

Angela Stănescu*

THE POSTCOLONIAL CITY AS A DYSTOPIAN WASTELAND: V. S. NAIPAUL'S GUERRILLAS

Keywords: *postcolonial dystopia; city; island; apocalypticism; race; black revolution; Gothic.*

Abstract: *The present article examines the dystopian quality of Naipaul's representation of the postcolonial space in his novel Guerrillas. Naipaul's staple use of the imagery of dereliction and desolation, paradigmatic of his portrayal of the decolonised outposts of Empire, is hypertrophied here so as to envision a dystopian city in a postcolonial 'wasteland'. The political and ideological edge of the novel is implied in the oppressive atmosphere of the place, as perceived and experienced by the displaced and repressed individuals who fall victim to its disorder. The study highlights the way in which the counterpoint dynamic of landscape and mindscape representations nuances Naipaul's acerbic critique of the millenaristic apocalypticism and messianism of the Black Power movements, as well as of the white left-wingers embroiled in Third World distress. As the apocalyptic spatial imagery and symbolism seep into the characters' vision of a world redeemable only by fire and violence, the novel's Wasteland metaphor is tinged with the thrill of a postcolonial Black Gothicism, conveying Naipaul's haunting "vision of a world undoing itself".*

Guerrillas (1975) is Naipaul's bleakest novel about the post-independence disorder plaguing the emergent nations in the Caribbean space. Portraying an unnamed West Indian island in the 1970s, the novel continues Naipaul's fictional and non-fictional exploration of the political developments across the decolonising world. It represents a moment of socio-political crisis in a "composite English-speaking Caribbean island resembling Trinidad and Jamaica", the habitual setting of Naipaul's "studies of small, economically unviable islands caught in the drama, rhetoric and delusions of independence" (King 100). Guerrillas intensifies the unnerving sense of menace, of impending danger bound up with the destabilising upshots of freedom. It also evinces Naipaul's increasingly apocalyptic vision of the Third World degenerating into the chaos of communal violence and civil war. The blackening perspective of Guerrillas figures a society engulfed by terror and chaos, as its political, social and economic instability is exacerbated by racial uprisings. The metonymic society of the capital city is pulverised in a divided crowd of disoriented, uprooted individuals, adrift towards a terrific, violent end.

Naipaul's anxiety about the aggravating political climate in the Caribbean and other decolonised areas brings about a shift from the realist mode of his earlier fiction to a markedly dystopian vision. This pervasive 'apocalypticism' is cast into an aesthetic mould definable as postcolonial dystopia or postcolonial Gothic. The choice of dystopian and gothic aesthetics suits the writer's "vision of a world

* 'Valahia' University of Targoviste, Romania.

undoing itself” (Naipaul 1987: 310). Naipaul’s brand of postcolonial dystopia, stalked by the spectre of gothic self-destruction, inscribes his vision of the post-independence space as a wasteland on the brink of self-annihilation. Naipaul’s bleak portrayal of the decolonised island/state/city projects a surreal, uncanny space, which construes “not a Third World...but a partly real, partly fantastic Fourth World toward which many countries are regressing...a single, fictional state, a Fourth World of fear, the menace of violence, and horror” (Weiss 167). Fitting the above description of a no-place, *Guerrillas* replays in a more sombre key the defining themes and motifs of Naipaul’s work – historical, geographical, cultural and psychological displacement; violence-ridden history, politics and society; cultural mimicry and mutual corruption; social disorder and chaos; conflicting racial and ethnic identities; human inadequacy and helplessness; the “casualties of freedom”; the disorientation of emergent nations in the formerly colonised, “half-made societies”, baffled by the complexities of self-determination; the danger of historical victimisation and retribution.

The novel also draws on the blend of factuality and fiction characteristic of his other novels. It fictionalises the political and racial upheavals plaguing Trinidad in the 1970s, especially the Black Power movement and uprisings which threw the country into political and social chaos. It is based on the material of his earlier article “Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad”, documenting the failed Black Power Revolution of 1970, alongside the story of Michael de Freitas, also known as Michael X or Michael Abdul Malik – a fraudulent hustler transformed into a Black Power leader, largely due to the attention he received in London from the leftist media circles, who helped glamorise his image as a fighter for racial emancipation. Malik also shocked public opinion by murdering his followers, who were living together in his commune, including an English female journalist. The novel figures Malik as Jimmy Ahmed, the leader of a commune and a self-imagined revolutionary symbol, in reality no more than a petty extortionist, who blackmails politicians and businesspeople by entertaining their fear of the revolution.

Guerrillas is primarily focused on a portrayal of the island’s capital city, confronted with an escalating political crisis. The physical reality of the city, with its architectonic incongruities and scenic incoherence, matched by the motley assortment of its residents, provides a parallel to the descent into chaos of an irremediably divided nation, whose fragmented collective consciousness cannot recover from the memory of racial hurt and ethnic antagonism. The image of this dysfunctional, futureless society emerges from the characters’ perceptions, thoughts and comments, but most of all from the lengthy place descriptions. Naipaul’s highly descriptive text uses the landscape and cityscape, as well as its cast of listless characters, as objective correlatives for the country’s political, economic and social precariousness.

