



THE POSTCOLONIAL RACISM: A STUDY OF V.S.NAIPAUL'S GUERRILLAS

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul is one of the greatest living writers in English. A prolific writer, Naipaul has published twenty one books. He has created a wide range of characters that arrest the reader's attention with their life-likeness. His writings are marked by a unique treatment of the contemporary problem, the homelessness of people. The elegance of his compressed style and other technical accomplishments deserve appreciation. The complexity and contemporaneity of Naipaul's art merit careful study.

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His sensibility is mixed with the feeling of detachment. His displacement provides him with an ironic vision of the Trinidadian society. Irony becomes the “key element” of his sensibility. His exercise of irony is subtle and one tends to limit Naipaul’s writings as the works of an ironist. The added strength Naipaul gains from his ironic distance and also the limitation implicit in Naipaul’s detachment from the West Indian experience are keenly observed by Gordon Rohlehr:

The worth of his irony is that it enables him to examine his past without any sentiment self-indulgence. We see Biswas as a full human being who is as weak and contemptible as he is forceful and admirable. Irony enables Naipaul to get down to the bare humanity beneath his history. Because he is dealing with his own personal past, his irony does not preclude sympathy but reinforces it. He is able to answer in terms of creative sensibility a question to which he could find no satisfactory academic answer. (“The Ironic Approach” Critical Perspectives 193)

The impact of Colonialism continues to exercise great influence on his attitude to the Postcolonial life. The political freedom from imperialism more often than not fails to promote psychological and intellectual freedom. Men in postcolonial world have become only mimic men aping the colonial way of lie. The conflict between cultures makes it hard for men to achieve a peaceful life. Men strive constantly for cultural identity. Their survival becomes hard, and, consequently, they experience the emptiness of human life on this earth. Freedom has become an illusion and brings despair. Neither politics nor sex relieves their tension. Power alone is glorified by the politician and it corrupts his personality. Sex has become mechanical, lacking emotion. It brings only boredom. The prevailing disorder and the lack of progress in the postcolonial world make it no different from the colonial world. It is this mood of colonial despair that pervades Naipaul’s later novels, where Naipaul “condemns not only colonialism – for its burden of slavery that masquerades as patronage – but also the colonials for idolizing and imitating the master for being slavish ‘mimic men’.” (Mel Gussow “Writer without Roots” 9).

His post-colonial novels expose the universal condition of homelessness in the twentieth-century world. Man becomes a victim of illusion of place, freedom and pleasure. The sense of the place becomes a source of pain. Escape is attempted, but it ends in futility. Any change of place remains only a change of one prison for another. Freedom has become an illusion. Man understands the paradox of freedom-the more he has, the less he can exercise. Hence, he seeks isolation and surrenders to the final emptiness. Even man’s escape into the activities of sex fails him. Sex only intensifies his desperate condition by bringing pain, boredom and horror into his life. Thus, his post-colonial novels reflect Naipaul’s dark vision.





In *Guerrillas* Naipaul explores what he sees as the continuing “Congruent corruptions of colonizer and colonized” (The Return of Eva Peron 73) in a fictionalized West Indian setting. The novel *Guerrillas* lacks an intricate structure. Its structure is simple and straight forward. The action of all the sixteen sections is viewed through the eyes the omniscient author. As Naipaul explains, “What I am doing is sufficiently painful and novel to have no need of structural deformation” (Hardwick, “Meeting V.S. Naipaul” 36) the book concentrates on the tragic sufferings of the people. It is a brief and fast book that pictures the lives of the people. It is a brief and fast book that pictures the lives of the people trapped in an imaginary Caribbean island. The plot of the novel is based on Naipaul’s essay, “Michael x and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad” which, in turn, is based on real life event. In 1972 Micheal de Freitas, also known as Michael X, was charged with the murder of a local youth and an English girl. The victims were found buried in the garden of Michael de Freitas’ house near Port of Spain. The English girl, Gail Benson, had come to Trinidad with her black American lover. It was later found that Gail Benson had been stabbed and buried alive. Michael de Freitas was hanged for the murder in 1975.

