood. And another great feature of the European ascendancy, imperialism, spread conditions across the world which created more anger among the colonised peoples of the world. Ironically, however, the means to express this anger was also often provided to those who had the intelligence to use it. Perhaps it represents a triumph of western liberal education, over those who tried to use it as a weapon of oppression, that it could produce subtle and articulate writers like V.S. Naipaul and Jamaica Kincaid.

In Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*, it is often Mr Biswas’s son Anand's anger we see and feel. Naipaul has written:

> Of all my books *A House for Mr Biswas* is the one closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child. … The book took three years to write. It felt like a career; and there was a short period, toward the end of the writing, when I do believe I knew all or much of the book by heart. The labor ended; the book began to recede. And I found that I was unwilling to reenter the world I had created, unwilling to expose myself again to the emotions that lay below the comedy.²

Reading this novel with the awareness that Anand is in many ways the young Naipaul, and that Mr Biswas is based on his father, Seepersad Naipaul, as has been confirmed by scholars such as Kenneth Ramchand,³ it becomes clear why this happens. For example, after the extraordinary scene in which he chooses to stay behind at Green Vale with his father, Mr Biswas asks Anand why he stayed. He replies, ““Because –” The word came out thin, explosive, charged with anger, at himself and his father. Because they was going to leave you alone.”⁴ Naipaul said in an interview in 1987,
When I was young ... I was always amazed that out of such profound rage, one could end by writing quite calmly. One reacts rather strongly, but, as a writer, one distils that down. If those responses were not strong, probably one would not be a writer.5

Naipaul is not unique among West Indians in his experience of childhood anger. In an interview in 1990, Antiguan novelist Jamaica Kincaid said that at school:

she was considered bright but troublesome. 'I was sullen. ... I was always being accused of being rude, because I gave some backchat. ... I wasn't really angry yet. I was just incredibly unhappy.' Her anger came on slowly, but once upon her, it never let her go. Gradually she became aware that she and all Antiguans were subservient to the British.... Her family and friends appeared to accept their inferior status, and that confused and infuriated her.6

We recognize this confused, unhappy child in her 1983 novel Annie John. Kincaid's anger is clearly a reaction to her status as a colonial subject, and even her troubled, ambivalent feelings for her mother are bound up with the tension between her true nature and the demands of her mother that she become a ‘lady’ in the English style. In A House for Mr Biswas, anger and rebellion are not so obviously directed against the imperial power. However, Gordon Rohlehr makes a convincing case for regarding Hanuman House and the Tulsis as potent symbols of colonial power:

There is something archetypal in the organization of Hanuman House. Mr Tulsi is a powerful mother-figure, and rules through an understanding of the psychology of slavery.... Mrs Tulsi, good colonizer as she is, justifies her exploitation with the explanation that she is really doing her subjects good. Her argument is that which ex-colonial peoples most bitterly resent, and also the one which gives them pause.7

Anand and Mr Biswas are both victims of the imperialism of the Tulsis. Mr Biswas experiences it at the height of its power, and Anand is particularly affected by its decline and disintegration, which is in its way as damaging as its ascendancy. Like a country that has been colonised, exploited and then abandoned, Shorthills and the Port of Spain house become run-down, disorganised and overcrowded, with no proper facilities, so that the effort required just to carry on a normal life is almost overwhelming. In a 1972 interview, Naipaul talked about growing up in his extended Hindu family:

I grew up with about fifty cousins and that was like a crash course in the world. You learned about cruelty, about propaganda, about the destruction of reputations. You learned about forming allies. ... I don’t think I [had a happy childhood] largely because of the disorder, because of this moving around and feeling oneself a kind of helpless unit in this large family organization. ... Perhaps one was ashamed of
poverty, because one was so close to what was a great deal of wealth. … But our little group within the clan was impoverished. I think if it had been a purely poor family, one wouldn’t have been so upset by poverty. 

In *Annie John*, poverty is not a problem. If anything, Annie is over-protected rather than neglected, and as she matures she feels more and more rebellious against the closed, well-ordered world of her parents. At the time of transition from childhood to adolescence, the very way they have provided material security for her begins to oppress her. By the time she leaves home for England, she completely rejects her parents' world:

> Everywhere I looked stood something that had meant a lot to me, that had given me pleasure at some point, or could remind me of a time that was a happy time. But as I was lying there my heart could have burst open with joy at the thought of never having to see any of it again.