The scenes of decay and desolation riddling both cityscape and landscape, with their ghastly sites of abandoned industrial estates and failed attempts at urban redevelopment bespeak the country’s thwarted post-independence projects for economic development. The contrasts of its polarised society are made visible in the scenic division between the derelict, slummy city spreading on the flatland at the foot of the hills and the opulence of the Ridge, the city’s fashionable suburb rising

on the hillsides. This topographic contrast of highland and flatland, both literal and figurative, underlies the pervasive spatial symbolism relating to social elevation and lowliness. Focusing on a pictorial depiction of the place, precariously located in a limbo between old and new, colonial past and postcolonial present, historical memory and aspiration for renewal, reality and illusion, Naipaul creates a setting which graphically illustrates the plight of a postcolonial space riven by conflict, contestation, and disorder.

The novel's first chapter opens with a thoroughly graphic account of a long car ride from the Ridge to the outskirts of the city. The emblematic features of the place are noted as they are glimpsed from the speeding car by the white expatriates Jane and Roche, who are driving to Thrushcross Grange, the agricultural commune administered by Jimmy Ahmed, the would-be leader of the Black Power revolutionary movement. Mindless of the absurdity of the ironically inverted parallel, Roche attaches no real meaning to the name: "I don't think Jimmy sees himself as Heathcliff or anything like that. He took a writing course, and it was one of the books he had to read. I think he just likes the name." (Naipaul, *Guerrillas* 10)

The racially charged politics unsettling the country soon becomes apparent from the "thoroughfares daubed with slogans: Basic Black, Don't Vote, Birth Control is a Plot Against the Negro Race", as well as from the signboards announcing Thrushcross Grange with "a clenched fist emblematically rendered" and the slogan "For the Land and the Revolution" (9). The sense of impending political crisis is paralleled by the natural hazard of the prolonged drought and the wildfires threatening to engulf the city. Apart from the scorching heat and stretches of ignited bush, another constant of the landscape is the red bauxite dust enveloping it: "the heat seemed trapped below the haze of the bauxite dust from the bauxite loading station" (10). The recurrent image of the red pall emanated by the bauxite industry, run by the Americans who virtually run the place, points to the neo-imperialist ventures in the region. The descriptions replay the whole imagistic and linguistic inventory of dereliction and decay paradigmatic of Naipaul's staple images of the colonial landscape, uncertainly situated between the binary poles of civilisation and bush:

. . . the rubbish dump burning in the remnant of the mangrove swamp, with black carrion corbeaux squatting hunched on fence-posts or hopping about on the ground; after the built up hillsides; after the new housing estates, rows of unpainted boxes of concrete and corrugated iron already returning to the shanty towns that had been knocked down for this redevelopment; after the naked children playing in the red dust of the new straight avenues, the clothes hanging like rags from backyard lines; after this, the land cleared a little. And it was possible to see over what the city had spread: on one side, the swamp, drying out to a great plain; on the other side, a chain of hills, rising directly from the plain. (9)

The areas of urban modernisation are shown to mingle incongruously and vie for space with the proliferating shanty towns. The agglomeration of corrugated roofed shacks and makeshift structures, a stock visual image in Naipaul's writing, is iconic of the provisional, precarious habitation of what the author calls the half-made societies of decolonisation. The emblematic incompleteness of the half-made

industrial or housing enterprises of the postcolonial moment is presented in counterpoint with vestiges of the island's colonial past as a plantation economy.

The traffic was heavy in this area of factories. But the land still showed its recent pastoral history. Here and there, among the big sheds and the modern buildings in unrendered concrete, the tall wire fences and the landscaped grounds, were still fields, remnants of the big estates, together with remnants of the estate villages: vegetable plots, old wooden houses on stilts, huts, bare front yards with zinnia-clumps, ixora bushes and hibiscus hedges. Grass now grew in the fields beside the highway; boards offered building plots or factory sites. (10)

Yet, there are also remnants of the quite recent past, testimonies of the false starts of a misconceived economic growth. The deserted relics of "the former industrial estate" are compared with the ruins of a Roman bath, which is an indirect, bitterly ironic comment on the long lost dream of economic progress, marred by the hit-and-run policy of opportunistic foreign investors:

. . . and sometimes there were rows of red-brick pillars, hung with dried-out vines, that suggested antique excavations: the pillars might have supported the floor of a Roman bath. It was what remained of an industrial estate, one of the failed projects of the earliest days of independence. Tax-holidays had been offered to foreign investors; many had come for the holidays and had then moved on elsewhere. (11)

In the general desolation of this parched 'wasteland', even the overpowering bush seems to have lost its vitality: "But the bush had a cut-down appearance and looked derelict in the drought" (11).

