

# The Messianic Leader in V.S. Naipaul's West-Indian Works

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To a people in a state of hopelessness and in want of leadership, a self-proclaimed messiah usually brings comfort. Claiming divine direction, the would-be deliverer offers not only spiritual ease but also social reforms. These twin concepts of religious indoctrination and political revolution have long been intertwined. Prophets have been known to be adept politicians, and, in time politicians have learned to become effective *soi-disant* redeemers. The Caribbean has been a fertile breeding ground for such local "saviors." The now deposed Eric Gairy of Grenada and the late Forbes Burnham of Guyana both thought that they were God's special envoy, charged with the mission of saving their suffering people. Not surprisingly, then, in both his fiction and nonfiction, Trinidadian-born writer V.S. Naipaul has been troubled by Caribbean politicians who promote themselves as messianic leaders leading protest movements and offering mystical redemption to a vulnerable and gullible people. In Naipaul's view, as long as the Caribbean people allow themselves to be duped by this type of deception, the region will continue to "return to the bush."<sup>1</sup>

During Naipaul's boyhood and adolescence in multiracial Trinidad, the messianic convention had taken strong roots. One of the most influential islanders of the 1930s and 1940s, Grenadian-born Uriah Butler, reportedly depended on the Bible as his handbook and sold himself as a savior of the people. It is a practice continued in the next decades by Dr. Eric Williams, the Trinidadian leader of the predominantly black People's National Movement (PNM). Sociologist Ivar Oxaal describes this public perception in the 1950s of Williams as a redeemer: "For many lower class Negroes . . . Dr. Williams was nothing less than a messiah come to lead the black children into the Promised Land. This messianic tradition had been firmly entrenched in the Butler movement and was an important basis of P.N.M.'s mass movement as well. . . . The image of Williams as a racial messiah was not limited to the black lower class . . . but could be found in the Creole middle class as well."<sup>2</sup> The island's blacks were disturbed by the economic dominance and privileged status of

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<sup>1</sup>For Naipaul's elaboration on "bush," see Elizabeth Hardwick, "Meeting V.S. Naipaul," *New York Times Book Review* 13 May 1979: 36; "V.S. Naipaul in Paris," *Manchester Guardian* 26 July 1981: 13.

<sup>2</sup>Ivar Oxaal, *Black Intellectuals Come to Power* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1968) 100-01.

whites and by the growing competitiveness of East Indians, who joined the work force after the end of their indentureship. Thus, blacks welcomed Williams's message of hope and racial pride.

The messianic flavor of these political campaigns was of particular interest to Naipaul, even though he had emigrated from Trinidad in 1950. (His maternal uncle, Rudranath Capildeo, was the leader of a predominantly Indian rival party.) Naipaul visited the island during the 1956 general elections, when racial tension between blacks and East Indians was high, and he took a deep interest in the growth of the new black awareness and Rastafarianism. A vocal movement, the Rastafarians espoused an apocalyptic vision of a paradisiacal return to Africa and read Ethiopian Emperor Selassie's coronation as the fulfillment of Marcus Garvey's prophecy about the redemption of New-World blacks from bondage. These developments did not escape Naipaul's keen notice.

From this background of messianic tradition grew Naipaul's works. In his early light satiric comedies—*Miguel Street*; *The Mystic Masseur*; *The Suffrage of Elvira* (all written between 1957-60)—can be seen the germ of the protest figure, which will find fuller expression in his later fiction and nonfiction.<sup>3</sup> *Miguel Street* portrays the whimsical, eccentric Man-man, who claims to have direct communication and meetings with God. A candidate at every election, Man-man preaches vigorously from the Bible at street corners and announces himself as a messiah: "He used to hold the Bible in his right hand and slap it with his left and say in his perfect English accent, 'I have been talking to God these few days, and what he tell me about you people wasn't really nice to hear.' Man-man announced that he was a new Messiah" (42). He stages his own crucifixion ritualistically—even mimicking Christ's utterances on the cross—and begs the people to stone him, but when the spectators take him seriously, he is swiftly brought back to reality.

