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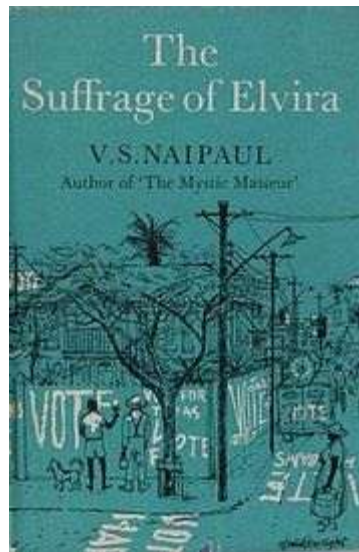
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The Suffrage of Elvira: A Post-Colonial Study

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***The Suffrage of Elvira* - Conventionally Plotted**

The Suffrage of Elvira tells the story of an election campaign in the place called Elvira in the West Indies. Baksh and Chittaranjan are the leaders of the Muslim and Hindu communities

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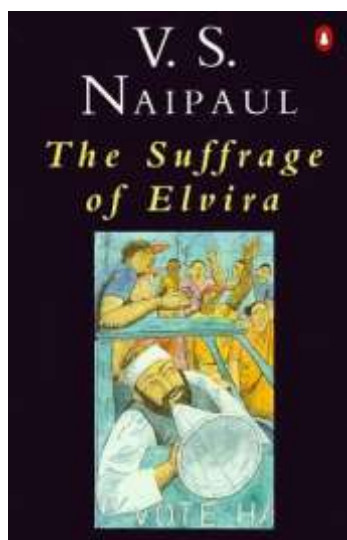
respectively. They have been bribed into a temporary alliance against the Caribbean Black candidate.

The Suffrage of Elvira has been described as the most conventionally plotted of all Naipaul's novels. This probably refers to the fact that the novel seems to be much like a comedy of errors in which the action is advanced by a series of hilarious accidents. Politics in *Elvira* is clearly not the result of comic errors, but of the mentality of the inhabitants of Elvira, which have been conditioned by the environment and history of Elvira.

A Remote Place

Elvira is made doubly isolated by the remoteness of Trinidad in which it is situated. The reference to isolation and deprivation in *The Suffrage of Elvira* are appropriately associated with politics. There is a considerable truth in Foam's assessment of the politics described in this novel: "In Trinidad democracy is a brand new thing. We are still creeping. We are a creeping nation" (SE: 14). Perhaps Trinidad's unimportance to the rest of the world is underlined most heavily by Beharry's explanation when Ganesh wishes that Hitler would bomb Trinidad: "But you forgetting that we is just a tiny little dot on some maps. If you ask me, I thank Hitler ain't even knowing it have a place called Trinidad". (SE: 112)

Making the Past More Concrete



The Suffrage of Elvira makes an elaborate attempt to make the past more concrete. Very early in the novel, the readers are told the origin of the name Elvira. The village is “named after the wife of one of the early owners” (SE: 10-11) of the cocoa estate. Although the estate is only a shadow of its former self, many villagers still survive by working on the estate. Mahadeo, for instance, “worked on what remained of the Elvira Estate as sub-overseer, a ‘driver’ (not of vehicles or slaves, but of free labourers), and as a driver he could always put pressure on his labourers”. (SE: 42)

Prejudice and Politics

Elvira of the present is haunted and controlled by its unsavory history. The election, which is what the main action of the novel concentrates on, is contested on the basis of prejudice and of the superstition of the electorate. Harbans, the candidate, never mentions a policy for a platform, and his strategy is to get the Hindus to vote for him, and to persuade the Muslims to do so as well. He accepts the Negroes will vote for the Black candidate. Although there is much talk of unity, religious and racial chauvinism is taken for granted.

The bitterness that exists between Hindus and Muslims is closely akin to racial prejudice. The prejudice is being brought out, because it has been there a long time. It is not new. Just as Elvira buried the child, the symbol of the uniting of the people of two races and classes to avoid scandal, so the present Elvirans only pay lip service to racial unity, and bury it when they stand to lose or gain.

Superstition and Other Practices from Homelands

Superstition, brought from their homelands and exacerbated by the sufferings brought on by slavery, is another method used to control votes. When Foam uses five dead black puppies to play on the superstitions of the voters of Cordoba, and to win back their votes from two American Jehovah Witness ladies, who have persuaded them not to vote, it is simply a matter of black magic outdoing White magic in terrifying the people. “The dogs cancel out the witnesses” (SE: 133) as Chittaranjan puts it.

Reincarnating the Ghosts

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The dogs, the black bitch, and her five dead puppies, are most important. Tiger, the puppy that lives, plays an important part in *The Suffrage of Elvira* not only because it affects the people's votes as has been indicated above, but also because the dogs are Naipaul's device for making the past concrete and for reincarnating the ghosts of Elvira, and of the past of the village. On two separate occasions in the novel Harbans shouts at the village of Elvira as he is leaving it : "Elvira, you is a bitch" (SE: 147, 206). These cannot help but associate Elvira, the village and the woman, with the black bitch which Harbans meets just before he enters Elvira for the first time in the novel.