The absurdity of this anachronistic agricultural commune is intensified by its mixture of pastoral romance and revolutionary utopia of a return to the land, which Roche disingenuously supports, as if yielding to a suspension of disbelief. Its utter futility is rendered visible by the arid, disordered stretches of aborted crops and the inertia of the few remaining boys, whose only reason for being there is that they have nowhere else to go. The aimlessness of the project is underlined by the romanticised, 'fairy story' ideals of its ideological programme, dabbling at poetry in its faulty, awkward English:

All revolutions begin with the land. Men are born on the earth, every man has his one spot, it is his birth right, and men must claim their portion of the earth in brotherhood and harmony. In this spirit we came an intrepid band to virgin forest, it is the life style and philosophy of Thrushcross Grange. (17)

This is the expression of Jimmy's personal utopia of rootedness, of belonging to the place, which is bathetically contradicted by the juxtaposition of his stereotypical idea of Englishness and European stereotypes of a Third World of new dawns and fresh possibilities – a contemporary version of the 'noble savage' utopia. His choice of the literary place name, suggestive of upper class privilege and security, indicates his impersonation of Heathcliff, of the outcast who eventually appropriates the space of his other. It encapsulates the self-aggrandizing fantasy of a displaced identity, marked by the uncertainty of his cultural belonging. The

dereliction of the place and the hopelessness of its uprooted inhabitants belie the promise of this utopian misconstruction, which enhances Jane's sense of desolation and futility, of being in an alien, barren universe.

But Jane had a sense now of more than heat; she had a sense of desolation. Later, on the ridge, in London, this visit to Thrushcross Grange might be a story. But now, in that hut . . . with the light and the emptiness outside, and the encircling forest, she felt she had entered another, complete world. (17)

Complete only in its imperviousness to Western eyes, it is a world doomed to incompleteness and impermanence. Impermanence is one of the novel's leitmotifs, substantiated by the physical incongruousness of the island's sites of economic modernity and the sights marked by its enduring colonial legacy: "traffic, blackened verges, factory buildings still looking impermanent in the flat landscape of the old plantations" (29).

The city itself is ambivalently located between the exclusive "self-contained suburbs" of the Ridge, "with their own shopping and entertainment plazas", and the old "city proper", which "no longer had a centre" (31). In a way, none of its disconnected upper and lower sides is actually a city proper, with a culturally coherent community and communal life. Those on the Ridge prefer to shun the lower city, which boils with the heat of revolutionary anger, racial riots and street violence, "to lose the feel of the city and see it as part of a larger view of sea and mangrove and great plain" (31). The city appears to sing itself into self-oblivion, to will away its fears in an endless revelry of music:

The hidden city roared and hummed, with ten thousand radios playing the reggae, as they often seemed to do. As though somewhere the same party had been going on, with the same music, month after month. The same party, the same music, at the foot of the hills, in the thoroughfares across the city, the redeveloping project, the suburbs beyond the rubbish dump. (33)

The refrain-like repetitions hyperbolise the spatial and temporal expansion of the city's reeling manifestation of its vitality, creating a surreal image of timeless stagnation and changelessness. One of the prominent residents of the Ridge, the local businessman and socialite Harry de Tunja, jokingly nicknamed 'Calypso Harry', ridicules this defining trait of his culture and resents being associated with a carnival society. While confessing that he loves "this" (not his!) country, he sees it as a one-dimensional culture of carnival, a "country that has been destroyed by music" (129), where "people would dance their way to hell" (128). In his view, this scathes the country's very credibility:

How the hell can you respect a guy who starts tapping his feet to music and jiggling up in his chair? . . . You feel the feller has no control at all, and that any moment he is going to tear his clothes off and start prancing about the room . . . If I had my own way I would ban music. And dancing. (129)

On their separate sides of the social, economic and political divide, the two halves of the city, high and low, new and old, affluent and impoverished share only the drought, the political unrest, the guerrilla activity scare and the pervasive sense of doom. Consumed by the fire, “the woodland on the Ridge had acquired something of the derelict quality of the city” (47). And though the “Ridge was self-contained, shut off from the city . . . in an atmosphere of extravagance rather than of crisis” (50), it is not really insulated against “the exploding city at the foot of the hills”. Behind its feignedly relaxed and settled lifestyle, there is the same sense of uncertain, provisional, dislodged habitation. The insinuating feeling of impermanence and precipitating political disaster escalates to a shared mood of hysteria and countdown to desertion, which both interests and alarms the newly arrived Jane:

Here, where she had come as to the centre of the world, the talk was of departure, of papers being fixed for Canada and the United States: secretive talk, because departure was at once like betrayal and surrender. (50)

Marred by the shiftiness of its existence, the fashionable Ridge, “so high, so seemingly secure” (56) lacks the solidity of a real, functional city, enlivened by human meaning and purpose, by a shared sense of continuity and sociality. It is an artificial, illusory haven, a place of refuge rather than of dwelling, whose insubstantiality stems from the intimation of its inevitable desertion and ultimate dissolution. Its soulless houses seem to reflect the general sense of transience, of makeshift habitation: “These new houses on the Ridge, while they lasted, would only be what they were now: concrete shells. [They] would never be allowed to become family houses that had been lived in for two or three generations” (57). The lives they hold are troubled by “an unknown human turbulence” by the hysteria that the “brown hills held guerrillas” (56).

