



**A Conflict Between Ideality and Reality: V.S. Naipaul's
*In A Free State***

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Abstract

In a Free State explores the multifarious meanings of freedom. Firstly, it is the freedom of natural world which has no divine purpose but paradoxically revealing the cycles of creation and decay. In other words, if there is no essential good or evil, no divine purpose, then we are essentially free to give life what meaning we wish, to purpose or not to pursue, what goals we wish. But this creates terrifying responsibilities as our freedom is limited by circumstances, possibilities and fears. In the social context, to be in a 'free state' is to be isolated, alienated, not part of the group and therefore prey for others. Thus, *Freedom* or *Free State* not only creates a crisis of purpose and responsibility but also brings dangers of insecurity and ruin. The tramp in 'prologue' is a perfect example for it.

Again, we find that freedom from moral rights and wrongs have its own dangers as Bobby learns while attempting to seduce African men. Similarly, freedom from established manners produces such absurdities as Santosh purchases a green suit. A free or independent state can be chaotic, disordered, violent nation, in the midst of civil or tribal wars and thus freedom can result in tyranny. *In A Free State* probes such contradictions, beginning with the threatened situation of the tramp, the financial and emotional insecurity of Santosh and the West Indian narrator in 'Tell Me Who To Kill', a civil war in independent African state or Naipaul's own exercise of moral choice in protesting against the humiliation of Egyptian children and himself being humiliated by it. Now let's analyze all three stories along with their prologue and epilogue in a sequential manner as presented by the author.

Keywords: Displacement, Exile, Freedom, Identity, Isolation, Post-colonialism, Violence.

1. Introduction

In a Free State by V.S. Naipaul is hailed as a great book by a greatest author. This work deserved all the praise and attention from readers and critics alike, particularly after getting Booker Prize for it in year 1971. It was a period when the author lived in Wiltshire, England and his literary pursuits were interrupted by travels abroad on assignment as a journalist. Among the books written during that period, his main concerns remain the nature of freedom, commitment and authenticity in relation to experiences and giving purpose to life. Quite interestingly, the ideas are questioned by real-life situations. Hence, it is a conflict between certitude and flux, ideal and real.

2. Discussions

As far as *In a Free State* is concerned, it is a marvelous collection of postcolonial short-stories highly skilled in the novelist's craftsmanship. The book displays three striking features, the paradox of seeking freedom in a strange land; the cultural anomie and a conflict between different ideologies. In a way, it is a reverse edition of *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster. Like in his other novels, V.S. Naipaul offers his readers sour-sweet experiences of modern wanderers and hence stirs them into profound thinking. But all the activity, no matter how different from reader to reader, from culture to culture, takes place under the cover of simple and uniquely ironical language employed by the author. It is a

classic analysis between the two theories , i.e. first, the entire world is home to us and second, we strive for our house house or home. In the process we move away from our ancestral home, our roots and find a home away from home. However, the search remains unfulfilled and one is forced to make undesirable compromises , lose his self-esteem and personal identity, and yet compelled to exhibit some sort of satisfaction and achievement to others.

The focus is usually on individuals , their hopes , desire , fears , and problems of freedom and human nature . These novels are rich in psychology ; in awareness of how insecurity is transformed into violence and tyranny . The novels like *In a Free State* , *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River* certainly remind us of the events portrayed by William Golding in *Lord of Flies* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Given the topic at hand, it would be particularly more relevant to dwell upon *In A Free State*. In this connection, it could be observed that prima facie it seems to be dealing with a single plot in accordance with the title of the book alone. However, it is actually more like a collection of stories as quoted earlier. For this purpose, it could be recalled that it is a book having three stories flanked by a prologue and an epilogue on either side.

Primarily, all five stories focus on uprooted individuals in a situation where society has become disorganized or 'free' and, like most of Naipaul's fiction, the narrative easily lends itself to being allegorized as representative of the nation , the post-imperial and contemporary world. It is essentially about experiences of being out of place. In this sense, it reminds us of Mary Douglas' conception of matter out of place from her essay 'Purity and Danger'. The stories are all about people who find themselves at places where they feel, or made to feel, that they do not belong. The stories too are about boundaries, purity, pollution , incommensurability and just plain strangeness . The presence of an English tramp on a Greek ferry cause uproar, an Indian servant tries to come to terms with his new life in Washington DC, a South Asian West Indian immigrant in London reflects upon his ruins of life, two white Britons in Uganda drive from the capital to their compound in the south as post—independence upheaval all around throws their presence in the country into relief, and finally in Epilogue, an Asian businessman travelling through Milan and Cairo reflects upon cruelty and Empire.

Some of the stories are more uncomfortable than others . But here is the real motive of the author coming to the fore. He wants to please the reader but at the same time, he

wants to convey the hard message through his chilling and depressing stories. He can be pardoned for the simple reason that going soft on certain matters would not have helped the cause. However, this 'freedom' or 'free state' turns out to be largely theoretical and ironic, since most of the countries even after getting independence are the playing of colonial powers. Other connotations of the title include an independent nation or condition where the law, rules and regulations are absent from general life. More commonly, the title has been taken to refer freedom as psychological state, a state of mind and that causes anguish, abandonment and the loss of personal attachments. Alternatively, it has been suggested that in his choice of the title, Naipaul is drawing upon scientific metaphor namely the idea of the free floating movement of sub-atomic particles around a nucleus. The same principle applies to the structure of the book. *In a Free State* is an assemblage of unblended, discrete elements. We have two stories and a novel loosely joined by a prologue and an epilogue. It all seems to be not revolving around any nucleus and therefore fail to cohere as a single work.