When Foam finds the dead bitch in the cocoa-house, he buries it in exactly the same spot where Elvira is said to have buried her child. Furthermore, he keeps Tiger, the sole surviving puppy, in the cocoa-house and Tiger becomes the ghost of the dead baby made flesh to haunt the Elvira of the present. People passing the cocoa-house claim to have "often heard the baby crying". (SE: 116) The starving Tiger at the cocoa-house can only manage "a ghost of a whine, a faint mew". (SE: 116)

Haunting

Tiger does a good job haunting Elvira. Not only does he terrify Baksh and the whole village who see him as Obeah, he also causes a modern re-enactment of the original Elvira's act of indiscretion. Foam wishing to find someone to take care of Tiger offers it to Nelly, the daughter of Chittaranjan, Her attitude to him when they meet for the first time is significant. She insists on "calling him Foreman, and refers to herself as his better" (SE: 75) She is nevertheless secretly trying to get the dog from him. Being a romantic girl, she cannot help fantasizing about the meeting, and she looks forward to even though she feels "it was more than wrong" (SE: 84) for her to have romantic interest in Foam. She is more than disappointed when they meet and she discovers that Foam does have a black dog to give her.

Creating a Microcosm

The scandal humiliates Chittranjan who packs Nelly off to Port of Spain. It means the end of her engagement to Harbans son, and is the direct cause of Chittranjan's violent quarrel, full of

racial and religious slurs, with Baksh, the Muslim. All the elements of the original scandal are present in this second one. The lady of the Big House, a Hindu of pure blood, meets surreptitiously a boy from the overseer's house, a Muslim, who is no different in her father's opinion, from a Negro. He gives her the black puppy which Naipaul has taken care to associate with the Ghost Elvira's baby.

By isolating Elvira, Naipaul manages to create a microcosm of Trinidad and even of the whole West Indies in which history is used to explain the shortcomings of the present. But the individual can overcome his fate occasionally when he ceases to be selfish as Ganesh does when he identifies with the black boy out of a strong desire to save his life. In *The Suffrage of Elvira* Chittaranjan and Ramlogan deny the standard of jealousy and enmity which surround them when they become reconciled after a long and hostile estrangement. "It have some good in everybody" (SE: 140) says Mrs. Chittaranjan and these two men prove it. And fate is kind to Nelly. As a result of the scandal, she escapes into a wider world.

Not a Popular Novel

The Suffrage of Elvira has never been as popular a novel as *The Mystic Masseur*, possibly because it has no central character as fascinating as Ganesh. John Theine comments "It is, however, a richer and more complex treatment of the same theme as that explored in the first novel of V.S. Naipaul, that the environment and history of the West Indies have created standards so far from the norm of Western standards that is ridiculous to expect democracy to work there as it does in Europe".

The Suffrage of Elvira

Here in this novel, there is no narrator distancing the characters and shaping the reader's critical response. According to White Landeg "The characters themselves are given vitality, inventiveness, and a resilience, that make their world seem much more palpable to the reader". What distancing there is in the novel is effected through the absurd which makes Naipaul's representation rather larger than life. It is this sort of inflation, and the sheer sense of fun in the novel, that limits serious involvement in the lives of the characters. Elvira's travesty of adult

franchise is treated merely as the ‘damn funny thing’ (SE: 148) that it is. So high is the effect of comic exaggeration that one cannot take the book as a serious, realistic indictment of a colonial society, but as a superbly humorous blow-up of human flaws and fetishes.

Baksh supposedly in control of the Muslim vote makes the most out of the election. Three times he is bribed; first to support Harbans, and Chittaranjan; then to stand for himself and, finally, to withdraw in favour of the allocation of election symbols. The new candidate gets Harban’s symbol; Harbans must now use his first opponent’s symbol and slogan. The highly comic situation becomes yet another example of the early narrative observation that ‘things were crazily mixed up in Elvira’ (SE: 74).

Baksh’s transparent roguery as he vigorously pursues short term benefits from the election is one of the sources of comic delights in the novel. Chittranjan, however, aims at a long-term goal. For the marriage of Harban’s son to Nelly, Chittranjan is the price which the Indian goldsmith asks for his Hindu and Spanish votes. The bargaining itself is a humorous example of understatement. Yet, it is soon evident to the readers that Harbans has no intention of fulfilling his part of the deal, and this makes Chittranjan’s subsequent efforts all the more farcical. To preserve his daughter’s ‘honour’, Chittranjan goes to comically grotesque lengths. It is one of the ironies in the novel that the only worthwhile thing to come out of the election, Nelly’s escape from the static, decaying world of Indian customs, results only from the frustration of Chittranjan’s objective.

