

The Ideal of Democracy is distorted in Naipaul's *The Suffrage of Elvira*

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“Democracy is not nearly a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen” (Ambedkar).

Abstract

Democracy it's a beautiful concept, where Equality, Freedom, Justice provided to the people of all strata of society irrespective of caste, creed, gender etc. Actually Democratic form of system is very ideal for administrative point of view. There are equal opportunities for all sorts of people to participate in the formation of government and equal responsibility while framing rules and regulations as well. Both the people and the elected representatives failed completely to uphold the very basic objectives of democracy. And this is nothing but the murder of Democracy. Because in Democratic form of system everything should be transparent but whereas for as third world countries are concerned, no transparencies only corrupted administrative officials, corrupted representative and the people too. This leads to the distortion of the ideal of the Democracy. Abraham Lincoln says about Democracy “of the people, by the people and for the people”. But the present scenario reconstitutes the statement “of the money, by the money and for the money”. Hence in this article Naipaul's *The suffrage of Elvira* will be discussed.

Keywords- Democracy, Corruption, Multi-ethnic, Multi-racial.

In the novel *The Suffrage of Elvira* Naipaul describes/finds awakening of the people of “The Elvira State” and brings to a focus the prognosis and possibilities harboured by democracy in a corrupt and dishonest society – a maze of deals and inducements. And before going to explore what democracy in Elvira is as Naipaul represents it, it is worthwhile to note what he has to say on the political situation Pervading Trinidad, or any colonial society for that matter, around that time:

Nationalism was impossible in Trinidad. In the Colonial Society everyman had to be for himself; every man had to grasp whatever dignity and power he was allowed; he owed no loyalty to the island and scarcely any to his group. . . universal adult suffrage was declared. The privilege took the population by surprise. The new

politics were reserved for the enterprising, who had seen the prodigious commercial possibilities. There were no parties, only individuals. Corruption, not unexpected, aroused only amusements and even mild approval [Naipaul, Middle Passage P.78]

Given this analysis it is easier to notice the distorted use to which the ideal of democracy is put:

Democracy had come to Elvira four years before, in 1946; but it had taken nearly everybody by surprise and it wasn't until 1950, a few months before the second general election under universal adult franchise, that people began to see the possibilities (Naipaul, *The Suffrage* P.13).

The new concepts like Independence and Democracy when it came to Elvira which is inevitably followed by elections – all serve to manifest not only the gross characteristics of human nature and the eccentricities embedded in individual behaviour at a point of historical transition but also the cultural dwarfness, the mimicry due to no original identity or loss of identity and ignorance of a society just coming out of colonial rule. Naipaul writes about his society, a confused one – confused because of the sudden arrival of independence and absence of rules and regulations, a central controlling authority, and refusal to accept any responsibility – becomes an authentic critical work of universal appeal. Though Naipaul deals with these things in an unserious and comic manner, he succeeds in putting forward the serious issues that affect individuals and communities in the complex cultural reality of the Caribbean in colonial societies. Naipaul's unbiased and impersonal diagnosis of the various ills of his society just coming out of colonial rule enables us to have a glimpse of the trickery, corruption, mimicries are common in such a society. The bitterness and irony behind Naipaul's presentation of the fact enables us to know about the confused state of affairs spreading out in every aspect of life including the religion, tradition and the politics.

The ideal of democracy and democratic elections and its reality in a community that lives very much in the present forced by immediate needs and personal interests seems to be Naipaul's major concern in this novel. The newly born concept, democracy, alien to a people split by considerations of race and class, provides Naipaul with a subject that aptly demonstrates the Trinidadian preference for imitation. Commenting on the democratic set up in India, Naipaul writes in, *India: A wounded civilization*. "Formal politics answered less and less, became more and more formal towards the end it had the demeanour of a parlor game, and became an affair of head counting and floor crossing" (Naipaul, *India* P.168).

The conditions and situations are equally applicable to those of Trinidad. In describing West Indian dependence upon other countries as models of democratic action in Eric Williams words: "Political forms and social institutions were imitated rather than created, borrowed rather than relevant, reflecting the forms existing in the particular metropolitan country from which they were derived" (Williams, *From Columbus* P.501).

Naipaul writes about the religious values in *Elvira* as follows but whether it is the religious harmony among the religions or breakdown of religious values:

Things were crazily mixed up in *Elvira*. Everybody, Hindus, Muslims and Christians, owned a Bible; the Hindus and Muslims looking on it, if anything, with greater awe. Hindus and Muslims celebrated Christmas and Easter. The Spaniards and some of the Negroes celebrated the Hindu festival of lights. Someone had told them that Lakshmi, the Goddess of prosperity, was being honoured; they placed small earthen lamps on their money boxes and waited, as they said, for the money to breed. Everybody celebrated the Muslim festival of Hosein. In fact, when *Elvira* was done with religious festivals, there were few straight days left (P.66).

Money is the main value of the society, and those who obtain money by cunning or cleverness are applauded irrespective of the means by which they earned it. No one has any conscience, honesty, selflessness, sincerity have long since fled. It is in portraying such, a society in its true colours that we see Naipaul's awareness of the Third-world Malaise.

"*Elvira*" is the short form for The *Elvira* Estate "named after the wife of one of the early owner" (P-10-11) of the cocoa estate. The social structure of *Elvira* also seems to be designed after that of a large estate. The character named called Baksh, the leader of the Muslims in the village, who lives in a "tumble down house of two storeys built for an overseer in the days of the *Elvira* Estate" (P.24). His son called Foam, short for Foreman, a title given to estate overseers. Chittaranjan, who lives in the "Big house" which is analogues to the Estate House or Great House on a plantation, seems to be the owner of the estate.