This feeling of rebellion is typical of the creative adolescent from a sheltered background. Her mother's insistence that she conform to an ideal of, in this case, English womanhood makes Annie all the more aware of her distance from that ideal; and the close supervision and the constant attention which are the lot of the only child makes her adept at lying and stealing to fulfill her need for creative freedom and her thirst for a different kind of life. What makes this experience particularly a colonial one is that the ideal imposed on Annie is a foreign one, and makes little sense in the small island on which she lives. The outrage of her teacher, for example, at what she wrote under the picture of Columbus in her history book, seems outrageous to the post-colonial mind, and the punishment of having to copy Books I and II of *Paradise Lost* seems entirely bizarre. This was a punishment the author herself underwent, as well as, on another occasion, having to ‘write over and over, 'Ignorance is bliss; it's folly to be wise'.” As Leslie Garis remarks, ‘It was a perfect colonial punishment.’ Nevertheless, however restrictive the colonial education system was, it did provide Kincaid with the language and the intellectual means to escape that world and eventually become a successful writer.

The rituals of punishment in *A House for Mr Biswas* are, if possible, stranger still. At school, Mr Biswas himself undergoes typical canings and humiliations, but he manages to turn one penalty into a subtle undermining of the teacher's authority. In this case, the teacher ‘didn't flog Mr Biswas. He ordered him to write I AM AN ASS on the blackboard. Mr Biswas
outlined stylish, contemptuous letters, and the class tittered approvingly.’ *(HB, 47)* His home life is so disorganised that it seems discipline is not an important issue: nobody really cares about him enough to punish him. Pundit Jairam inflicts probably the cruellest punishment on him by making him eat seven bananas because he stole two, thus ruining his digestive system for life. But his children grow up in Hanuman House among the Tulsis, where the ritual floggings mothers give their children are much more than a corrective for bad behaviour. The Tulsi sisters beat their children to communicate messages to other family members, especially their brothers-in-law. Sumati's reaction to Mr Biswas’s complaint that her child had broken some bottles in his shop is to beat the child, but the flogging is accompanied by a ritualistic chanting:

> 'This will teach you not to meddle with things that don't belong to you. *This* will teach you not to provoke people who don't make any allowances for children.' She caught sight of the marks left on the boy's collar by Mr Biswas's fingers, sticky from the tin-lid. 'And *this* will teach you not to let big people make your clothes dirty. *This* will teach you that they don't have to wash them. *You* are a big man. *You* know wrong. *You* are not a child. *That* is why *I* am beating *you* as though you are a big man and can take a big man's blows.' *(HB, 154)*

The unfortunate child, probably without realising it, is merely an instrument of his mother's desire to humiliate her brother-in-law and make him feel guilty and excluded from the family circle. The perverse psychology of this is minutely observed by Naipaul, who as we have seen is writing from personal memories. As he said in his *Paris Review* interview,

> I was oppressed by the pettiness of colonial life and by (this relates more particularly to my Indian-Hindu family background) the intense family disputes in which people were judged and condemned on moral grounds. It was not a generous society – neither the colonial world nor the Hindu world.12

The strong impulse to conformity in the Tulsi household – the propensity of the sisters to crush any type of individuality, which causes Shama to destroy Savi's doll's house – forces Anand into a particular form of self-defence:

> Though no one recognized his strength, Anand was among the strong. His satirical sense kept him aloof. At first this was only a pose, and imitation of his father. But satire led to contempt, and at Shorthills contempt, quick, deep, inclusive, became part
of his nature. It led to inadequacies, to self-awareness and a lasting loneliness. But it made him unassailable. (HB, 412-3)

Annie John develops a similar satirical method of defending herself:

If someone behaved toward me in a way that didn't meet with my approval, without saying a word I would look at them directly with one eyebrow raised. I always got an apology. If someone asked me a question, I would begin my answer with the words 'Actually' or 'As a matter of fact'. It had the effect of allowing no room for doubt. I left people's company if they said or did something I did not care for, and I had made my presence so felt that when I removed myself my absence was felt, too. Many girls wanted to show me up, and tried, but all attempts failed. I could see that everything about me aroused envy and discontent, and that made me happy - the only happiness I knew then. Both Anand and Annie, alter egos for their authors, develop the detachment from their everyday lives which is essential for the novelist. As Naipaul says, the feelings have to be strong for the impulse to write to exist; but without the ability to stand aside and analyse those feelings, the writer will not have the strength and calmness to channel and shape experience into literature which rises above mere self-indulgence.

