

Sir V.S. Naipaul's Observations of Half-made Societies in The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad

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INTRODUCTION

Honoured with the prestigious Nobel Prize and the Booker Prize for English literature, immensely gifted, exasperatingly a controversial man and generally considered the leading writer of the English-speaking Caribbean, Sir V.S. Naipaul occupies a prominent place among the most widely read and admired literary figures of the 20th century English literature. He is a prolific dissenter and has a uniquely authoritative position as an interpreter of Caribbean societies which are well depicted in *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad* (1980). It reflects the historical, economic and cultural circumstances that can induce the people to accept a dictatorship. In the book, Naipaul evaluates contemporary "half-made societies" – those in Trinidad, Argentina and the Congo. He also explores Joseph Conrad's vision of Africa. In fact, the book is a thorough and total investigative journalistic narrative. Walter Clemons remarks:

This is the book (*The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad*) you may begin with if you haven't read Naipaul before.¹

Structurally, *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad* has three different journalistic essays – "Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad," "The Return of Eva Peron" and "A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa." The three essays focus on particular situations in vividly separated countries – Trinidad, Argentina and the Congo. The essays are followed by an analysis reflecting Joseph Conrad as "Conrad's Darkness."

The first essay of *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad* is "Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad" in which V.S. Naipaul depicts Michael de Freitas, also known as Michael X and Michael Abdul Malik, and different tragic killings of the black leaders in Trinidad. Born in Trinidad in 1933, Michael X was, for Naipaul, one of those dense situations in which a writer finds his every concern refracted. Michael was the dope peddler, the pimp and everybody's Negro but not too Negroid. He had gone to England as Michael de Freitas, a Trinidadian seaman in 1957 when he was 24 years old. After some time there, Michael de Freitas named himself Michael X. Soon he became the leader of black people. Naipaul states:

He (Michael X) became Black Power "leader," underground black "poet," black "writer." In 1967, when he was at the peak of his newspaper fame, he was convicted under the Race Relations Act for an anti-white speech he had made at Reading, and sent to jail for a year. In 1969, with the help of a rich white patron, he had established his first commune, the Black House, an "urban village" in Islington. This had failed. At the same time there was more trouble with the law. And in January 1971 Michael X- now with the Black Muslim name of Michael Abdul Malik – had fled to Trinidad.²

In Trinidad, Michael Abdul Malik was not just a man who had run away from a criminal charge in England. He was a Black Muslim refugee who was in revolt against "the industrialized complex." Soon he was able to establish a new commune in Trinidad. His commune was a residential rented house in a sub-urban developed place called Christina Gardens where with its mature garden and fruit trees, Malik and his commune did agriculture. One of the prominent figures in Malik's commune is Steve Yeates who was Malik's bodyguard, the Supreme Captain of the Fruit of Islam and the Lieutenant Colonel of Malik's Black Liberation Army. By early 1972, Gale Benson, Joe Skerritt and Steve Yeates were murdered in an unexpected way. Malik tried his best to conceal himself from the police. But ultimately he was arrested at Bishop's house and tried at court for the charge of Joe's Skerritt's murder. Naipaul, further, says:



He (Malik) was hanged in the Royal Jail in Central Port of Spain in May 1975, three years and four months after the killing of Benson.... Chadee was sentenced to death, but this was later commuted to life imprisonment. Abbatt... was sentenced to death for his part in the murder of Benson. His was the true agony: he rotted for nearly six years in a death cell, and was hanged only in April 1979.³

Malik was a man of practical politics. He was not interested in elections and stuff like that. His political philosophy is well explained when he told *the Trinidad Express*:

The only politics I ever understood is the politics of revolution – the politics of change, the politics of a completely new system.⁴

In fact, Malik appears before us as a Negro, but he was not really a Negro. He was shallow and unoriginal. However, his very absence of originality, his plasticity and his ability to give people the kind of Negro – all these made him acceptable to journalists. As a result, once when he sent an English advisor the manuscript of his autobiography regarding his role as a Negro, he received a long memorandum in reply for the English advisor. The memorandum reads thus:

... At this juncture you (Malik) may look at the Negro's relationship with the Whiteman throughout the world. Use South Africa, Rhodesia, England, Portugal and America to speak of the heartlessness of White society.⁵

The entire narrative about Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad – the situation Naipaul later rendered into a novel entitled *Guerrillas* – exists as a way of wishing a bad ass not only to Malik but also to all those who helped to make Malik. It makes a way not only to the people who continue to simplify the world, substitute the doctrine for knowledge and visit the centres of revolution with return air tickets but also to those who wish themselves on societies more fragile than their own and do no more than celebrate their own security.

