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## Political Reality in V.S. Naipaul's *The Suffrage of Elvira: A Critical Study*

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V. S. Naipaul

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### Abstract

Naipaul adopts political reality as the setting which regulates the structure of his novels enables him to present a fresh perspective on the function of time and place. Life at the time of the second general election in Trinidad in 1950 is portrayed in *The Suffrage of Elvira*. It continues with Naipaul's exploration of the theme of elections in Trinidad. The cynical behaviour of the characters contributes fairly to the main theme of the political issue.

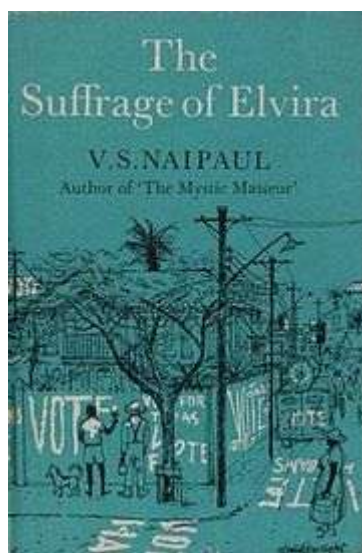
### Introduction

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Courtesy: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Suffrage\\_of\\_Elvira](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Suffrage_of_Elvira)

Naipaul concerns himself with the political reality of Trinidad just before and after independence. He highlights the problems arising out of the coming of democracy to a multi-racial, multi-religious island. Democracy was a brand new thing in Elvira. The people of Elvira interpret democracy in their own fashion. They have woken up to its possibilities lately. William Walsh points out, “The target of satire in *The Suffrage of Elvira* is the representative machinery of an abstract democracy without a sanction in tradition or understanding” (26). While commenting upon the democratic set up, Naipaul in *India: A Wounded Civilization* said, “Formal politics answered less and less, became more and more formal; towards the end it had the demeanour of a parlour game, and became an affair of head-counting and floor-crossing” (167).

### **A Political Novel**

*The Suffrage of Elvira* is a political novel, portrays the major events before the elections going to be held in an African city. The novel stands out as a satiric chronicle of the burgeoning democratic process in Elvira, a place small enough for people to know each other and where the potential voting pool numbers in the thousands. It is a metaphor for Naipaul’s mockery of the political transformation of Trinidad and Tobago. It depicts politicians as tricksters who trick the voters into voting for them while the voters also try to exploit the politicians by exacting bribes for votes. Pathak comments, “The novel records the consequences as well as the result of the elections in the tradition ridden decadent, degrading and demoralizing society of Elvira” (133). It dramatizes a particular feature of Trinidad’s inability to go back to colonial security or to generate a national identity thus emphasizing its

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political insignificance. It is a sincere study of the functioning of the most promising political system in the developing world. It records the experiences of Surajpat Harbans, a PWD contractor, and the owner of a quarry and a transport service wants to test his fortune in the elections. It also examines different aspects of the reaction to political independence of the individual and the group.

### **Bribe-taking**

Bribe-taking is an accepted and approved norm in Trinidad. This is of course like the Trinidad of *Miguel Street* and *The Mystic Masseur*. Mazurus Baksh, the Muslim tailor, who is believed to be in control of the Muslim vote, makes most out of the election. Three times he is bribed: first to support Harbans; then to stand for election himself; and, finally, to withdraw in favour of the ‘popular candidate’. Baksh’s nomination necessitates changes in the allocation of election symbols. He had also to woo the Negro votes away from his rival Preacher, who kept on “walking about quiet quiet and brisk brisk from house to house to house” (19). No one in Elvira dreams of censuring Baksh; he is in fact admired for being smarter than anyone else.

All his energies are directed to extract the largest possible bribe from Harbans in return for the promise of the Muslim vote. Though he has no dignity as a leader, he is popular among the Muslims, probably because he is a big talker. People called him “the mother” (13). Years before the election, he contrived fraudulent practices such as the shirt-making scheme in which he sold cheap, one-size shirts as exclusively tailored. Depending upon the size of the offer made to him, he is ready to play the role of a religious liberal or a bigot, a sullen man or a clown, a poor tailor or the leader of the Muslim bloc. He secures a van and large sums of money from Harbans. But he remains a trouble maker and inciting the voters to burn the newly elected MLC’s (Harbans) car. He fits naturally to the role of the colonial trickster, cunning, expediency, and ambush.