These two novels, so different in many ways, show some interesting similarities. It is unlikely to be insignificant that each mentions death in its first sentence, for example. This cool mention of mortality in both cases sets the tone for the novel. Anne John starts off her first-person account with the statement, ‘For a short while during the year I was ten, I thought only people I did not know died.’ (HB, 3) This level, adult voice continues throughout the novel, resisting shock tactics, but conveying the full range of emotions - the confusion, anger, unhappiness and ambivalence – that the child experiences. This is very much a novel focused on the changes in the mother-daughter bond as Annie passes from childhood to adolescence, with intense and often unexpected emotions all the more powerfully conveyed by the detachment of the tone. A House for Mr Biswas is in every sense a larger novel, covering the whole life-span of the protagonist. It has a stronger commitment to the narrative conventions than Annie John, which concentrates on capturing the child’s feelings at various stages of her childhood, rather than narrating a chronological series of events. Nevertheless, Naipaul also strongly resists such devices as suspense. The first sentence of the novel gives away several facts that would be difficult to predict from the humble birth of Mr Biswas: ‘Ten weeks before he died, Mr Mohun Biswas, a journalist of Sikkim Street, St James, Port of Spain, was
sacked.’ (HB, 7) Before we know he has been born, we find out that he has died. The interest of the novel thus lies in the details of his life as it progresses in finding out how these circumstances came about, rather than what will happen in the end. This technique is used throughout the novel. We are never left to wonder what will happen - whether Mr Biswas will find a house at last, how long he will live, whether he will become rich: this is all covered on the very first page. The novel works on several levels. It can be seen as a richly comic vision of life in a parochial society; a homage to a father the author belatedly came to appreciate; or an allegory for the colonial situation. But in the end, the breadth of the novel’s scope, combined with its profound understanding of relationships and emotions, and Naipaul's resistance to any sentimentality or simplification, is what gives it its power.

Both these novels, despite their avoidance of obvious shock tactics, show an interest in exploring beyond the expected and conventional. This is not surprising when we realize how badly the expectations and conventions of, for example, the education system were adapted to the children's situations. In *Annie John*, the children are expected to admire and respect Christopher Columbus, whereas an intelligent childlike Annie can see the difficulty this involves.

Of course, sometimes, what with our teachers and our books, it was hard for us to tell on which side we really now belonged – with the masters or the slaves – for it was all history, it was all in the past, and everybody behaved differently now; all of us celebrated Queen Victoria's birthday, even though she had been dead a long time. But we, the descendants of the slaves, knew quite well what had really happened, and I was sure that if the tables had been turned we would have acted differently; I was sure that if our ancestors had gone from Africa to Europe and come upon the people living there, they would have taken a proper interest in the Europeans on first seeing them, and said, ‘How nice,’ and then gone home to tell their friends about it.14

However tongue-in-cheek this self-righteousness might be, the irony is the writer’s not the child’s, and even so it does not remove the sting of her accusations against the European imperialists. In her later novel, *Lucy*, also written in the first person about a young woman with a very similar life story to her own, Kincaid writes of the hatred she feels when confronted in America with daffodils, flowers she had been forced to celebrate by memorising poetry about them in her school days in Antigua. Such an incident reveals the ambivalence Kincaid feels about her education. She hated having Wordsworth and Milton
forced upon her, but she loved the English novel: *Jane Eyre* was her favourite novel as well as Annie John's.

In a 1964 essay, ‘Jasmine’, Naipaul also mentions Wordsworth’s daffodils. But his attitude is slightly more complex than Lucy’s hatred.

The language was ours, to use as we pleased. The literature that came with it was therefore of peculiar authority; but this literature was like an alien mythology. There was, for instance, Wordsworth’s notorious poem about the daffodil. A pretty little flower, no doubt; but we had never seen it. Could the poem have any meaning for us? The superficial prompting of this argument, which would have confined all literatures to the countries of their origin, was political; but it was really an expression of dissatisfaction at the emptiness of our own formless, unmade society.”

