

Ecological Instigations of Trinidad in V.S Naipaul's Select Novels

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Abstract

Man's observation on physical environment, both in art and literature, has been a continuous practice since long back. The mode of depiction of natural phenomena passes through several changes in style and exposure with the shifting perceptions of human mind. However, this perception of nature or wilderness was not earlier viewed and examined with any recognized critical, interdisciplinary lances till 60s and 70s. The inquiry, about what nature actually stands for in a literary text or whether place has link to human culture and entity or authors do really engage with ecological or environmental consequences, gradually begins after the explosion of a social movement environmentalism in the 60s and 70s. But till 90s, writings on nature were viewed in accordance with a number of sprinkled critical frameworks such as American studies, pastoral(ism), regionalism, human ecology etc. By focusing on the picture of Trinidad in the works of the 2001 Nobel Prize winner, the present book certainly fills an evident gap in Naipaulian criticism. Although Trinidadian themes are of central importance in most of his novels.

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Ecocriticism in his much celebrated essay Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism, 1978, with an intention to apply ecological concepts to assess literature, it did not turn out to be a rational movement for the purpose. Finally, the two historic seminal publications in the mid 90s such as the Ecocriticism is a critical literary approach for studying basically two things: representation of nature in literature and relationship between literature and environment. The former had been exercised in the previous centuries almost in all ranges and disciplines; but the later gains ground owing to the rapid and precarious changes in the physical environment. However, these studies did seriously incorporate no deep investigation in literature towards author's representation of environmental decline or calamity of the day to day world. Although William Rueckert¹ first coined the word

Within this literary corpus, Trinidadian themes occupy a privileged place, underlying the majority of Naipaul's writings. I focus on 10 fictional works, namely The Mystic Masseur (1957), The Suffrage of Elvira (1958), Miguel Street (1959), A House for Mr Biswas (1961), A Flag on the Island (1967), The Mimic Men (1967), In a Free State (1971), Guerrillas (1975), The Enigma of Arrival (1987) and A Way in the World (1994),⁵ without neglecting, however, important non-fictional works like The Middle Passage (1962), The Loss of El Dorado (1969), Between Father and Son: Family Letters (1999) or the essays and lectures collected in the following volumes: The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles (1972), The Return of Eva Peron with The Killings in Trinidad (1980), Finding the Centre (1984), Reading & Writing (2000) and The Writer

and the World (2002). My purpose is to analyse representations of Trinidad in the aforementioned writings by situating the respective images in a larger discursive context.

Naipaul makes extensive use of ludic tropes in order to depict his native island; therefore, we can speak of a portrayal of Trinidad as “play-culture”. Of extreme complexity, this image should not be interpreted only by means of the concept of mimicry, which has aroused the interest of many critics as the subsequent chapter will point out. The book is divided into three parts corresponding to the three main facets of Trinidad as it appears in Naipaul’s writings: firstly, as a childish world; secondly, as a festive place and thirdly, as a playground for the western imagination. The image of Trinidad as a childish space stands at the intersection of the autobiographical genre with the colonial/ Social Darwinist discourse of the so-called “child races”. In both cases, we have to do with a cultural construct of childhood whose main stereotypical features are smallness, imitation, irrationality and of course, playfulness. In the second part of my analysis, I focus on the importance of rituals and festivals in shaping up Indian and African identities in Trinidad. Roughly, Hindu rituals are capital means to create diasporic Indias, whereas Carnival is a powerful symbol of the Afro-Trinidadian community. Nevertheless, they carry the potential of becoming genuine liminal spaces, where ethnic boundaries are transgressed.

Trinidad appears as an adventure playground where the Westerner projects his/her desires, sometimes under the mask of scientific respectability. The eye of the European sees the tropical island as an exotic Garden of Eden, as an aesthetic space with strong pictorial and theatrical qualities. But if Trinidad occurs as an artistic, a fictional object, then Naipaul’s novels and stories describing it are fiction about fiction, and so have a very important meta fictional component. At this stage, since metafiction is also a capital element of postmodernism, I trace back Naipaul’s ludic metaphors to the present-day Zeitgeist, pointing out the postmodern elements in his texts dealing with Trinidad.

Naipaul’s first four books have an explicitly Trinidadian setting. The writer made his debut in 1957 by publishing the novel *The Mystic Masseur*, which presents the fortunes of Ganesh, an Indo-Trinidadian young man, who after having studied in Port of Spain returns to the countryside, giving up teaching. There Ganesh earns a fame as a healer and spiritual leader; then, he will also become the political leader of the Trinidadian Hindus, being elected in 1946 as an MLC and awarded an MBE title some time later.