The disused cocoa-house that still survives from the olden days and the estate plays a central role in the novel. It is here that the skeleton of *Elvira*'s past is buried. *Elvira* also has an offensive and brutal scandal which it had attempted to conceal. *Elvira*, the mistress of the Estate, had a baby by a black servant and to conceal this fact, she has buried the child in the foundations of cocoa house which was then being built. It is also believed that the child's ghost still haunts the cocoa-house. It is clear that *Elvira* is haunted and controlled by this offensive history. It becomes evident in the way in which the election is contested on the basis of prejudice and the superstition of the electorate. Obeah and black magic play an important role.

Naipaul presents both his politicians and the electorate as tricksters and exploiters. Democracy becomes merely a pretence for self – advancement. The candidates do not have a policy for the platform. Harbans strategy is to get the Hindus vote for him and to persuade the Muslims vote through Baksh. Though people talk about unity, religious and racial chauvinism always take precedence over ideology. The politicians, infact make the people more and more racially conscious to meet their ends. The bitterness that exists between Hindus and Muslims is nothing but racial prejudice. For instance, when Chittaranjan gets into

a fight with Baksh, he says, “Every Hindu blood is pure bold” (P.114). He goes on: “Muslim is everything and Muslim is nothing. . . Even Negro is Muslim” (P.114).

Surajpat Harbans P.W.D. contractor, and the owner of a quarry and a transport service, who now wants to test his fortune in the elections. And his sole aim is to win the election. He submits himself to the exploitative demands of the people of Elvira. Foam perhaps voices forth his deeper thoughts or hopes; “When we put in the leg co, you going to make it (the bribe money) back” (P.20). The election strategy of Harbans further includes distribution of petrol and rum vouchers, posters and banners. Baksh demands two hundred dollars and loudspeaker van and seventy five dollars per month for his eldest son, Foam, who is to be the manager of the campaign.

On the polling day, due to fickle nature of the people, Harbans has to see that they would not change their minds in the last minute. His men have to take care of the agents and clerks at the polling booths who would otherwise stagger the polling process. Some men of tried criminality have to be appointed to see that the ballot boxes reach the Warden’s office without any problem. All these make him so desperate that he looks only “sad and absent minded” (P.162) even in the moment of triumph.

After the victory, Harbans leaves Elvira but reappears at the function arranged by Ramlogan, who intends to present a case of whisky to the winning candidate. He appears in an outfit that transforms his appearance completely. He drives a different vehicle too, a brand new blue and black Jagur instead of the old Dodge lorry. At the function the crowd go berserk and set fire to his car, which is not even a week old. Greatly agitated, Harbans says “Elvira, you a bitch” (P.206) a second time in the novel and he comes no more to Elvira. Harbans repeated malediction “Elvira, Youa bitch” (P.147, 206) can be taken to refer both to the person and to the town. Anthony Boxil says “like the original Elvira..... the village Elvira is a bitch in the way she seeks to sell herself over again to Harbans” (Boxil P.54). In addition to this, as Elvira murdered her child, so her spiritual inheritor demoralise the democracy for a few dollars. The people of Elvira as well as Elvira are wantonly destructive.

Democracy, the chief ideal to usher in order and social equality but now can only give rise to confusion and chaos. Elections tend to cause dissensions or worsen existing prejudices and rivalries among the individuals, races and religions. The kind of notions these ignorant, mentally immature and irresponsible people entertain about democracy and elections are really worth nothing.

To Harbans “this democracy is a strange thing” (P.156). To Dhaniram, “this democracy is a damn funny thing” (P.130). These two statements sum up the Elvirains awareness of the difficulties engendered by self ridicule in mid-century Trinidad. It seems to them funny and strange because the ideal of democracy is distorted to the maximum extent in Elvira or in any other once colonial nation. Chittaranjan’s observation that “Everybody want

bribe these days” (P.180) becomes an ironical comment on the beginnings of the concept of democratic equality. The novel is infact a consistently satiric treatment of the human absurdities that men are capable of performing in the name of ideology. Connivance (secret approval) and corruption consequently become common denominators for the rich and the poor alike.

For Mrs. Baksh democracy and the gift of franchise stand as symptoms of bad times. Hence she keeps on warning her people many times in the novel:

Nobody ain't listening to me, she said, Everybody just washing their foot and jumping in this democracy business. But I promising you, for all the sweet it begin sweet, it going to end damn sour (P.40)

Is this election sweetness that sweeten you up Baksh. But see how this sweetness going to turn sour sour. See (P.82).

And probably Mr. Baksh's warnings may be said to prove true in the end, in the Elviran Context.

The people are anti-democratic in spirit and pay only lip service to democracy. To them, election is a carnival, and democracy a farce rather than a passion or a lasting value. The unity of masses proves to be a shaky one, not grounded on a genuine historical or social awareness. It is a culture overtaken by disorder and anarchy due to lack of morals. Given these conditions, democracy and independence are no longer in use obsolete and irrelevant in ameliorating a society like that of Elvira. The concept of democracy, due to constant misuse and misinterpretation, leads to greater destabilization of the society that was held together by its basic needs and wants. Elvira is “the smallest, most isolated and most neglected of the nine countries of Trinidad” (P.9). And so it remains even after the elections : “So, Harbans won the election and Dhaniram lost daughter in law. Elvira lost lorkhoor and Lorkhoor won a reputation. Elvira lost Mr. Cuffy. And preacher lost his deposit” (P.207). Hence *The Suffrage of Elvira* offers an analysis of the idiosyncrasies and the prevalent societal evils of the multi-ethnic, multi-racial culture of Trinidad.

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