### **Election Campaign**

Foam, the campaign manager, is an important figure in the election drama. He knows each person in Elvira at the bottom of their hearts. Hence, he is accepted even by Harbans as the best campaign manager for the elections. He is the eldest son of Baksh. He works hard for Harbans in the elections, “He worked not so much for the victory of Harbans and the defeat

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of Preacher, as for the humiliation of Lorkhoor and Teacher Francis” (40). He is appointed as the Campaign Manager at seventy five dollars a month. He is a loyal and responsible supporter, unlike his deceitful father. Foam’s over-enthusiastic slogan is “VOTE HARBANS OR DIE!”(40). He summarizes the younger generation’s greater awareness of political reality as a process of maturation, “‘you shy, Mr. Harbans,’ Foam said. ‘I know how it is. But you going to get use to this waving. Ten to one, before this election over, we going to see you waving and shouting to everybody, even to people who ain’t going to vote for you”(25). He pushes enthusiastically into the dispute, not so much for the sake of Harbans, who is paying him a salary for this role, as for his desire to avenge the loss of his position to Lorkhoor as campaign manager for Preacher.

### **In the Name of Democracy**

Foam says, in Trinidad this “democracy is a brand new thing we is still creeping. We is a creeping nation he dropped his voice solemnly I respect people like you, you know Mr. Harbans doing this thing for the first time” (25). He, at the intervals, informs Harbans how to propitiate the most contemptuous rivals like Chittaranjan and Ramlogan by which the latter will get their votes in the elections. It is again from Foam, we hear that Ramlogan and Chittaranjan bear contemptuous attitude for each other. Harbans too comments on the fact that people are disuniting themselves day by day. Harbans thinks, “They should be uniting at least in the days of the Elections” (28), It is here, we are told about Harbans’ selfish nature that people should be united only on the occasions of the elections by which candidates like him could avail of the power. Though Harbans does not bear the guts to play the political game, he wants all the votes of the people in Elvira. He has been struggling with the absurd situations just to turn the eminent leaders of different communities to his side. As a result, we, sometimes, observe his, “thin hands gripping nervously to the steering wheel” (27).

### **A Natural Writer**

Lorkhoor, the childhood rival of Foam, is called by Teacher Francis as a born writer. He secures the job of advertising for the cinema in a loudspeaker van through Teacher Francis which otherwise would have gone to Foam. This intensifies the enmity between them. Lorkhoor acts as the Campaign Manager for Preacher and betray him in the end. He is self-centred and sells his votes to Harbans. Finally he elopes with Doolahin, the daughter-in-law of Dhaniram, and leaves Elvira for good. Lorkhoor, the better-educated and better-spoken

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rival to foam's ambition is no more redeeming in his character than Foam. Because the older generation failed to be inspired by Gandhi into having a sense of commitment to the needs of their constituents, they are incapable of transmitting any meaningful example to Foam and his generation. This sad situation is further aggravated by the fact that all of them, the older and the younger generations are trying their hands at a game that is completely new to them. There are no models in Trinidad and Tobago for them to follow and Foam is as good or bad as they are.

### **The Preacher and Political Intricacy**

Preacher, the Black candidate, is an eccentric character. He has the support of two thousand Black votes besides some Spanish and Hindu votes wooed by Lorkhoor. He is "a tall Negro with high frizzy hair, long frizzy beard, long long white robe" (37). His campaigning includes energetic and long walking tours with a Bible in one hand, and a stone in the other. He is not disheartened by his defeat, but goes round briskly from house to house, thanking the people. Once the elections are over, he fades into anonymity.