The second essay of the book is “the Return of Eva Peron” which deals with Juan Peron, his wife Eva Peron and Peronism. Juan Peron (1895-1974) was an Argentine President who ruled over Argentina for about nine years from 1946 to 1955. It is well established now that Juan Peron was not a dictator. He was elected by overwhelming majorities in two elections. However, the book calls Juan Peron a dictator. It tells his story in terms of him being a dictator who imposed his will on the unsuspecting and naive Argentine population. Naipaul writes:

Like many dictators, he (Juan Peron) hadn't begun badly. He had wanted to make his country great. But he wasn't himself a great man; and perhaps the country couldn't be made great. Seventeen years pass. The country is still without great men; the treasury is still empty; and the people are on the verge of despair.⁶

Maria Eva Duarte de Peron (May 7, 1919 – July 26, 1952) was the second wife of Juan Peron. She served as the First lady of Argentina from 1946 until her death in 1952. Generally known as Eva Peron, she was born in Los Toldos, the dreariest of pampa small towns in rural Argentina on May 7, 1919. She was the youngest of five children. In 1934, at the age of 15, she went to Buenos Aires where she pursued a career as a stage, radio and film actress. When she was 25 years old, she met Juan Peron on January 22, 1944 in Buenos Aires during a charity event at the Luna Park stadium to benefit the victims of an earthquake in San Juan, Argentina. The two got married the following year.

In 1946, Juan Peron was elected the President of Argentina. Over the course of the next six years, Eva Peron became powerful within the pro-Peronist trade unions, primarily for speaking on behalf of labour rights. Moreover, she ran the Ministries of Labour and Health, founded and ran the charitable Eva Peron Foundation, championed women's suffrage in Argentina, and founded and ran the nation's first large scale female political party named the Female Peronist Party. In 1952, shortly before her death from cancer of the uterus at the age of 33, Eva Peron was given the title of “Spiritual Leader of the Nation” by the Argentine Congress. When she died on July 26, 1952, she was given a state funeral upon her death, a prerogative generally reserved for the heads of the state.

Now Eva Peron has become a part of international popular culture. She is famous as the subject of the musical *Evita*. Christina Fernandez de Kirchner, the first female elected President of Argentina, claims that the women of her generation owe a debt to Eva Peron for “her example of passion and combativeness.”

The third essay of *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad* is “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa” which is a profile of Zaire, the former Belgian Congo. The Congo which used to be a Belgian Colony is now an African kingdom and is called Zaire. The man who has made himself the king of the Zaire - the land



of the three Z's - *pays, fleuve, monnaie* - used to be called Joseph Mobutu. His father was a cook but Joseph Mobutu was well educated. In 1960 when Mobutu was thirty years old, he was a sergeant in the local Force Publique. Soon the Force Publique became the Congolese national army and Mobutu, the colonel and commander of this army. Naipaul adds:

In 1965, as General Mobutu, he seized power; and he has imposed order on the army and the country so his style has changed, and become more African. He has abandoned the name of Joseph and is now known Mobutu. Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga.⁷

As General Mobutu, he used to be photographed in army uniform. But as Mobutu Sese Seko, he wore the Zairois court costume which was a stylish version of the standard two-piece suit. Whenever he was in public, he always wore a leopard-skin cap and carried an elaborately stick carved with symbolic figures of two birds. The cap and the carved stick were the emblems of his African chieftaincy. At that time only the chief was allowed to kill the leopard. Naipaul states:

The stick is accepted by Zairois as the stick of the chief. While the chief holds the stick off the ground the people around him can speak; when the chief sets his stick on the ground, the people fall silent and the chief gives his decision.⁸

Truly speaking, Mobutu was the guide of the authentic Zairois revolution. He was not only the father of the nation but also the President -Founder of the movement Populaire de la Revolution. In other words, he was the only political party of his country. In November, 1973, he nationalized all the businesses and plantations belonging to foreigners - mainly Greeks, Portuguese and Indians, and gave them to Zairois. Moreover, Mobutu was, for all his stylishness, the great African nihilist though his way was not that of blood. In fact, the Mobutism simplified the world, and the concept of responsibility and the state.

In the end of the essay, Naipaul says that Mobutu's peace and his kingship are great achievements. Mobutu's power may inevitably be extinguished, but there can be no going back on the principles of Mobutism. According to the writer, Mobutu has already established the pattern for his successors and they will find that the African dependence is not less than it is now, nor is there any need for nihilistic assertion.

The analysis which supports the above mentioned three essays is "Conrad's Darkness" which describes Joseph Conrad. This part serves not only as the envoi to *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad* but also as a quite direct exploration of what Naipaul has called his own political panic. As a whole, Naipaul's observations of the half-made societies in *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad* are fact-based, critical, straightforward, unprejudiced and unbiased.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- [1]. Reviewed by Walter Clemens, V.S. Naipaul, the cover page of *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad*, New York: Vintage Books, 1981.
- [2]. V.S. Naipaul, *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad*, op. cit., p. 4.
- [3]. Ibid., pp. 96-97.
- [4]. Ibid., p. 23.
- [5]. Ibid., p. 25.
- [6]. Ibid., p. 102.
- [7]. Ibid., pp. 185-186.
- [8]. Ibid., p. 186.