Functions of Characters

To some extent, what characters like Harbans and Baksh take to be supernatural elements in the election gives the action of the novel an aura of inflation that ironically mocks the essential pettiness of activity in the society. That the skinny black bitch and half-dead pup do in a sense influence the course of the election, merely adds to the farce of the campaigns. The droll irony of the novel, however, culminates in the role of the ‘popular candidate’, Harbans. It is in all sincerity and with much justification that his Management Committee suggests that his presence in Elvira is immaterial to the campaign. Naipaul’s mode of portrayal itself suggests how little the candidate features in Elvira’s politics. As the characterization of Harbans is superficial; he never

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becomes a really palpable figure in the reader's imagination. His moods, for example, are usually indicated by brief narrative statements; his distinguishing mannerism is referred to only in the first chapter and as a result is soon forgotten by the readers.

In contrast, the portrayal of Old Sebastian is conspicuously impressionable. Sebastian shows no interest in the election and remains remote from the bustle of campaigns, but though he contributes little to the development of the actions, he is so vividly drawn that he attracts greater attention than his contribution really warrants – at least on one level. The unexpected vividness with which the character is drawn, however, seems a deliberate attempt to underline all the farcically grotesque, barren, and absurd elements of life in Elvira. Embodying these elements, the old, decrepit, and fragile Sebastian's portrayal leaves one wondering if he represents much more than any requirement of plot, for it clearly suggests that the social condition which to some extent Sebastian reflects is equally unchangeable - that there is no possible escape from a very limited, grotesque and absurd existence. V.S.Naipaul himself says “ It is this implication that creates a sense that all life is meaningless in *The Suffrage of Elvira*”.

Naipaul's obtrusive characters then would perhaps be not impressive, if the old man were absent from the novel. Yet such a response hardly diminishes one's delight in the richly comic presentation of self-interest and petty ambitions and fetishes.

Racial Loyalties in Election

Harbans is banking on racial loyalties. What he achieves at the end is the power over others. He spends the campaign signing cheques as his 'entrance fee', but his first action, once he is sure of winning, is to note the number of the taxi driver who caused trouble over the motorcade. Meanwhile, although he was elected through a Hindu- Muslim alliance, he is glad to be handed a reason for breaking his promise to Chittaranjan - his son couldn't possibly marry a girl who walked out with Muslims. Baksh, too, is sufficiently free of racial feeling to be able to exploit it in others. He demands a loudspeaker van before he will support Harbans, but when Chittaranjan offends him by saying even Negroes can be Muslims, he seizes the opportunity of racial affinity to preach back to his people. Harbans, in panic, has to bribe him again to stand as a

Muslim candidate, and a third bribe - that he should stand down, which is only averted by Mr. Cuffy's death.

Dhaniram, by contrast, stands to gain little from Harbans' election, only some contracts for the tractor of which he is part-owner. No one in Elvira is more excited by the modernity of the election than he is. But he is a broken man when the Doolahin runs off with Lorkhoor.

Modernity cannot compensate for the loss of a girl of the right caste to do his cooking and housework. Chittaranjan, too, is a good Hindu. He lives in a two-storey concrete house which proclaims his wealth, and he lets Nelly take lessons in shorthand and typing. Curiously, he has status too as a bad john; his proudest boast is of his appearances in the Supreme Court for stick-fighting. But the effect of his alliance with Muslims is to bring out his deepest prejudices. His three-year quarrel with Ramlogan ends abruptly as they trade tales of the ingratitude and laziness of Muslims and Negroes. Nor do Foam and Lorkhoor, the new generation, offer much contrast. Foam betrays no racial feeling and he is scornful about Obeah. But he involves himself in the election for strictly private reasons - he wants his own back on Lorkhoor and Teacher Francis, and he sees democracy simply as a means of bribing oneself into a position where eventually one will be able to demand bribes. Lorkhoor preaches the unity of races and creeds in the modern age, but his object from the beginning is to sell out to Harbans a week before the election.

Ironic Detachment

The tone of ironic detachment as well as the third person's omniscient point of view that Naipaul adopts, serve to expose the vices of the society in Elvira. The Elvirans' propensity for money is revealed in their priorities. Money is placed topmost, even above religion. Finally, it is Harbans who wins the elections, but it leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. His brand new Jaguar is set on fire when Harbans comes to Elvira for the first time after becoming a member of the legislative council to give away the case of whisky, which Ramlogan had promised the committee of the winning candidate.

East Indians in West Indies

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This shows the acculturation of the East Indians in the West Indies. In a society dominated by materialistic values, it is inevitable that conventional customs should also yield to political interests. Hamner says “The whole novel becomes a good deal of caricature as irony is tinged with good humour”.

A Comedy of Errors

Likewise, *The Suffrage of Elvira* is a comedy of errors. It has all the Post-colonial elements like racism, politics, segregation, identities, and beliefs in supernatural elements and so on. It presents the chaos of the present to suggest a very disordered past. It is the Harbans who shouts in a rage as “Elvira, you is a bitch” (SE: 147)

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