Portraits of spiritual politicians also appear in Naipaul's other early novels. In *The Mystic Masseur*, Ganesh, the East-Indian hero, is driven by people and circumstances to become, first, a mystic masseur, and, second, a politician. "A vote for Ganesh is a vote for God," reads one of his election posters. He promises, "In everything I shall consult God and my conscience, even at the risk of displeasing you" (194). Although Ganesh later finds himself metamorphosed into an indifferent Anglicized politician, throughout most of the novel he fits the pattern of Naipaul's "savior" type politician. In *The Suffrage of Elvira* Naipaul further explores the figure of the preacher/politician. In a way reminiscent of Man-man, Preacher, a black political candidate, also attempts to sacrifice himself (154). These examples of Naipaul's early deranged politicians

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<sup>3</sup>*The Mystic Masseur* (1957; rpt. London: Heinemann, 1978); *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1981); *Miguel Street* (1959; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1981). All references are to these editions.

show that the theatrical manipulation of religion is a route to political office and fame.<sup>4</sup>

From *The Middle Passage* (1962), the West-Indian travelogue which forms a bridge between Naipaul's early works and later works, the writer treats with more seriousness--and rage--the types of messianic movements, and by extension black mass movements, which he believes to be the root of the problems in the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the most controversial section in *The Middle Passage* is the chapter on Jamaica, in which Naipaul, scanning a government-sponsored report on Rastafarianism, betrays his attitude: "One of Garvey's statements was that the deliverance of the black race would occur when a black king was crowned in Africa. In 1930 Haile Selassie was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia. . . . Photographs of the Emperor went up in thousands of Negro homes. . . . Several Jamaican preachers, of a type in which the island abounds . . . decided that the black race in the New World were Ethiopians, that Ethiopia was the black man's promised land, that Haile Selassie was divine" (218-19). According to Naipaul, Rastafarianism appears to be more than just the rejection of the culture of Europe and an assertion of the importance of the African. He argues that the black intelligentsia in its racial attitudes has moved closer to Rastafarianism, ignoring Garvey's metaphor of the harmony of white and black piano keys. This type of attitude, Naipaul believes, has no positive value in multiracial Caribbean territories.

Naipaul's criticism of Rastafarianism created a furor in the islands, but the writer staunchly defended his position.<sup>6</sup> In a 1979 interview, he argued that his views about the messianic redemption have been prophetic: "The particular holy man [Selassie] they were pushing at the time in those places has been abandoned. . . . Obviously it offended people who had their own prejudices, who thought that shouting racist slogans in 1960 was wonderful. . . . You must read the book and tell me that the chapter on Jamaica is not marvelously prescient, pre-visionary of what has happened lately. If you can tell me that, *then* attack me. Don't tell me otherwise that I shouldn't have said what I say about the illiterate black man shouting for racial redemption and found to get nowhere."<sup>7</sup> To Naipaul, the Caribbean has returned to the "bush," or has become a society without order, primarily because racialist politics allow no ac-

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<sup>4</sup>Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1982), the last of his novels marking his early period, does not focus on any politicians.

<sup>5</sup>*The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies--British, French, and Dutch--in the West Indies and South America* (1962; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1981). All references are to this edition.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, John Hearne, "Unsentimental Journey with V.S. Naipaul," *Sunday Guardian* (Trinidad) 3 Feb. 1963: 4.

<sup>7</sup>Bharati Mukherjee and Robert Boyers, "A Conversation with V.S. Naipaul," *Salmagundi* 54 (1981): 13.

countability, no "idea of law, or honesty about public money or the rights of all men."<sup>8</sup>

Rastafarianism blended with the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, a movement which, according to Naipaul, the West-Indian protest leader finds convenient in promoting self-aggrandizement. He has argued that West-Indian governments are black and that the situation in the Caribbean is not the same as that in America, where blacks suffer from social and political discrimination. Yet, Black Power has caught on in countries such as Trinidad and Guyana, where although East Indians form a majority, politics is dominated by blacks. In one of his short essays, Naipaul contends that black politicians have exploited the concept of the Black Power Movement to institutionalize themselves in power indefinitely. The eccentric leader and Premier of Saint Kitts, Robert Bradshaw, or "Papa," suppresses his opposition to perpetuate his authoritarian rule. The opposition leader, a mulatto, William Herbert, became a celebrated figure, when, after the Anguillan secession, he was jailed, tried, and acquitted. Bradshaw, isolated, "appeared to be on the way out," but, Naipaul notes, his newly recruited Public Relations Officer saved him by discovering the usefulness of Black Power: "He [Bradshaw] has become once again the leader of protest. It is in protest that he now competes with Herbert. . . . The cause is Black Power. . . . Both parties are parties of protest, in the vacuum of independence. . . . The difficult message of Black Power . . . has become mangled in transmission. It can now be heard that Bradshaw . . . is a full-blooded Ashanti. Herbert is visibly mulatto."<sup>9</sup> Naipaul sees this type of exploitative politics, which he also encounters in Belize and Mauritius, as the most dangerous in the Caribbean.