The dystopian vision of this unhomey city of “human turbulence”, of people in flight from the chaos within and without, with houses which lose the name of homes, is replete with Naipaul’s version of the Shakespearean image of the ‘unaccommodated man’ – the un-housed of the (post)colonial space. The characters’ figurative homelessness has its correspondent in the literal homelessness of the many, just as the madding disorder of the city is paralleled by the ultimate kind of human disorder, that of the mind. The city supposed to be teeming with guerrillas is haunted by the more visible number of those unsheltered and distressed of mind, whom Jane eventually ceases to see:

. . . an elderly Negro . . . was an well-known figure, a disordered man, who at odd times of the day and night took to the roads and ran for miles. . . . people like the runner, people like the wild men who live in the hills, among the new developments, or down in the city, in the backyards of certain thoroughfares: derelicts, a whole parallel society. (30)

To Jane they appear as more than scary, houseless drifters, whom she perceives hyperbolically, as an overwhelming, ubiquitous multitude. To her culturally biased mind, they epitomise an alien, archaic, aboriginal nomadism,

anachronistic and out of place, yet so much part of the place. Her insistence on their ancestral wildness replays the stereotypical image of the uncivilised, savage native:

But in that vegetation . . . there was strangeness and danger: the wild disordered men, tramping along old paths, across gardens, between houses, and through what remained of woodland, like aborigenes recognizing only an ancestral landscape and insisting on some ancient right of way. (31)

Calypso Harry expresses his concern in a half-serious key. Beyond the island's reggae craze, he sees a society afflicted with madness, literally and figuratively: "But this place is full of mad people, for truth . . . once you realize you have madmen running about the place, you start seeing them everywhere. It's a damn frightening thing" (137-8).

Throughout the novel, landscape and mindscape are presented in counterpoint, as seeping into one another, punctuating and accentuating each other while the characters take in and respond to their surroundings. The absurdity of their mind-set and the pretence of their engagement with the place are gradually gleaned from their perceptions of the island, of themselves and each other. Their mindscapes, too, illustrate the same intimation of the end as an act of self-destruction. Though their perspectives are differentiated by race, nationality, background or gender, they yield to the same vision of impending apocalypse. The meagre plot is superseded by the atmosphere of menace and despair, which builds up to the characters' final awakening to the reality of their misreading of themselves and their world(s), to a sense of failure and self-violation. The loss of their political illusions about the country's survival parallels the discovery of their self-delusions. Bruce King notes that the plot "does not treat the political events . . . considered a communal frenzy predictable on a small, politically independent island with a history of racial humiliations" (King 103). In fact, it focuses on how the dynamic of Third and First World politics shapes the politics of private and public identity in both spaces. King explains: "Their stories show how personal rebellions are mistaken for revolutionary idealism and how history has determined behaviour. The subjective illuminates the historical drama" (King 103).

Naipaul once said that "a place is its people", an idea underlying the novel's representation of the post-independence political chaos in the Caribbean. The focus on the displaced, unanchored individuals re-echoes the leitmotif of *The Mimic Men* (1967), the observation that in these island colonies there is "no relationship between man and landscape". None of the characters seems to share any real, meaningful bond with the place, be they local people or adventuring expatriates like Jane and Roche. The author's critique is equally unsparing of either side of his binary construction of the world – metropolis/colony, centre/margin, world/island, master/slave, white/black. In the foreground is "the relationship between whites and blacks in which assertions of black authenticity so often are part of dependency." (King 101) The scathing portrayal of the self-deluded expatriates Peter Roche and his follower Jane, with their romanticised activism and false sense of mission, exposes the personal and ideological hollowness sometimes actuating "whites who want to be involved in Third World distress" (King 103). The white South African

Peter Roche, a former activist for the blacks' rights, imprisoned and tortured in South Africa, finds it hard to live up to his reputation as a champion of liberty and progress, which lures his English lover Jane to follow him on the island. They represent the idealistic, left-wing intellectuals of the West, disenchanted with their own societies, whose anti-Establishment stance makes them espouse Third World causes, as an ultimate act of contestation. Their militant posturing hides their search for status in what they consider the new centre of things. Seeking a refuge from the de-centring of the former imperial centre, they re-enact the colonialist myths of the white man's civilising agency: "As the imperial centre has lost its glamour, Europeans have sought excitement among the decolonized...now dissatisfied with their own shrunken societies they carry their emotional needs to the former colonies in search of drama, sexual excitement and access to power" (King 103).

Roche is blind to the irony of his working for a company originally established by slave owners and of Jimmy calling him 'Massa'. Jane gradually opens her eyes to the rift between her image of him as a man with a sense of mission and his meaningless pursuits on the island, where he is condescended upon. His inauthentic, displaced identity becomes apparent in the divorce between thought and action defining his aimless, faithless work. As she begins to cut him back to size, Jane grows aware of his inadequacy, as well as of her own self-deception: "Jane saw . . . that in spite of the real respect for his past, Roche had become a kind of buffoon figure to many" (53). In the man who appeared to her as a doer with "some long view, some vision of the future", she discovers a listless, visionless man with no particular training or skills, "a doer of good works, with results that never showed, someone who went among the poor on behalf of his firm and tried to organize boys' clubs and sporting events" (53). Roche is revealed as a failure, in flight from the void within himself, from his inner insubstantiality, whose existence on the island is as absurd as her own: "She saw that Roche was a refugee on the island. . . . He was a man who had no place to go to; he was someone for whom room had been made" (51).

