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Perspective Views in V.S. Naipaul's Guerrillas and in a Free State

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Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is unsurprisingly highly acclaimed name in the history of the postcolonial Indian Diasporic Literature. Though the question of identity is not new, and much work has been done on this theme of identity, still a few very important strands of identity are still untouched.

V.S. Naipaul, a novelist, essayist, a short story writer, author of many travel books, was born in Trinidad to Indian parents and has resided in England since 1950. His early works drew praise for clear prose style and delicate sense of humor.

Naipaul is sensibly acute in describing the quality of sensitivity to sights, smells and sounds. His descriptive writing of the physical world and the scenic beauty is elaborate. He also has a unique way of describing the feelings of characters which actually would be his way of describing the thoughts from his point of view. This fastidiousness is responsible for some of his finest effects, for example the atmosphere of pervasive horror that is gradually built up in *In a Free State*.

Both Naipaul's sensibility and his experimentation with theme are evident in *Guerrillas*. The setting is an unnamed Carribbean island, for all practical purposes Trinidad, and the plot is obviously based on the career of Michael de Freitas, the Trinidadian black power leader. One of the novel's most striking features is the elaborate description of the

picture of Trinidad wherein the reader feels that he has actually visited the island but actually it is the hometown for Naipaul. The island is seen almost entirely from the point of view of transient whites; representatives of its East Indian Community.

Guerrillas is a violent book in which little violence is explicit; and it is the opposite of anonymous. It may surprise the casual readers of Naipaul's work, who regret the absence of calypso in his West Indian books. It is a novel, not of revolt, but of the play-acting that is frequently called revolt, that queer situation of scabrous glamour which Naipaul sees as a throw-back to the days of slavery, half-remembered even now in the angry grizzling of people like Jimmy Ahmed, the lost soul of the present novel.

Most of the story happens in the minds of these characters, and the revolution, when it does erupt, happens off-stage and is a damp squib, quickly put out by the authorities and the police who are fed by the islanders – so where are the guerrillas and where is their support base? and the foreign investors who are eager to protect their investment. And Jimmy is left isolated in his farm, seemingly immune from arrest, with no followers, thirsting to avenge himself on Jane and Roche who represent the colonial yoke that thwarts true change on the island. Among the locals, the establishment of the state of Israel around that time seems to be their only sign of hope; they believe that Africa's and, by extension, their island's turn is next – how, they do not know, or seem to care about.

Naipaul is pitiless concerning the three central characters in *Guerrillas* and their interrelationships as he is tireless in his notation of the sweat, dirt, heat, and ugliness that surround them. All are pathetically limited and inauthentic; each misunderstands and misinterprets the other and wrongly thinks he or she figures largely in the others' thoughts and fantasies. It is one of Naipaul's most complex books; it is certainly his most suspenseful, a series of shocks, like a shroud slowly unwound from a bloody corpse, showing the damaged--and familiar--face last. The island now is infertile, crowded, reeking with gas fumes and the dust from the bauxite plant. The particularities of irritation are everywhere, for this is the Third World with her disordered armies and supine population, and --with a vengeance--her camp followers. Jimmy, the fifties' pimp and sixties' black power leader, is the seventies' guerrilla; Roche, the jaded white liberal, resembles in his wronged mood a slave-owner--he is a kind of benign puppeteer; and Jane, who uses the lingo of sympathy easily ("words that she might shed at any time, as easily as she had picked them up, and forget that she had ever spoken them" (p. 76)--Naipaul describes her best:

"She was without memory . . . She was without consistency or even without coherence. 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"(p. 97).

In this novel all are emotionally, spiritually and intellectually impoverished, burnt-out cases like the drought-stricken, sun – scorched landscapes and like the island itself, which seems to Jane " itself a place at the end of the world, a place that had exhausted its possibilities" (p. 44).

In a Free State is one of the best works of fiction that deals with the subject of cultural incommensurability and the broken symmetry of colonial relationships. Naipaul's use of multiple stories helps him present a more balanced perspective than a straightforward novel would have allowed, the subject is one he has made his own, and his prose is up to its usual high standard. There can be little surprise when *In a Free State* won the 1971 Booker Prize.

Although *In a Free State* is a sequence of five works — two short stories (the prologue and the epilogue), two forty page novellas and a one hundred and forty page short novel — linked by a common theme, all are about individuals stranded in foreign countries and confronted by alien cultures. In "One out of Many" an Indian servant is almost accidentally transported to Washington, where he finds a niche for himself but remains profoundly alienated from the world around him. "Tell Me Who to Kill" is the tragic story of a West Indian who moves to London. The novel "In a Free State" is about expatriate English civil servants in a recently independent African state torn by civil war. And the epilogue and prologue present the more detached view of an experienced traveller writing in his journal.