The application of the Black Power Movement by messianic leaders in the Caribbean islands is the subject of Naipaul's most controversial essay "Power?" (1970).<sup>10</sup> Tracing the root of the Black Power Movement to Carnival and to the slaves' fantasy or the make-believe world he so eloquently described in *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969), Naipaul interprets Carnival as the "original dream of black power." He is most concerned about the people's confusion and about their addiction to messiahs: "These islanders are disturbed. They already have black governments. . . . They await crusades and messiahs. . . . In the islands the intellectual equivocations of Black Power are part of its strength. After the sharp analysis of black degradation, the spokesmen for Black Power usually become mystical, vague, and threatening. . . . Black Power as rage, drama and style, as revolutionary jargon, offers something to everybody" (269-70). These are indeed harsh words. But it must be stressed that Naipaul is not opposed to the Black Power Movement in North America or Great Britain but to the

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<sup>8</sup>Mukherjee and Boyers 13; see also Hardwick 36, and "V.S. Naipaul in Paris" 13.

<sup>9</sup>V.S. Naipaul, "St. Kitts: Papa and the Power Set," in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (1972; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 248-49.

<sup>10</sup>"Power?" in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* 267-68.

movement and its imported jargon in multiracial societies where blacks already control political power. Admittedly, he does not address the contention of Caribbean Black Power activists, who argue that the islands' economy is dominated by foreign nationals and that blacks in political power does not necessarily translate into blacks with economic power. Naipaul's concern is the abuse of the jargon as a "catchall," a way of oversimplifying and escaping the real problems of the islands.

Naipaul's concern about manipulative protest leaders and their abuse of the Black Power Movement led to his interest in the sensational story of Michael Abdul Malik, a Trinidadian Black Power activist, who was tried and hanged for two gruesome murders. In *The Killings* Naipaul's sentiments on the movement, a "revolution without a program," an offer of instant redemption, have remained the same as in his controversial "Power?": "In Trinidad . . . with the Asian and other minorities already excluded from government, Black Power became something else. . . . a mystical sense of race, a millenarian expectation of imminent redemption. . . . Malik's career proves how much of Black Power--away from its United States source--is jargon, how much a sentimental hoax. In a place like Trinidad, racial redemption is as irrelevant for the Negro as for everybody else."<sup>11</sup> As a black entertainer "performing" for a white, foreign audience, Malik mastered the jargon of the Black Power Movement. Naipaul criticizes the establishment press and particularly the misguided white middle-class liberals who offered the image, the finance, the endorsement necessary to convert Malik into an overnight "writer" and "leader," with plans for a messianic redemption and for the implementation of Black Power ideology in an island already ruled by a black government. Malik knew what was expected, and he accommodated himself and his patrons with an appropriate system of values, a system which Naipaul has always blamed for the lack of achievement in the West Indies. Real life figures such as Malik have provided Naipaul with a vast storehouse of material out of which he fashioned his fictional characters.

Naipaul's later fiction--that is, the novels after *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961)--shows his continued preoccupation with the protest leader. In the multiracial novel *The Mimic Men* (1967), Singh, one of the East-Indian characters, abandons his family, changes his name to Gurudeva, and becomes a rebel leader of a short-lived revolutionary religious movement, a mere "gesture of mass protest, a statement of despair, without a philosophy or cause."<sup>12</sup> But the focus of this confessional novel is not on the rustic movement; it is on the new breed of mimic men, Singh's son and his black friend and political ally, Browne. Depending on borrowed phrases and relishing pomp and ceremony of the imperialist masters, the mimic men promulgate a vague, dangerous type

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<sup>11</sup>V.S. Naipaul, *The Return of Eva Perón with The Killings in Trinidad* (1980; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1981) 41, 74.

<sup>12</sup>V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (1967; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1981). All references are to this edition.

Power, one that eventually leads to racial riots. Browne, whose home is decorated with pictures of Haile Selassie, is portrayed as an exploiter of "the distress of his race" (185, 202). His transformation is rapid: "In a few hours consciousness of power has turned a semi-politician, a semi-ideologue, a joker, into a folk-leader" (203). As a messianic leader, he succeeds in creating not harmony and cohesion but division and factionalism.