The novels of Naipaul focuses on the period between 1930, the date associated with the advent of West Indian literature, and 1980, the date by which literary works began to focus on the problems of specific islands and to move away from a West Indian perspective. The British Caribbean they write about in this time frame includes the islands of Trinidad and Tobago; Jamaica; and Barbados. Although each country maintains a unique identity, their populations also define themselves regionally as West Indians and today acknowledge some similarities, especially in history and culture. West Indian literature went through three phases, each of which overlaps with another so that there is no sharp division among them; many authors wrote in more than for a racial breakdown of the population on the islands of the British West Indies.

The conial feelings and despair at the slow process of independence. It was the generation who migrated after World War II in large numbers that launched a serious investigation into life in the West Indies. Writers of this period were critical of the British

who had ruled them for so many years and encouraged them to believe that they too were British. They came from different islands but confronted the same problems. Most importantly, they believed they had to establish a new identity in order to move forward from colonial domination to independence.

Post-colonial studies began as literary studies because English was the language of cultural propaganda and often the language of dissent. Early studies of the literature focused on style; the relationship between the novels and life on the islands merited some attention but no serious study. In recent years historians have begun to study the ties between literature and post-colonial realities and to explore the developments between the literature and social and political relationships in post-colonial societies.

Race is also a key theme in West Indies literature and a complicated issue in the West Indies. Views on race changed as the islands went from colonies, through the Federation period, and on to independence. Blacks dominate the population, but the black population itself is stratified by color; under the British colonial system the lighter one's skin tone, the greater the opportunity for advancement. That bias did not disappear completely after independence. Frantz Fanon, the French-Caribbean author and postcolonial theorist, has said, perhaps in the travel book he can more easily instruct his audience; perhaps he is freed from the tedium of constructing plots for an English audience in incongruous settings; perhaps, as he has intimated, he is lured by the glamour of travel (Naipaul 29). Most certainly, as a dejected and a stray, he has no alternative but to travel. However, he has struggled to find his voice within this genre as well.

Miguel Street is comprised of a series of short stories narrated by a young boy who describes life as he perceives it on one street in Port of Spain, Trinidad in the 1940s. The people he portrays live on the fringes of society, sometimes eccentric, sometimes violent, and always guided by the lies they tell. Man-Man, one of the most eccentric characters, pretends to be a new messiah who wants to die a martyr, but when people try to stone him he shouts, "Cut this stupidity out!" (68) Bogart falls under the spell of the Americans who pour into Trinidad during World War II. He takes his nickname and his attitude from the film *Casablanca*. We never know his real name. When he is arrested for bigamy the entire street is shocked. They did not even know he was married.

Eventually the narrator grows up and his mother decides he needs an education or he will end up like the rest of Miguel Street. In the final scene he leaves for England. Naipaul pointed out that colonial society offered no role models of its own to young people, so Trinidadians had to look elsewhere. Naipaul's narrator painted a disturbing picture of an impoverished colonial society where the inhabitants lacked hope for the future. In the end, the boy proclaimed For Naipaul, Miguel Street was not just a slum but rather a world in which he spent a portion of his childhood.

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"(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. (44).

The culmination of Naipaul's state of exile and sense of alienation occurs in his novel, *A Bend in the River*.

As rebellion overcomes an interior African nation, a new nation consciousness is forged. However, this nation is one which aims at producing a new African man. He would witness the emergence of Africa as a viable force, spiritually, economically, intellectually and politically. Yet this new Africa does not embrace everyone. Those who are left from the days of European colonialism are fresh out of luck. East Indians, such as the main character Salim, despite being of Africa, had "no use at all for the kind of freedom that had come to Africa" (BR 160).

While Salim has lived in Africa his entire life, he is alien to this "new" Africa. He is a coastal African. At least there he thought he had some roots on which to build and to cling. Yet here he is as alien to this land as an Eskimo to the Amazon. Though he has

spent his entire life in and among Africans, Salim believes that "however much the rest of us study Africa, however deep our sympathy, we will remain outsiders" (141-42).

Now that it has been established that so many of Naipaul's characters are alienated from

their environment, which merits further discussion is the tendency for Naipaul's characters to fall prey to deception. Many of Naipaul's characters, as will be illustrated in a moment, come to grossly misjudge certain aspects of their respective settings as well as in regard to their fellow characters. Such acts occur in *Guerrillas* and in *A Bend in the River*, Miguel street where such deception becomes a focal point of the novel itself. This deception, when discovered, leads to a sense of being lost in a world the character believed that he/she once knew. The characters begin to feel alienated and in a state of exile from what they once thought of as home. As a result, they wish to leave their respective settings in an effort to escape the chaos ensuing around the ecological instigations in the landscape of Trinidad .

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