In the beginning it is just a car trip through Africa. Two English people--Bobby, a civil servant with a guilty appetite for African boys, and Linda, a supercilious compound wife -- are driving back to their enclave after a stay in the capital. But in between lies the landscape of an unnamed country whose squalor and ethnic bloodletting suggest Idi Amin's Uganda. And the farther Naipaul's protagonists travel into it, the more they find themselves crossing the line that separates privileged outsiders from horrified victims. Alongside this Conradian tour de force are four incisive portraits of men seeking liberation far from home. By turns funny and terrifying, sorrowful and unsparing.

The tales in this book are based on the lives of characters who are somehow pitifully depicted as slaves to their socioeconomic conditions, which is a sad and common reality to the human experience, and now it can be related to the many people who are alleged victims of globalization. There is a tone of irony throughout the narratives that seem to indicate that

goodness does not come to the individual as a set of consequences for having worked hard enough, but rather that good and bad are haphazard and simply a consequence of their circumstances. For, despite these people's struggles, it all seems to be invain. This is a painful truth of the human condition, and this is true across all cultures, across all time periods, and by all ethnicities.

The title "In a Free State" sounds sarcastic and hiding a tinge of irony, because based on the outcomes of the characters, they never attained the holy grail of freedom that they sought and on which they based their hard work. These are all stories of vanquished dreams and frustrated realities. This, and the fact that they are all foreign Anglophone people, is the dominating theme that connects all the short stories into one miniature anthology of stories. Elements of naturalism and realism reign throughout these stories, and as appropriate to the style, there is never a happy ending to make the initial troubles worth it.

Resemblance between *In a Free State* and *Guerrillas* could be multiplied, for the central situations as well as the central characters are similar: heat, sweat, colonial relics, abandoned industrial estates and ugly corrugated buildings are the background to the explosion of volatile political situation which is obliquely glimpsed by the white couples who exist ' in a free state' of non-alignment but are nevertheless tested by events. In each work, the political upheaval follows the same pattern: racial strife among the principal non- white factions; demagogy, incidental persecution and exploitation of non-white minority groups; and evidence of American intervention. But while the subject matter is similar, the theme is different. *In a Free State* has the resonant sparseness, the single emotional key (the sustained sense of mounting fear and horror) and the parabolic dimension (too overtly hinted at in its opening sentence – the work's one false step) which are characteristic of the novel form.

Another resemblance between *In a Free State* and *Guerrillas* is that the main characters are in search of something, struggling to attain it, even trying to leave behind modesty of their gender. Though Bobby has hatred towards Linda he leaves behind the modesty in trying to search in her some character to make her comfortable. Jane in search of sexual satisfaction shifts the partner easily leaving behind the modesty that has to be in womanhood as set by the society, the basic rules for a woman. In both the novels the characters in the end are failures. Not having what they wanted and some have to leave the country while some are murdered brutally. Thus the search in the characters are not fulfilled and they turn to be failure models.

Recognition of differences in the theme facilitates an understanding of *Guerrillas*, for all the fine things in it, is a less successful fiction than *In a Free State*. In the first place,

Naipaul has unsuccessfully attempted to get into his novel the parabolic drift and the cumulative force of his novel. The novel's title and its epigraph – Jimmy's statement that "When everybody wants to fight there's nothing to fight for. Everybody wants to fight his own little war, everybody is a guerrilla"(p. 83) – indicate the intended parabolic dimension. But this is never more than notionally realized because while guerrilla activity is often talked about by non-participants is insufficiently concretised. 'Guerrilla' remains a symbolic conception unrooted in the realistic surface of the novel. Similarly, while Naipaul tries very hard to have the landscape s of *Guerrillas* convey the heightened intensity of the landscapes of *In a Free State*, he is unable to do so successfully because the greater length of the novel form dissipates effects that can be concentrated in a shorter form.

It is hard to imagine a more unpleasant or a more negative ending. Yet when one looks back over the novel it is seen to be neither unprepared for nor inappropriate. For the dominant subjects of *Guerrillas* are the repellent unwholesomeness of Jane and Jimmy, and the weakness of Roche, to which the political and public dimensions of the novel are not made as quantitatively ancillary as they are qualitatively so. Both the fictions have all mixed sexual and political concerns. In *In a Free State* the two concerns were given equal weight and held in a mutually vivifying tension. In *Guerrillas,* perhaps in spite of Naipaul's intention, revulsion with sexuality has become dominant.

Naipaul's writing is something essentially different from the self-conscious "psychological man" who dominates current American fiction and, so far occupies much of the wisdom. The novels is a form of social inquiry something he has lived as well as written. He recognizes himself as a historical effect and that he has used this in his writing with something like the British power that once awed poor Indians in Trinidad.

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