*Guerrillas* (1975), Naipaul's last fiction set in the West Indies, presents his fullest treatment of the black messianic leader. From the story of Malik (in *The Killings*) comes the fictional world of Jimmy Ahmed with plot, character, and theme all duplicated.<sup>13</sup> For his fictional setting, Naipaul uses an unnamed Caribbean island with a mixed but predominantly black population. Peter Roche, a white South-African liberal, and his mistress, Jane, an Englishwoman, become involved with the work of a self-styled Muslim Black Power leader, "Haji" Jimmy Ahmed, née Jimmy Leung. A former notorious criminal, Jimmy had enjoyed good press coverage in England, where he was sponsored as a black "leader" and blindly idolized by confused white liberals. When he fell from his zenith and was charged with rape, he, like Malik, escaped to the island of his birth and ran a sham, eerie commune. Controlled by Jimmy, the commune professes to assist the derelicts of the island. However, its bisexual, narcissistic leader craves self-aggrandizement and needs both the following of the helpless poor and the endorsement of the gullible rich in his chimerical quest to be hero of a Black Power revolution. His rambling, incoherent communiqués, Jane's confession of her ignorance of the goals of the movement, and Roche's confusion about his own contribution show that neither the leader nor his followers have any specific platform. The focus of the novel remains on the power an erratic, self-styled messianic leader has over his victims as he manages to convey the illusion of strength—amid a crumbling commune. Naipaul seems to hand down a heavy indictment against white liberals who support and encourage bogus messiahs.

*Guerrillas* demonstrates the essence of much of the writer's views about the West Indies: the predicament of small dependent nations, the psyche of the colonial mimic men, the importation of the Black Power Movement to societies in which the movement has no relevance, and most of all the way in which a protest leader exploits these conditions. Whether he is head of a nation or a small commune, the messianic savior thrives on the conspiratorial silence of white liberals. Naipaul notes, "Liberals think that these countries are independent now, but it happened that they're governed by real tyrants—and liberals keep their mouths shut."<sup>14</sup>

Naipaul's writings on the protest leader are still relevant today, even though much of his material has been topical. His recent assessment of the

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<sup>13</sup>V.S. Naipaul, *Guerrillas* (1975; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

<sup>14</sup>"V.S. Naipaul in Paris" 13.

Caribbean has remained consistent as seen in his article on Grenada after that country was invaded by the United States. To Naipaul, what operated on the tiny island was the same type of politics he had described in Saint Kitts and the identical assurances of racial redemption offered by the Black Power Movement and by Eric Williams. In the "black-Hansel-and-Gretel world" of Grenada, Naipaul notes, both Eric Gairy, who grew into an "eccentric Negro shepherd-King," and Maurice Bishop, who later imposed "manners" (silence) on the opposition, offered the same vision: "sudden racial redemption." This vision, combined with "socialist mimicry" and the necessary "imported apparatus" and fancy slogans, could have led only to failure and disaster. In his writings, Naipaul has suggested that this pattern of destruction will recur unless people stop permitting themselves to be deceived by movements which "promise Jerusalem."<sup>15</sup>

Because of his unpopular stand on the Black Power Movement and because of his unsympathetic depiction of the new type of protest post-independence leaders, Naipaul has met with strong hostility from Caribbean readers. He blames them for misunderstanding him and for making hasty generalizations: "People have a myth about me . . . that I'm reactionary, totally out of sympathy with progressive movements, that I'm hard-hearted and cruel—none of which is true. People make divisions very quickly. . . . Because you are not left-wing, they automatically assume that you're right wing." This myth, he claims, grew from the position he has taken with certain Caribbean issues: "I wasn't applauding all the various movements of liberation here. . . . Many of them turned out to have seeds of corruption."<sup>16</sup> And while some readers question not only his perception but also his motives, Naipaul insists that the purpose of his severe criticism is to trigger positive action, not associated with self-deception.<sup>17</sup> If people became more wary of the ploys used by self-styled messianic leaders (such as Eric Gairy and Forbes Burnham), and more practical in seeking solutions to their mundane matters, then Naipaul would have achieved his goal.

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<sup>15</sup>V.S. Naipaul, "Grenada: An Island Betrayed," *Harper's March* 1984: 61-72.

<sup>16</sup>Adrian Rowe-Evans, "The Writer as Colonial," *Quest (India)* 78 (1972): 51.

<sup>17</sup>Mel Gussow, "Writer Without Roots," *Time* 26 Dec. 1976: 19.