His view was not, as he makes clear, political. It is an emotional reaction he is describing, not an intellectual position. He describes his childhood response to English literature:

Trinidad was small, remote and unimportant, and we knew we could not hope to read in books of the life we saw about us. Books came from afar; they could offer only fantasy. …

Everything in books was foreign; everything had to be subjected to adaptation; and everything in … an English novel which worked and was of value to me at once ceased to be specifically English. Mr Murdstone worked; Mr Pickwick and his club didn’t. *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* worked; *Pride and Prejudice* didn’t. The adult education on offer to those in Trinidad was also Anglocentric. A comic passage in *A House for Mr Biswas* describes Mr Biswas’s experience with the Ideal School of Journalism, based in England. The subjects suggested for Mr Biswas to practise on include ‘The Seasons’, ‘Characters at the Local’, and ‘Some Village Superstitions’. Despite the humour, it is clear how this thoughtless bias has suppressed Mr Biswas’s confidence in his obviously quite remarkable writing skills.
As a child he has been glibly taught about oases and igloos, things he never has a chance of seeing in real life, and history, to his teacher, was ‘simply a school subject, as unreal as the geography, and it was from the boy in the red bodice that he [Mr Biswas] first heard, with disbelief, about the Great War.’ (HB, 46) Anand’s schooling, although it takes him to success in the overseas scholarship stakes, is similarly divorced from the reality of his situation:

Childhood, as a time of gaiety and irresponsibility, was for these exhibition pupils only one of the myths of English Composition. Only in compositions did they give delirious shouts of joy and their spirits overflowed into song; only there did they indulge in what the composition notes called ‘schoolboy's pranks’. (HB, 392)

And Mr Biswas finds fault with the reader Anand uses at school, with its non-Hindu sentiments: ‘The cow and the goat give us milk and we eat their flesh when they are killed.’ You hear the savage?’ (HB, 340) The compositions the children are encouraged to write contain stories of trips to the seaside in cars most of their parents are unlikely ever to own. Creativity is discouraged in preparing for the exhibition exam – education is a matter of memorisation and regurgitation, rather than intellectual training individual minds. Both Annie John and Anand Biswas, however, receive special recognition for autobiographical compositions which describe, coincidentally, incidents involving their parents and the sea. Annie reads out her piece to her new classmates, and earns their adoration as well as the teacher’s approval. Anand is given twelve out of ten for his highly personal account of his narrow escape from drowning. The education system is not entirely committed to crushing individuality: obviously in the case of Naipaul and Kincaid, it produced or at least failed to suppress two angry, articulate and aware individuals, amply equipped to convey their message to the world. However, Naipaul points out, this was a privilege offered to only a few:

When I was a child in Trinidad – and the horror of this is that I am horrified only today, and was not horrified in 1942 – there were eight or perhaps twelve free places in the secondary schools. Twelve free places in an island that had a population of over half a million! What an attitude to human beings!17

A recent article by Aaron Eastley also points out that Naipaul very nearly did not get the scholarship which allowed him to escape from Trinidad:

Naipaul … had earned marks of distinction in Spanish and French … but was not eligible for a Colonial Scholarship to study in England owing to a recently-introduced
technicality. Through no fault of his own he had not completed all of the requisite course work to qualify for competition. In response the Trinidadian Education Board unanimously voted that an additional scholarship be created specially for him. … Curiously, nowhere in Naipaul’s extensive autobiographical ruminations are readers given reason to suspect that his leaving Trinidad was such a touch-and-go affair. 18

I have speculated elsewhere that in characters like Willie, in *Half a Life* (2001) Naipaul dramatizes the ‘frightening sense of the blankness of the life he feels he narrowly missed’ in this world of severely limited opportunities. 19 Perhaps this was something he could only face in his fiction much later, while in *A House for Mr Biswas* it was too recent and anxious a memory to be used in this way.

