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POWER POLITICS IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S 'IN A FREE STATE

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Abstract

'In a Free State,' the short story collection of V.S. Naipaul speaks about the Africa and its turmoil and power politics between oppressor and oppressed which won the Booker Prize in 1971. At the background, there is the tribal war between the tribes of the President and the King with independence. The age old enmity between the different tribes have revived and there is a struggle for power between the President and the King. Both the King as well as the president intrigues with the local representatives of White Governments for support, but the white men choose to support the President who is in command of the new army and thus the stronger than the King.

Key words: power politics, disorientation, Africa, turmoil, Whites, Blacks, domestic, socio-political etc.

The titular story, "In a Free State", a newly independent unnamed African country which is in turmoil. It is set in "an English-Indian creation in the African wilderness" which owes nothing to African skill and depicts the power politics between oppressor and oppressed. Everything in this part of Africa is supported by Americans. The major characters in the story are English. Besides some minor African characters, there is an American who makes a brief appearance. At the background, there is the tribal war between the tribes of the President and the King with independence. The age old enmity between the different tribes has revived and there is a struggle for power between the President and the King. Both the King as well as the president intrigues with the local representatives of White Governments for support, but the white men choose to support the President who is in command of the new army and thus the stronger than the King.

The story comes to us through the consciousness of Bobby, who is an administrative officer in one of the departments of central government and who lives in the southern collectorate, a territory of the King's people. When the story opens, Bobby is in the capital, a four hundred miles drive from the collectorate, attending a seminar on community development. Ironically, there are more American / English participants in the seminar and a few Africans present.

On his drive back, Linda, one of the 'compound wives' joins Bobby. Though Bobby tries to remain aloof from Linda, it is not long before he is drawn into a conciliating relationship with Linda. They are having conflicting views about Africa. Bobby is liberal and demonstrates a protective attitude towards the Africans while Linda is mildly racist. However, both share some misconceptions about Africa. As Linda tells Bobby, before coming to the collectorate, she had imagined the compound to be in "a little clearing in the forest", and had even pictured Africans "leaning on their spears under a tree and standing around one of

those big old – fashioned sets. His master's voice." (P.122-23) Bobby too confesses that he knew nothing all about Africa and had been surprised to find them working iron.

V.S. Naipaul effectively conveys the threat posed by the shifts of power which leaves no one safe. Bobby and Linda, being whites, are especially vulnerable. The hunt for the king at the background, unpredictable soldiers and the Africans, whom the Colonel just manages to keep at bay, all serve to underscore the chaos that threatens to break through. The king is finally hunted down brutally and Bobby, after a series of humiliations, is manhandled by the President's soldiers.

The situation that prevails in Africa is conveyed through the image of the hunting dogs that have gone on being abandoned by their white masters. These dogs that had been used by the whites to attack Africans have now become a danger to everyone. Bobby and Linda have a narrow escape from the pack. Their escape is suggestive of the wild 'free state' into which the Africans themselves have fallen after their 'Masters' have left.

In the course of his long and eventful drive, Bobby has to review his attitude towards the Africans and correct his misconceptions about Africa. Bobby seems sincere when he says – 'Africa saved my life' but his interest in Africa is nothing more but self indulgence. Bobby's over friendly, patronizing attitude is revealed in the conversation with a boy:

"You want life? You big boy, you no go to school? No, no you no frighten. Look, I give you shilling, hold my hand. Look, my color, your color. I give you shilling, buy schoolbooks. Buy books, learn read, big job. When I born again I want your color. you no frighten. You want five shillings?"(P.117)

A Zulu youth first encourages but later spits on his face. When Bobby gets back to the compound, the house boy laughs at him. The story concludes with Bobby realizing that he would have to leave eventually but first he would have to dismiss Luke before whom he has been exposed. However, he can only sack Luke only because he belongs to the already oppressed King's Tribe. Bobby in the end of the story realizes that he is safe nowhere now.

In a Free State concludes with an entry from Naipaul's journal entitled "The Circus at Luxor", which forms the epilogue. In the epilogue, Naipaul makes an unexpected gesture of involvement. While in the past he had remained a detached witness to the bullying of the tramp. In the epilogue, he physically intervenes to put a stop to the drama of human misery and indignity he witnesses in Luxor. At an Oasis restaurant, he sees how desert children are being lured by some tourists with scraps of food, which they throw on the ground. When the children draw close to the food, a coffee-waiter scales them away with his whip. For the tourists it is an entertainment, but Naipaul is incensed by the miserable exhibition of poverty and vulnerability. He rushes to the scene and stops the act by snatching the whip from the coffee-waiter. The novel ends with Naipaul's critical examination of Egyptian land in reference to past and present where he concludes that in ancient time these people had 'place' but now they are 'placeless'.