Chittranjan, the goldsmith, is the leader of the Hindus of Elvira. He is another power centre in Elvira, a man aloof and stiff. He becomes an important figure in the local politics because he has control over three thousand Hindu votes and one thousand Spanish votes, "As a Hindu Chittranjan naturally had much influence among the Hindus of Elvira; but he was more than the Hindu leader. He was the only man who carried weight with the Spaniards of Cordoba (it was said he lent them money); many Negroes liked him; Muslims didn't trust him, but even they held him in respect" (24). He is a popular man in Elvira because he is rich and owns the biggest house in Elvira. In the elections, Chittranjan is a staunch supporter of Harbans, and of course, he has his own selfish reason for it. He wants to marry his daughter Nelly to Harbans' son, though Harbans is not keen on this alliance. In spite of this Chittranjan chalks out all the election schedules and helps in devising certain strategies to win the votes such as taking care of the sick people of Elvira and providing monetary help to the poor and the sick.

### **Minor but Important Characters**

Dhaniram and Mahadeo are two other supporters of Harbans who play minor roles in the novel. They are included in the committee "only to keep them from making mischief" (42). Dhaniram is a Hindu pundit in Elvira who lives in a wooden bungalow with his paralyzed

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wife and his meek, young daughter-in-law, who was deserted by Dhaniram's son just two months after the marriage. Mahadeo is a devout Hindu. He works as a sub-overseer, a driver of free labourers on the Elvira Estate, and thus is able to influence them in the elections. This is why he is useful though he is "an out and out fool" (42). At the election, he is entrusted with the work of preparing a list of all those who are sick or dying. He is very much concerned about old Sebastian, a Negro, and expects him to survive at least up to the polling day to secure the other Negro votes. Ironically enough, he himself is fully drunk even before the polling begins and "he has clean forgotten to vote" (187).

### **Role of Superstition**

Superstition, another heritage of slavery is exploited most during the elections. Foam uses five dead black puppies to play on the superstitions of the people of Cordoba and to win back their votes from two American Jehovah witnesses who have persuaded them not to vote. "It is simply a matter of black magic outdoing white magic in terrifying the people" (133).

At the first convergence of the movers and shakers of the burgeoning political campaign for Mr. Harbans, Foam finds himself in the house of the most influential Hindu in Elvira, Chittranjan, whose big house is the talk of Elvira. It is a meeting to map out strategies on how to counter the effectiveness of the Hindu sellout, Lorkhoor. The characters rise up to some moral high ground. The sight of the framed picture of the most venerable Mahatma Gandhi raises expectations of some degree of conscientiousness:

Harbans saw a large framed picture of the Round Table Conference with King George V and Mahatma Gandhi sitting together, the king formally dressed and smiling, the Mahatma in a loincloth, also smiling. The picture made Harbans easier. He himself had a picture like that in his drawing-room in Port of Spain (33).

### **Gandhi as an Idol to Worship, Not to Follow**

Knowing Mahatma Gandhi, a man of legendary integrity, courage, and intelligence, the sight of his framed picture in one of the most triumphant moments of his fight for Indian independence would engender expectations that Harbans would be inspired by the same traits for which Gandhi was revered. Gandhi's picture hanging on the wall, overlooking the deliberations provides nothing but a counter point, a stark contrast to Harbans. Harbans may

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have the same picture in his home in Port of Spain and he may be comforted by his physical closeness to the same in Chittranjan's drawing room, but he is at best an ideological agnostic, the best example of what Gandhi was not. Whether he wins the election or not, it seems apparent even this early in the campaign that the fortunes of the Indians, Blacks, Muslims, and Spaniards would not, in any way change for the better.

### **Irrelevance of Political Parties**

The unpredictable appearance and all the more sudden disappearance of political parties just on the eve of the Election Day is another feature of such countries. Regarding the status of the Party for Progress and Unity, we are informed, "The party had been founded two months before the parade; it died two days after it. It won one seat out of twelve; ten funds disappeared" (162).

Chittaranjan pointed out that the Hindus could win the Harbans (a Hindu candidate for the Elections) without the Muslim votes, but will never entertain their daughters' meeting with Muslim boys. Moreover, pinching his skin just below the wrist, he remarked, "This is pure blood. Every Hindu blood is pure blood. Nothing mix up with it. Is pure Aryan blood" (130). Harbans had to reserve Chittaranjan, the "aloof and stiff" (12) goldsmith to get the Hindu votes, and the tailor, Baksh with "the squat built of the labourer and having no resemblance with a leader" (16) for the Muslim votes. He had also to convince the Negro people to trap them away from his rival, Preacher.