Naipaul's own life seems to be in a 'Free State' or constant flux akin to many of the characters populating his works. In this regard, the author confessed in an interview during the year of book's publication that with each novel he found it harder and harder to do the artificial side of making up big narratives and simply decided to let the book fall into its component parts. Though the individual sections of the book are each set in a 1960s postcolonial world and feature common themes of displacement and transplantation to alien cultures. They also in their diverse speaking voices, geographical settings, and narrative techniques have the randomness of component parts left to lie where they fall thus vindicating the intention of the author.

In the Prologue and epilogue Naipaul travels to Egypt as a part of what seems a life of being continually on the move, being in a free state. He is also travelling to a now supposedly free state. He travels among various casualties of freedom, people displaced as a consequence of national independence, the withdrawal of the former imperial order or by the demands of individual ambition. There is an older impoverished Englishman, who travels alone and is immediately seen as weak, a potential victim, prey to be hunted by others for amusement. Naipaul watches with interest but fearing for himself avoids involvement with the weak. In the epilogue Naipaul, for once, intervenes in what he sees as injustice and humiliation; but he soon learns the futility of what he has done and withdraws. The strong continue to dominate the weak. Naipaul also observes a touring

Chinese circus which unlike himself travels as a protected , well-led , organized , disciplined group. Naipaul is interested in them. Although they appeal to those hoping to right social and economic injustice, they may represent another international empire, the possible new order to replace the confusing freedom of the West . Between the two autobiographical episodes there are three stories. At the centre of the book the title story, ‘ In a Free State ’, offers another , more way , contemporary version of *The Heart of Darkness* . Here two Europeans travel in a car across a large African country , while the government is crushing a secessionist movement. There is a parallel between the political chaos following national independence and moral and psychological chaos of the two whites . If Africa has given them the freedom to follow their sexual desires and other privileges , it is also a place of violence where Europeans are losing their dominance , where they are now often humiliated ; the expatriate British white has joined the unprotected , rootless , homeless population of the contemporary world and will need to keep moving.

In ‘One out of Many’ Naipaul uses the convention of the novel of manners where the servant given security and status by working for someone rich or titled becomes a snob, the one person in such fiction who usually upholds class and other status distinctions . In having an Indian servant as his central character , Naipaul gets at the underlying assumptions behind a middle -and upper -class joke . The working classes are usually happier with the security of job and position than the financially well off and highly qualified who have more to gain from mobility and who are therefore more likely to be ‘ liberal’ . Freedom assumes security. It also assumes a consensus of values and therefore of culture. Santosh’s transfer to Washington and expectation of a green card through marrying an African - American may seem like paradise to some in the ‘third world ’, and his memories of life in Bombay may seem the immigrant’s usual idealized nostalgia for a lost home, but his life in America is impoverished, lonely and filled with anxieties. As Santosh becomes increasingly more conscious of his freedom and responsible for himself, without the knowledge and qualifications to make much use of such liberty, his situation begins to seem genuinely tragic. Naipaul balances the comedy and tragedy, allowing his themes to deepen without totally moving out of comedy until the conclusion:

Soul Brother. I understand the words; but I feel, brother to what or to whom? I was once part of the flow, never thinking of myself as a presence. Then I looked in the mirror and decided to be free . All that my freedom has brought me is the knowledge that(p.58)

Santhosh mixes Indian fatalism and passivity, of the world as illusion, with the rebel, the Western striving individualist, the self-willed, in which this life is the only reality. The two opposing views blend together into a distinctive pessimism, an existential despair. That Santosh can see no achievement in his remarkable life is part of the comedy. But another interpretation might be that the Asian Indian is another Invisible Man in the United States, someone whose own culture is mistakenly assumed to be similar to that of African-Americans and black West Indians.

“Tell Me Who to Kill” concerns the ways ambition, education, illusions and travel fracture family bonds and how personal faults and lack of self-knowledge can be as destructive as the difficulties presented by the world. The speaker, an Indian, brought up among the sugar cane fields of the West Indies, is obsessed with his younger brother whom he decides will not have the ugly, brutal life he himself has known. Like an overly affectionate parent he spoils his brother, who lacks the abilities and will to better himself. The younger brother blames others for his failures, is lazy, lies and keeps pretending he needs money for further study. The narrator borrows money for his brother’s trip to and study in England, eventually follows him there, himself finds a job in a factory, and besides paying for his brother, who long ago has stopped enrolling for courses of study, saves up enough to open a small roti shop which he eventually loses along with his savings. While he has admittedly suffered from racial prejudice at the hands of young British toughs, he seems in any event totally unequipped to operate a shop in England. He has no friends, no society, no one to give him advice or help. The only person he trusts is his younger brother, who refuses to have anything to do with the shop. For decades the speaker has shown bad judgment about his brother and an unwillingness to take advice from others who warned him.

3. Conclusions

Finally, the narrator resigns and the conflict between the stories leaves us in a gloomy mood. The story highlights the fact that individual aspirations, no matter how genuine they are matter little in the present superstructure of society and global order. Freedom is only a mirage and an unattainable goal for mankind. So, the title *In a Free State* again proves to be ironical.

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