These facts are converted into fiction. Jimmy Ahmed is based on Michael de Freitas and Jane on Gail Benson. Incidentally, Naipaul’s adoption of his prose essay for the theme of *Guerrillas*, a novel, shows the inter-relationship between his non-fiction and fiction. *Guerrillas* has been called Naipaul’s “bleakest, most disillusioned novel” (Riis 110). The novel is dominated by the mood of pessimism and cruelty about the freedom in the post-colonial world. The title and its epigraph, “When everybody wants to fight, there is nothing to fight for. Everybody wants to fight his own little war, everybody is a guerrilla” (*Guerrillas* 7) - - Jimmy’s statement - - underscore the theme of the paradox of freedom in this novel. In an interview Naipaul justifies his stand in the novels:

It’s frightening but it’s true. It’s a mature work: as you get older you learn things... Many countries have achieved independence and become tyrannies. Both colonial dependence and independence have been distorted and perverted by the liberal falsehoods of the big nations... I would like people to take a closer look. (“V.S. Naipaul in Paris” 13)

Peter Roche, an Englishman, comes to the Caribbean island after it gets political independence. Previously he has been tortured for his anti-apartheid work in South Africa. he has written a book on that experience: the race consciousness. Now in the firm, that is financing Jimmy Ahmed’s commune. Jane, an English woman accompanies Roche to the island. As Roche says about Jane:





She knew only what she was and what she had been born to; to this knowledge she was tethered; it was her stability, enabling her to adventure in security. Adventuring, she was indifferent, perhaps blind, to the contradiction between what she said and what she was so secure of being; and this indifference or blindness, this absence of the sense of the absurd, was part of her unassailability.(25)

Roche and Jane, the white liberals, arrive at the Caribbean island, where the natives are blacks. These two whites come to the island expecting a place. But they are caught in the culture – colonial problem. Jane is murdered. Roche, again flees from the island. As Hana Wirth-Nesher observes, in *Guerrillas*,

Naipaul writes about the persistence of colonialism in the era of political independence. He depicts what Frantz Fanon has termed “false decolonization,” legal independence without breaking down the colonial social and political structures. Naipaul’s native characters’ self-awareness is derived entirely from the culture that perceive them as “other”. Knowledge of themselves as objects in society brings about a feeling of shame and self-contempt. (“The Curse of Marginality: Colonialism in Naipaul’s Guerrillas” 534)

The native Jimmy Ahmed is a self-styled, “Haji, a hatwai Chinee” which he explains as “Chinese for nigger” (27). He is a man full of racial-complex. His home mimics the colonial English middle-class suburbia:

A square of English carpet, electric blue with splashes of black and yellow almost covered the floor. The furniture was also the English and had a similar innocent stylishness; it was of a kind seen in windows of furniture shops on the high streets of English market towns. A three-piece suite, square and chunky, with fat cushions, was covered in a tiger-striped synthetic material, thick and furry. On the fitted bookshelves a number of books in the same magenta binding stood solidly together. The Hundred Best Books of the World there were also some paperbacks and a neat stack of records. (23-24)

Though his home reflects English style, it exposes Jimmy’s hatred towards English. When Jane comments “But it’s like being in England” (24) on seeing Jimmy’s room, Jimmy replies with contempt: “All the stuff here comes from England. You know what they say. You may not be able





to make a living in England, but England teaches you how to live” (24). He talks about the English superiority and reveals his conflicting attitude towards the English. The action of the novel becomes tense when it concerns with the interaction of these three characters’ conflicting views.

Jimmy, the native, has to depend on white people for financial aid. Jane’s sexual freedom disillusioned her and brings disaster to her life. Roche who wants to serve humanity realizes the hurdles of political freedom. This predicament is well – stated by Meredith, the local politician who comes very close to be a mouthpiece for his creator. As he speaks to Roche:

We’re a dependent people, Peter. We need other people’s approval. And when people come to us with reputations made abroad we tend to look up to them... You know the difficulties, the campaigns of hate... You’re a stranger, you don’t feel involved. You’re involved with an agricultural commune which you consider anti-historical and which you don’t think can succeed. But for you it’s an opportunity for creative work. The human need, as you say. For you work is important. You aren’t too concerned about results. (Guerrillas 206-213)

This makes Roche realize how the political freedom has made the world fragile. After the murder of Jane, he feels insecure in living in that island. Here, Freedom is in conflict with security. Moreover, he, as a doer, recognizes how the place and the people become inactive. As Meredith says, “The setting may change, but no one will make a fresh start or do anything” (149). This proves the futility of freedom prevailing in the island.