However, of the novel's trio of role-players, Roche is the only one capable of self-scrutiny. Acknowledging his self-delusion, he lucidly dissects the sham of his (self-) image "as a man given over to a cause" (91). Having for years "thought of himself as a doer", he discovers himself to be "so far from that self, to be a man who waited on events . . . waiting . . . for all his action to be revealed as futility" (91). He realises that his actions have never been founded on any genuine creed or "set of political beliefs": "he had no political dogma and no longer had a vision of the world made good" (91). His defensive motto, "You have to work with what is there", points to the self-exonerating hypocrisy of a man who has no true sense of political purpose, whose actions and decisions have resulted from having "disregarded some element of the truth" (92). Meredith, the local politician who interviews him for the radio programme "Encounters", eventually calls his bluff, openly challenging him on the moral and ethical foundation of his work: "'You're a stranger, you don't feel involved. You're involved with an agricultural commune which you consider anti-historical and which you don't think can succeed. You aren't too concerned about results'" (213). The concise, incisive tonality of the short negative sentences sounds like an act of indictment. Goaded into explaining himself about his alleged support

of Ahmed's back-to-the-land revolution, Roche gives himself away by a telling choice of words: "You can't go back to the land as a gesture. You can't pretend". Taking up his cue, Meredith sarcastically exposes him as a fraud: "'you've used the key word, Peter: pretend'" (204).

Roche confesses his inadequacy to Jane in a moment of honesty: "I just can't see the future. I can't even see what a good future for me would be...I no longer have any idea of what I want to do...I've stopped thinking of myself as a politician...And now there's nothing to replace it" (157). The cumulative succession of negatives conveys his glimpse of himself as a non-entity. His displacement is gauged not only by his lack of a home or sense of belonging, but by his confusion as to his life's meaning. Roche's self-perception as a man 'quite adrift' (92) is voiced by Meredith's subtle allusion to the archetypal homelessness of Ulysses: "here we are, I can't say at home, but at the end of your personal odyssey" (213). Roche has his own metaphor for the inconsequentiality of his lifelong journey: "I've built my whole life on sand" (91). The insubstantiality of Roche's identity is captured by King's remark that he "is perhaps the only character in the novel with any claim to be a guerrilla; he risked his life for political action. But he is found to be a fraud with no clearly thought out objectives or plans" (King 115). Eventually, during one of his frantic drives with Jane through the alienating landscape, he breaks down into an avowal of his real feelings: "I loathe all these people. I hate this place" (160).

Jane, too, has a warped sense of identity, hiding her hollowness under the mask of a disabused reformist, haunted by a "vision of decay, of a world going up in flames" (100). Her affected impatience with the moral decay of her society is a displaced manifestation of her awareness that England "no longer offers...an ideal such as imperialism or the mission of Western civilization" (King 103). Behind her revolutionary, anti-racist and progressive stance, Roche discovers that her world-weariness serves as a disguise for her sense of failure, that "her critical obsession with England and her class showed her still to think that England was of paramount importance in the world." (95) Without any real values or ideals of her own, she lives vicariously through men who offer her a sense of direction and purpose.

Soon her romantic image of the island as "the setting of action that would undo the world" (53) is soured by her realisation "that she had come to a place at the end of the world, to a place that had exhausted its possibilities". She is surprised by the naivety of her notion "that the future of the world was being shaped in places like this, by people like this" (50). As she loses interest in the political frenzy of the island, she switches off to its sights and its people, adopting the aloofness of the white outsider, unable to empathize with local distress. Her deprecating evaluation of the locals evokes the hegemonic discourse of colonialism: "They were dull people, she decided, sheep being led to the slaughter; they deserved their future. She continued to find proofs of their dullness, and he watched her revulsion grow" (99). Overwhelmed by her 'feeling of being adrift' (100), she retreats into the reassuring consciousness of her privileged class and nationality, of her British passport and her return air-ticket. While reasserting her firm sense of belonging to the centre, she turns her back on the disorder of the periphery, whose significance she plays down

with contempt: “Nothing that happened here could be important. The place was no more than what it looked” (51).

The island seems possessed of the magic power to dispel the characters’ illusions about themselves and the others. Equally disenchanted with Jane’s performance of identity, Roche thinks that “what London had masked the Ridge had layer by layer exposed” (100). Jane’s weariness of the island is also bound up with her disappointment with Roche, with the fact that “she had once again seen in a man things that were not there” (54). Consequently, she sees in Jimmy “a candidate” for her romantic idea of powerful men. She is intrigued by his rebel’s aura and his racial exoticism. Typifying “the white woman who seeks sexual satisfaction in the violent, primitive man”, a version of “Jane to his Tarzan” (King 104), she is modelled after Gale Benson, the Englishwoman who became involved in Michael X’s commune and was murdered on his orders. Like Benson, Jane pays with her life for “the excitement of the [black man’s] macho image, threat of violence and display of black aggression” (King 105). Her horrible death appears as the ultimate act of self-violation of a woman who “may also find sexual satisfaction in masochism” (King 105). Well aware that she is “playing with fire”, she dies as she has always lived, venturing “out into the sexual jungle, to play perilously with the unknown” (97). The emptiness beneath her persona is symbolised by the complete erasure of her existence. After Jimmy disposes of her body in the latrine, Roche destroys her passport, which bears no record of her arrival on the island, thus making her a non-person.