### **Misplaced Self-Confidence?**

Like Ganesh in *The Mystic Masseur*, Harbans is sure of winning for he feels he is one of the elect, "despite everything, he knew he was going to win" (53). This self-confidence, generated out of single-minded self-devotion makes him blind to the picaroon nature of the society of which he is a member. In the final count it is money alone that decides the election. Harbans spends exorbitantly on petrol and rum vouchers, posters and banners, a loudspeaker van, and so on. But this was the first and last election he was to fight. This was so because it was "the first and last election" (194) he was to fight. He asked his supporters if he had committed a lot of sins to deserve such fate by getting himself "in this big big mess in ... old old age!" (167). Thus, personal interests are claimed even if they caused violation of certain significant democratic principles. The unforgettable appearances and all the sudden

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disappearances of political parties on the eve of the Election Day is another criterion of such countries. As regards the status of the party for progress and unity in diversity, we are told: “The party had been founded two months before the parade; it died two days after it. It won one seat out of twelve; ten of the candidates lost their deposits; the president and the funds disappeared” (185).

### **Democracy Taking Roots!**

Naipaul ironically comments, “And so democracy took root in Elvira” (193). Whatever be the reasons, the democratic set up in such places does not seem to serve a really useful purpose either to the benefit of people or their representatives or to the advantage of social and cultural institutions. Harbans says, “Thus democracy is a strange thing. It does make the great poor and the poor great. It makes me a beggar – yes, don’t stop me, I is a beggar ... and I begging for your vote” (156). The rhetoric of election has crystallized in Elvira. Here is an election speech:

People of Elvira, the fair constituency of Elvira, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains, unite and cohere. Vote for the man who has lived among you. This is the voice of the renowned and ever popular Lorkhoor begging you and urging you and imploring you and entreating you and beseeching you to vote for Preacher, the renowned and ever popular Preacher. Use your democratic right on Election Day and vote one, vote all. This good people of Elvira, is the voice of Lorkhoor. (166)

### **Corrupt Appeasement as the Basic Process**

Harbans has to resort to demeaning and corrupt practices to appease different kinds of people in Elvira. Harbans was more worried about the loss of the Muslim votes than “about the loss of honour of his prospective daughter-in-law” (129). To get the Hindu votes he has to please Chittranjan by agreeing to marry his son to Chittranjan’s daughter, Nelley, though it never materializes. To get the Muslim votes he has to satisfy Baksh, the tailor, who till the last moment, tries to exploit Harbans. Harbans then woos the Negro votes away from his rival, Preacher. Baksh demands two hundred dollars per month for his eldest son, Foam, who is to be the manager of the campaign. On the verge of elections, he was asked by Chittranjan to



give Lorkhoor five hundred dollars for eight hundred Hindu votes. In the meanwhile, his campaign members arranged a big motor-car parade.

On the polling day, given the 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 problem. All these make him so desperate that he looks only “sad and absent minded” (192) even in the moment of triumph.

### **Election Day**

Naipaul describes the Election Day with full vitality and liveliness. He presents both his politicians and the electorate as tricksters and exploiters. Democracy becomes merely a guise for self-advancement. The candidates do not have a policy for the platform. Harbans’ strategy is to get the Hindus to vote for him and to persuade the Muslims to do so through Baksh. Though people talk about unity, religious and racial chauvinism always take precedence over ideology. The politicians, in fact, make the people more and more racially conscious. The bitterness that exists between Hindus and Muslims is nothing else but racial prejudice. For instance, when Chittranjan gets into a fight with Baksh, he says, “Every Hindu blood is pure blood” (114). He goes on, “Muslim is everything and Muslim is nothing” (114).

### **Preconceived Notions and Superstitions**

The other factor which stresses their literal existence and guides their votes is their preconceived notions: the fear of magic and obeah in the shape of the unsuspecting tiger as the sign of evil things to come. For the older generation, democracy and the gift of the vote becomes a symptom of bad times. As Mrs. Baksh says, “‘who fault it is that this whole thing happen?’ Her brow darkened and her manner changed. ‘Is this election sweetness that sweeten you up, Baksh. But see how this sweetness going to turn sour sour’” (82).