Likewise, in his essay, “The Documentary Heresy” Naipaul reacts to the use of violence in present-day writing: “It is like the obscene photograph. It deals anonymously with anonymous flesh, quickened only by pleasure or pain; and this anonymity is a denial of art” (Critical Perspectives 23). To Naipaul, if violence is not documented, and if it is studied with human concern, then, it can acquire artistic effect: “Violence as therapy, Violence as the releasing response either to the extreme placidity of the age or its insecurity” (Critical Perspectives 23). Moreover, Naipaul says that the artist is a participant in the violence and becomes anonymous. In *Guerrillas* sex becomes one of the principal themes.

In the colonial context, the colonizer is often considered as the powerful, thereby masculine by nature and the colonized who is meek and slave, is considered as feminine. In the colonial-racial context, the white holds the dominance over the black till now. The oppressed and the rejected blacks react violently to establish themselves. Sometimes the white women are





invaded and raped. In the colonial and the post-colonial writings, racial and sexual violence are yoked together. If colonial power is repeatedly expressed as a white man's possession of the black women and men, colonial fears center on the rape of white woman by the black men.

The novel... hangs between two sexual scenes. The first explains the second. I was very nervous before I wrote the first one. And I was appalled by the second... I know it's offended a lot of people... But you see, the terror of that book is inevitable. It's a book about lies and self – deception and people in habiting different worlds of cultures... the fact that it shocks you is part of its success. (Mukherjee and Boyers "A Conversation with the V.S. Naipaul" 16)

Jane-Jimmy's sexual encounters are described with a tinge of racial consciousness. In the first causal encounter Jane dominates Jimmy. Jimmy reads her: "The starved woman had many lovers, nevertheless; she was as inexperienced as a girl, yet she was spoilt; and without knowing it, she had developed the bad temper, and the manners of a prostitute" (81). As she takes the sexual lead, she is master as the white woman she belittles him with her mockery. "Do you always make love in your Mao Shirt?" (80). Her whiteness disturbs Jimmy most. "She was white enough to be unreadable"(14). Moreover, the action is interrupted by Roche's, another whiteman's call. And the scene ends with his premature ejaculation and her indifference. Jimmy develops hatred towards her: "He was full of hate of her" (81).

Bryant, Jimmy's "reptilian catamite" (Paul Theroux "An Intelligence from the Third World" 2) his male lover, is threatened by Jane's intrusion into Jimmy's life and he "hisses" at her. The comparison of Bryant's hair to "Medusa's head" (18) and the hiss sound create an atmosphere of terror. Jane's fascination for sexual adventure ends her life when she meets Jimmy in her second encounter. She is sexually assaulted by Jimmy and is murdered. She is offered to Bryant in a ritual murder:

Sharp steel met flesh. Skin parted, flesh showed below the skin, for an instant mottled white, and then all was blinding, disfiguring blood, and Bryant could only cut at what had already been cut. (243)

The battle of passion becomes the battle of egos, prejudices and racial – complex. This hideous scene has been described as one of the "harshest scenes of sexual violation in modern literature" (Michael Thrope V.S. Naipaul 40). "The ritual murder of Jane" observes Hana Wirth-





Nesher, "is the ultimate perversity engendered by colonialism" (542-543). Thus, in this novel sex is pictured with horror.

When Jane is disillusioned with Roche, she gets fascinated by Jimmy's self-proclaimed power. Her whiteness is marked by shame and hatred. Hence, her romantic liaison with Jimmy ends in a brutal rape and murder of herself. As a woman, Jane becomes powerless in the male-dominated society. Her whole life symbolizes the essence of emptiness or nothingness. After her death, the narrator says her eyes "knew nothing; they acknowledged nothing" (243). Jimmy also enters a void and he disappears in that void. With Jane's murder grows his desolation: She grew heavy; his strength became useless; and as he felt her fail a desolation began to grow on him. And then there was nothing except desolation... his desolation was complete. (243-244)

After realizing the futility of living in the Island, Roche alone has the privilege to make his escape. He is faced with his personal failure as an engaged 'doer'. Being a white male, he feels his alienation and wants to remove himself from the island. Thus, his journey to the island becomes "a wasted journey" (249). As Shashi Kamra observes:

All the themes of Guerrillas which build up a picture of despair and social breakdown are dramatized by the dual consciousness of the narrator: alienation from the land, from society and from self-from the important world. (The Novels of V.S. Naipaul 129)

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