Through the eerie character of Jimmy Ahmed, Naipaul figures the cultural disorientation of postcolonial identity. Jimmy’s displaced articulations of selfhood in the island’s blazing purgatory of historical and racial hurt, his posturing and impersonations illustrate his “cultural alienation [which] bears down on the ambivalence of psychic identification”, to which he “responds with an agonizing performance of self-images” (Bhabha 2000: 60). Estranged from the realities of his society, he withdraws in his utopia of identity. His sense of non-belonging is as acute as that of the white outsiders. Despised as a half-breed posing as a ‘black’ redeemer, he anchors himself in a fantasy of England, which helps him fabricate his legend as a militant for black rights. Still, he seems aware of the pettiness of their interest in him, as he defines his status in England as that of a ‘playboy’, which he tellingly mistakes for ‘plaything’. The West’s support of fake Third World redeemers is debunked by the irony “that the man regarded as a black leader by the British is not black and not a leader” (King 107). Another irony is that the same England which glamorizes Jimmy’s image has to deport him on charges of rape. He becomes a non-entity in both worlds, as both eventually challenge his claims to identity. However, his self-aggrandizement is sustained by the country’s political and business elites, who play the card of racial appeasement and support his commune for fear of the violence he might unleash. Jimmy’s ego feeds on the insecurities of his unstable society.

His imposture as a Black Power leader is apparent in his racial hybridity, which he proclaims with a curious mixture of shame and pride. Half Chinese, half black, he defines himself as “a *hakwai* Chinese”, “the Chinese for Nigger” (27), a title which entitles him to pose as a black militant. He acts out the identity which his

English admirers have bestowed him with, like a puppet “who learns to act the part of the Black Power revolutionary for whites” (King 106). Meredith considers it is this very blankness of character that makes Jimmy dangerous, since it makes him vulnerable to manipulation: “Anybody can use that man and create chaos in this place. He can be programmed. He’s the most suggestible man I know” (142). Weiss compares the Gothicism of Jimmy’s counterfeited identity with the patchy creature of the classic Gothic story, seeing him “as the “programmed” monster, a Frankenstein or creation of bits and parts of 1960s revolutionary ideology” (Weiss 182). Jimmy epitomises the blighted mimics, the acculturated social rejects spawned by Empire’s cultural displacements, whose playing with identities makes them both pitiful and grotesque: “Jimmy is another of Naipaul’s outsiders, who belong to and are protected by no group. He is . . . a half-breed, a product of the mixing of races as a result of imperialism” (King 107).

His self-image is a collage of stereotypical images of messianic black leaders, borrowed from the mythology of the American Black Power Revolution and the radical discourses of the British left. The confidence of his racial self-assertion is mocked both by his yellow complexion and by his “mimicry of the imagined black” (King 107). The poster which portrays him as “more negroid than he was” defines him by borrowed clichés about the black crusader: “*I’m Nobody’s Slave or Stallion, I’m a Warrior and Torch Bearer*” (17). In his self-glorifying writings, his martial stance is replaced by the figure of the redeemer sacrificing himself for the deliverance of his race. As Weiss observes, “the novel undercuts this position by setting up an incongruity between his life and his fantasized identity” (Weiss 181). His posturing as a hero of black revolution is belied by his disdain for ‘*those crazy black people [who] started shouting for Israel and Africa*’ (229), expressed in a letter to his English ex-wife. This moment of unchecked candidness reveals Jimmy “as a man-made half-foreign by his exile in England and as a revolutionary manqué out of touch with the underlying currents of ethnic attitudes in his own society” (Weiss 181).

There are numerous incongruities underlying Jimmy’s fabricated persona. Wanting to pass as a Muslim black, he entitles himself Haji “to mean “mister” or “esquire”” (12), thus ignoring its real religious significance. His Muslim alias is also at odds with a racial movement founded on essentially Christian notions of Messianic deliverance, also based on racial purity politics. As to his Thrushcross Grange, the mismatch is not only onomastic, but also ideological. Although Jimmy likes to identify with Heathcliff, he does not envision himself at Wuthering Heights, but on the symbolic side of nobility and class privilege, in contrast to his revolutionary pretence: “the name [is] an ironic evocation of the order, restraint and social status of the Grange in Brontë’s novel as opposed to the violence and animalistic existence at Wuthering Heights” (Nightingale 174).

His counterfeit self-image is most compellingly illustrated by his veneer of authorship, which mimics English models of literariness. In his auto-diegetic writing, he represents himself as a mythical hero of “*a lovely golden colour, like some bronze god*” (39). He projects himself into stock images of masculinity belonging to various literary traditions: the medieval romance, where he would be a ‘Black Knight’, the hero of his ‘white lady’; the romantic novel, where he is the

demonic lover; the Gothic novel, in which his “unfortified castle” and the burning city “represent the Gothic castle and its dangerous environs” (Weiss 182). The flaunted “*collection of books*”, supposed to cast him as “*a man of considerable refinement rare for these days*” (39-40), epitomises his “mimicry of an education” (King 112). However, his stylistic flamboyance is undercut by his faltering grammar and chaotic punctuation, displaying his scrappy idea of culture and literariness: “Jimmy’s language is often literary in the worst sense of that term...every word and phrase is borrowed, a mimicry of wildly diverse attitudes and times” (King 113).