Apart from this, almost all meetings, all the campaign members tried to make Harbans spend his money for getting sympathy or support of people. For instance, at his meetings on the terrace of Chittaranjan’s shop, Harbans gave out bagfuls of sweets to children. As the meeting practically was about to over, one of the campaign members got up and said: “Boss, the boys from Pueblo road can’t play no football this season. Goal post falls down Football bust” (178).

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## **Winning for the Status Quo**

Harbans wins because he is able to pay the entrance fee. Elvira has not changed significantly as a consequence of the elections: “So, Harbans won the election and the insurance company lost a Jaguar. Chittranjan lost a son-in-law and Dhaniram lost a daughter-in-law. Elvira lost Lorkhoor and Lorkhoor won a reputation. Elvira lost Mr. Cuffy. And Preacher lost his deposit” (207).

On the other hand, Preacher, the other candidate, was a person who had suffered the loss in the elections and as a result faced bankruptcy at the most. When he lost the elections, he was helpless and could not do anything except going around briskly from house to house to thank the people. Only Baksh, the third candidate for the elections, was the individual who was most benefited for a number of times. Moreover, his son, Foam added to the income of his family by becoming the campaign manager of Harbans.

## **Elvira – A Reconstruct of Trinidad?**

With the success of Harbans – democracy arrives in Elvira, portrayed as an imaginary place, but in reality an imaginative reconstruct of Trinidad. The machinery of election is educative and brings out not only the dormant differences but also a temporarily forged unity created by a common involvement in the election. “Everybody, Hindu, Muslims and Christians owned a Bible; the Hindu and Muslims looking on it, if anything, with greater awe; Hindus and Muslims celebrated Christmas and Easter. The Spaniards and some of the Negro celebrated the Hindu festival of lights” (66).

Harbans could not endure the losses of elections. He left Elvira, intending never to return. But he did return, once because of the offer of the case of whisky by Ramlogan to the winning party. He appears in an outfit that transforms his appearance completely. He drives a different vehicle too, a brand new blue-and-black Jaguar instead of the old Dodge lorry. At the function, the crowds go berserk and set fire to his car, which is not even a week old. Greatly agitated, Harbans says, “Elvira, you a bitch” (206) a second time in the novel and he comes no more to Elvira

Political action activates the various alliances. These alliances change partners as rapidly as in a country dance guided by the desire of extracting as much benefit from Harbans as is possible: medical welfare, burial expenses, and free drinks at Cuffy’s wake and to celebrate

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victory, vans, loudspeakers, marriage alliances and business deals. He settles his bills of the taxi drivers, Ramlogan's rum account and petrol vouchers. In addition to the above, he has to give bonuses to the agents.

### **A Topsy-turvy Trait of Democracy**

However, to Dhaniram, democracy has a certain meaning it shows a topsy-turvy trait. Hence, he is absolutely correct while saying "This democracy is a damn funny thing" (148). Teacher Francis considers democracy a nonsense thing. He opines, "This universal suffrage nonsense is 'just another British trick to demoralize people' of 'a good friendly place'" (96). Even the pose of Rampiari's husband decided to vote none, "He didn't believe in this new politics business, politicians were all crooks, and nobody was going to do anything for him anyway" (88). Mr. Baksh is supposed to be in control of the Muslim vote. He makes most out of the election; throughout the novel, he is bribed for three times: first, to support Harbans, then to stand for the election himself and finally to withdraw in favour of the 'prestigious candidate'. His nomination necessitates changes in the allocation of election symbols.

The characterization of Harbans never becomes a really palpable figure in the reader's innovation. 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. Although he contributes little to the development of the action, he is so vividly drawn that he attracts greater attention than his contribution really warrants – at least on one level.

The shoddiness of the political system in Trinidad, as depicted in the novel, would become obvious. The public interaction is of vital importance in democracy, "The government to the people, for the people and by the people" (185). Democracy cannot be expected to function and survive in such an atmosphere along with people like Harbans, Dhaniram, Chittaranjan and Mahadeo.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, Naipaul's mode of portrayal suggests how little the candidate features in Elviran politics. He shows the development of democracy in a vacuum which makes mimicry of the whole concept of community and individual responsibility.

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