The titular story 'In a Free State' is a description of socio-political upheavals in Africa. From the several incidents we witness through Bobby and Linda in the course of their long drive that the picture of life in the newly independent African societies is one of total chaos. The educated Africans, who are the men of the country, turn out to be ineffectual copies of their white benefactors. They remain as inarticulate as their brothers in the bush villages. Naipaul shows that progressed Africans are the mimic men.

masters. The whole society is trying to mimic their ideal white's society. Their lack of identity is reflected in their English-made suits and hair done in the 'English Style'. They have no fixed identity. Naipaul examines that Africans have lost their original identity and even prior social realities. The 'bush' Africans remain in the background as forbidding presence. When Linda and Bobby see a large number of Africans in new clothes, the former comment on their "savage way": "somewhere up there they have taken off their nice new clothes and they are dancing naked and holding hands and eating dung." (P.173) Though this opinion comes from the racially prejudiced Linda, there is a suggestion elsewhere in the story that even the Africans who have come into contact with the white civilization will revert back to their "bush" ways. Even the new African officials like Sammy Kisenyi are made out to be culturally and intellectually barren. Sammy's fraud is evidenced in his paper-reading at a conference, in which he lifts paragraphs from "T.S.Eliot, of all people." (P.225)

Naipul has shown that these new pillars of society are intellectual, emotionally empty and that they imitate their white masters. The educated and uneducated both achieve neither an original social self nor a perfectly new one. They are trapped between the two. The African society seems a chaotic society.

We come to know that Bobby has come to Africa after recovering from a nervous breakdown because his society has no place for homosexuals like him. Bobby himself was a placeless person in his society. On the social level he is an expelled and defeated being. V.S.Naipaul has drawn a vivid and realistic picture of newly independent Africa where the social, political economic and religious upheavals are disturbing the local people. All these happenings and circumstances are making natives and even outsiders (Bobby and Linda) totally disoriented.

Apart from the views put forward through Bobby and Linda, there is a third opinion expressed by the colonel who is in charge of tourist's resort where Bobby and Linda half for a night. The Colonel's view is even a more damaging one as it presents a completely dehumanized picture of the Africans. A conversation between the Colonel and Peter, an African youth who works for the former, in the presence of Bobby and Linda shows social slavery and total submission of the Africans to their white masters.

'What do you think of me, Peter?'

'I like you, sir'

'He likes me. Peter likes me.'

'You take me in when I was small. You give me job; you give me quarters, you look after my children'.

He has fourteen. He's living with three of those animals right now. So polished, so nice, so well spoken. You wouldn't believe he doesn't even know how to hold a pen in those hands. You wouldn't believe the filth he comes out of. But you like dirt, don't you peter? You like going into same black hole to eat filth and dance naked. You will steal and lie to do that, won't you?'

'I like the quarters, sir.'

'while I live, you will stay there. You won't move in here, peter. I don't want you to bank on that. If I die, you will starve, Peter.'

'You will go back to bush.'

'That is true, sir (P.189)

The Colonel's general comment about Africa completes the dehumanized, barbaric picture of the African continent. Naipaul observes that the newly independent African society is still under impressions of white masters and is so disoriented on its own social grounds. So the selves of the Africans are still suffering from the inner conflict, complex, disintegration and uprootedness. Speaking about Africa to Bobby and Linda, Colonel attacks the ethical and moral sensibilities of African societies in these words:

"They say there are good and bad everywhere. There's no good and bad here. They do what they have to do. That's what you have to tell yourself. You can't hate them. You can't even get angry with them. You can't get angry." (P.193)

Naipaul examines here that African society is disoriented even on moral and ethical levels and individuals are also disoriented on the same levels. The Africans have denied even the moral sense of good and bad and it is insinuated that they are governed by the laws of 'jungle'. Throughout the story Africans are made out to be "savage" and "barbarous". Naipaul expresses his revulsion for them by describing them as "dirty" and "smelling". Naipaul has done all this in an indirect manner, by creating an imaginary land where the normal animal verses Human order has been inverted. Naipaul examines that the whole society is barbaric, uneducated and so the people living in it also are fractured, disoriented beings. So each one is dissatisfied in the society and disoriented at outer and inner levels. Through the last story "In a Free State", Naipaul shows that Africans having lost their sense of self are trying to mimic and to experience a sense of wholeness. But they do not understand that their mimicry is no one but their post-colonizer's. The broken, oppressed past and culturally detached have fractured their society.

The social disorientation is due to the racial, religious and tribal disorientation. So it is very difficult to find the sense of oneness in African societies. The neo-colonialism or decolonization, economic imbalance, mimicry lack of oneness, social traumas and individual's painful past have all disoriented Africans at the psychological and social levels.

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