Jimmy’s fantasies of sexual conquest and domination clumsily evoke the psychoanalytical discourse of Franz Fanon’s parables of racial empowerment through the symbolic subjection of the white woman’s body, and of other “black radical autobiographies of the 1960s with their ideological defence of raping white women” (King 109). Jimmy identifies himself with literary models of demonic virility such as Heathcliff or Lovelace, casting Jane as an enthralled Catherine or Clarissa. His mutilation of Jane’s fetishized body is a symbol of his racial vindication and will to power: “In the well-known mythology of white-black relations...the white woman is the white man’s most guarded possession, that which must be possessed, loved, defiled, killed, in the love-hate psychodrama of the black man’s relationship to whiteness and his own self-hatred” (King 106). Naipaul further complicates the web of interracial sexual transgressions by exploiting the racial significance of Jimmy’s homosexuality. Through his sexual use of Bryant, Jimmy enacts “his own love-hate relationship with blackness, seeing in [him] that deformed part of himself” (King 107). Bryant both attracts and repels Jimmy, and, as a reminder of his inauthentic, corrupted racial identity, helps him discharge his secret hatred and craving for authentic blackness, which parallels the white woman’s transgression of the taboo of black sexuality. The significance of Bryant’s role is that he “serves simultaneously as the sexual body upon which Jimmy realizes his domination as well as the politically disenfranchised body whom he manipulates for his cause” (Mustafa 127). Jane’s slaughter is intended as a ritual offering, a racialist act of poetic justice. It is ironic that Jane should have been reading Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* just before she is murdered in the bush, by men of “*an intrepid band [come] to the virgin forest*’, to claim ‘*their portion of the earth in brotherhood and harmony*’ (17). For these socially disaffected protagonists, sex becomes a pathological substitute for social intercourse and communication. An instantiation of their dysfunctional, dispassionate relationships, sex is merely “an expression of power, fear and dominance” (King 108) or “the ultimate weapon in personal power struggles” (Nightingale 172). The characters’ “social disaffection” translates as “sexual misadventure”, thus “making sex and sexual promiscuity the novel’s frame for political misadventure and misalliance” (Mustafa 126, 127). If all of Naipaul’s novels indirectly treat of sex and eroticism as emotionally scathing and hardly ever satisfying, this singularly naturalistic, yet symbolic representation of sexuality renders sex as the vehicle for self-violation and social violence.

By contrast, the local politician Meredith Herbert emerges as the only character who meaningfully engages with his world. The legitimacy of his claim to a political role is underlined by his relieving impression of normalcy, purposefulness and rightness. He is supposed to have a true grasp on the country’s situation and a

more accurate idea of appropriate political action, as he “has a stake in its future” and “his words carry with them the weight of someone who truly belongs to his society” (Weiss 181). However, he blames his former failures on his turning a blind eye to the island’s social realities, to the truth of Harry’s view of the place as riddled by madness: ““We don’t make enough allowance for the madness. . . . I knew about the madness. . . . But I pretended it didn’t exist . . . A good politician should never do that.”” (138). He looks on island politics and society with a mixture of hopefulness, lucidity, cynicism and gloom, counteracted by a surprising serenity, rooted in his ability “to separate his political anxieties from his private life” (134). Intrigued by his “combination of political concern and private calm” Roche wonders at his capacity to remain “untouched by his own vision of imminent chaos” (135). While resignedly comparing his country’s collapse into chaos with “living in a house without walls”, he seems secure “in his house-building and house-making”, in his “certainty that the world would continue, and the place he had made for himself in it” (135). Roche opens his eyes to the reality of Meredith’s paradoxical stance as he “begins to penetrate the façade of calm, ordered domesticity” and see his “strained efforts to appear whole” (Nightingale 179). He gradually recognises the bluffing behind his “exaggeration and defiance”, and has “an intimation of Meredith’s own hysteria, of the rages, deprivations and unappeased ambition that perhaps lay behind that domesticity he flaunted” (136). The politician’s public persona is revealed “as a creation” (135). His subsequent, unexpected acceptance of a ministerial position just before the riots shows his political and moral shiftiness. The blatant contradiction between his public commitment and his private nihilism suggests a split, duplicitous vision.

In the world of *Guerrillas*, there is an ironic relationship between man and landscape, in that the characters’ pursuits seem as sterile and doomed as the drought-ridden, burning island. The physical and spiritual aridity of the city is congruent with the dryness of the characters’ inner space, with their sapless morality and dried up ideals. Albeit equally alienated from the land and from their others, they all share in the hellish reality of the public chaos which circumscribes their own private hells. Interlocked in a dual dynamic of mutual mirroring and conditioning, landscape and mindscape seem to define or rather infect each other in the engulfing whirl of violence and self-annihilation. The apocalyptic atmosphere of the place, as well as the failing individuals, with their visionless, inconsequential actions and pretence of agency, their misplaced projects and lack of direction, function as metonymic projections of the larger failure – that of the post-independence nation state.