The differences between these two novels are as illuminating as their similarities. Annie John's world is closed, secure and suffocating. Mr Biswas and his children are adrift in an uncaring world, and the course of events that lead to their final achievements seems random and tenuous. Seepersad Naipaul wrote a story called ‘They Named Him Mohun’, in which his sense of alienation and insignificance is clearly displayed. The first sentence reads, ‘Mohan's coming into the world was not an occasion of joy for anyone.’ 20 V.S. Naipaul wrote in his Preface to the collection which includes this story, published in 1976 for the first time outside Trinidad:

It was the only piece of autobiography my father permitted himself, if autobiography can be used of a story which more or less ends with the birth of the writer. But my father was obsessed by the circumstances of his birth and the cruelty of his father. I remember the passion that preceded the writing; I heard again and again the forty-year-old stories of meanness and of the expulsion of his pregnant mother from this father's house; and I remember taking down, at my father's dictation, a page or two of a version of this sketch. 21

The story of Mohun Biswas’s birth in *A House for Mr Biswas* is another version of this story, but the inauspicious signs are undercut by a sceptical narrator. The midnight birth, for example, which is mentioned without comment as unlucky in ‘They Named Him Mohun’, is tempered in *A House for Mr Biswas* with the comment that the child's grandmother ‘had no means of telling the time, but both she and the midwife had assumed it was midnight, the inauspicious hour’; (HB, 16) and the unfortunate sixth finger falls off undramatically in the novel, whereas the Mohun of the story remains six-fingered. There is little room for
superstition in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Mr Biswas has a reputation for atheism, but as he grows older he shows more and more respect for the Hindu faith, and one of his running arguments with Mrs Tulsi is her adoption of Catholic, and possibly even obeah, customs: her elder son leaves for his examination with all the charms and protective devices she can think of from any religion – including ‘crucifix, sacred thread and beads [and] a mysterious sachet’, *(HB, 21)* reminiscent of the ‘little black sachet, filled with something that smelled abominable’²² that Annie was given by the obeah woman when she was ill. Obeah in *Annie John* is not ridiculed or dismissed. Ma Chess is a skilled obeah woman, as well as a beloved grandmother. Anand, on the other hand, is a determined sceptic, and resists as far as possible his mother's efforts to load him with good luck tokens on his examination day.

These two novels, between them, have a great deal to say about the colonial experience in the islands of the Caribbean. Culturally, they depict two separate worlds. The Afro-Caribbeans, descended from the slaves of the European imperialists, had little sense of a continuing African culture of their own. Kincaid said in an interview, ‘The connection I have to Africa is the colour of my skin,’²³ and this may be why the world of *Annie John* seems so closed and isolated, with little reference to an outside world other than an unreal image of England. The Indians of Trinidad, on the other hand, feel very strongly about their heritage and culture, and try to a ridiculous degree to continue with their customs. The Tulsis regard their stay in Trinidad as ‘a stage in the journey that had begun when Pundit Tulsi left India.’ *(HB, 390)* This sense of being adrift in the world seems to be characteristic of Naipaul, who vowed to leave Trinidad as soon as possible, and claims to feel rootless and out of place wherever he lives, despite his increasing material security.

Some of Kincaid’s anger is actually directed against Naipaul. According to Scott Winokur, she, among others,

see[s] Naipaul as an enormously gifted moral failure: a man of color trying to pass for white, trying to pose as a member of the English upper class, to mimic the oppressor’s arrogance. “He just annoys me so much, all my thoughts are intemperate and violent,” Kincaid said.*²⁴*
However, both Kincaid and Naipaul had to leave their Caribbean homes before they could write: Kincaid in America, where she feels that she has been given ‘a place to be myself - but myself as I was formed somewhere else’; and Naipaul in London, which he wrote in 1958 was ‘the best place to write in,’ despite or even because of its drawbacks as a place to live. Naipaul’s biographer, Patrick French, believes that Naipaul’s dismissal of his homeland became part of his persona, a persona he invented in order to realize his early ambition to escape the periphery for the centre, to leave the powerless for the powerful, and to make himself a great writer.

The post-colonial writer thus becomes the expatriate writer, looking back with anger balanced with detachment and a cool, sometimes ironic, gaze at his or her own childhood; making sense of it and at the same time creating some of the most compelling fiction written in English.

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1 An earlier version of this article appeared in *The West Indian Fiction* ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige, 2000) 164–172.
4 V.S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (London: Penguin, 1969), 279. All references are to this edition denoted by HB hereafter and included in the text.
10 Garis.
11 Garis.
13 Jamaica Kincaid, op cit, 129.
14 Jamaica Kincaid, op cit, 76
21 S. Naipaul, 8.
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