The characters are linked only by their hysterical vision of the world ending. Everyone is a prophet of doom, finding a kind of perverse relief in their intimations of irrupting violence. Jimmy, who wishes “*to see fire everywhere*” and feels “*that to destroy the world is the only course of action that is now open to sane men*” (42), seems to voice the general mood. Each of “these singularly unsympathetic characters” (Mustafa 126) evinces a misplaced sense of mission, which the author mercilessly deconstructs. They are eventually revealed as being “dangerously deluded . . . confused by their missions and arrogant in their ignorance”, though boisterously acting “under a licence of pietistic political and “moral” self-righteousness” (Mustafa 125-6). Self-delusion becomes public deception when they

pretend to pursue an ideal in full consciousness of their fraudulent claims. Ironically, it is the deceptive Jane who hammers home the truth about the deceiving appearances in which they all share: “Everybody is pretending that something exists that doesn’t exist” (30). With an inspired, sententious turn of phrase, Jimmy accurately defines their condition as desperadoes trapped in a phoney guerrilla war: “*When everybody wants to fight there’s nothing to fight for. Everybody wants to fight his own little war, everybody is a guerrilla*” (87). This voices the author’s own chilling diagnosis of the postcolonial disorder, contained in the title metaphor – the guerrillas are the characters themselves. The narrative technique itself, based on “split narration and point of view” (King 110), mirrors the fragmentation of both inner and outer space. The self-contained, inconsecutive chapters, linked by nightmarish car rides between the Ridge and the smoking city, resemble the mixed-up pieces of a broken picture, which “creates a sense of alienation, fragmentation, bubbles of enclosure, lack of contact, lack of community” (King 110).

Focusing on the disarticulated discourses and actions of socially disaffected, marginal, yet emblematic individuals, Naipaul conveys the absence of any legitimate or influential political elite. None of the male characters has any valid claim to effective leadership. Both Roche and Jimmy are mock-heroic figures, would-be political activists, with a deluded sense of mission. Harry and Meredith, as representatives of the economic and political elite, with a legitimate stake in their country’s future, rationalise their impotency by a defeatist, disabused critique of their own society and culture, which they see as devoid of any potentialities for good. Wrapped up in their personal dramas and jarring agendas, the characters are only linked by their intrinsic nihilism, eerily instantiated by the smouldering cityscape. At the same time, this focus on individual listlessness also cancels the idea of a politically conscious majority. The people as presence and force are relegated to the status of faceless figures in a landscape. Their effacement as a mass indistinguishable from the “debris-littered and scorched wasteland” suggests their lack of agency:

... the majority is pictured as deeply insulated in their immediate, limited, indeed myopic preoccupations. The idea of a cohesive and “authentic” political matrix from which an “independent” polity can emerge is ruled out...in the depiction of failed collective imaginations. (Mustafa 129)

Their collective invisibility suggests the blank space of a still unimagined, inchoate national community, who has yet to awaken to a new sense of polity and sociality. The book transposes the incontestable truth of Naipaul’s political credo: “The politics of a country can only be an extension of its ideas of human relationships” (Naipaul, *The Return* 156). Indeed, the dysfunctional relationships afflicting both the characters and the riven society on the island, rife with racial, ethnic and ideological conflicts, substantiate the inadequacy of its politics – what the author calls “the politics of hurt”.

Variouly described as “a postcolonial morality tale” (Mustafa 131), or “a kind of Afro-Gothic horror story” (Weiss 181), *Guerrillas* allegorises the postmodern and postcolonial pulverisation of Eurocentric meta-narratives of

historical teleology. Within the novel's web of inter-texts, the most pervasive are T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*. Wandering through this absurd, self-consuming world, the protagonists discover their own emptiness in the parched landscape and cityscape. The poetic collage of broken thoughts and images, in which the sterility of the islanders' apocalyptic hysteria is mirrored by the land's smoking desolateness, evokes the mood of Eliot's modernist anti-epic, recast in this dystopian representation of a postcolonial wasteland. Grafting his own postcolonial angst on Eliot's modernist sensibility and vision of an ailing civilisation, Naipaul creates a cautionary tale of historical and political frailty, in which, "as in a myth or fairytale, some malady, some irrationality, lingers over a land and its people" (Weiss 184). Its stifling, arid atmosphere also brings forth the vacant feel of Eliot's *Gerontion*: "Tenants of the house, / Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season".

Works Cited

- Naipaul, V. S. *Guerrillas*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1975. Print.
- Naipaul, V. S. *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad*, New York: Vintage, 1981. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge Classics, 2004. Print.
- King, Bruce. *V.S. Naipaul*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2003. Print.
- Mustafa, Fawzia. *V. S. Naipaul*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.
- Nightingale, Peggy. *Journey Through Darkness: The Writing of V.S. Naipaul*, St. Lucia: University Of Queensland Press, 1987. Print.
- Weiss, Timothy F. *On the Margins: The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992. Print.