

NAIPAUL'S *MAGIC SEEDS*: A PARODY OF POLITICAL MIMICRY

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ABSTRACT

As a colonial author, Naipaul is deeply concerned with the exploration of the nature of the colony from a cultural and a political perspective. Being of Indian descent, his interest in pondering over Indian history and understanding its cultural identity is central to his fiction. In *Magic Seeds* Naipaul moves from the colonial India under British rule where the protagonist, Willie Chandran, was born to a post-independence rural India besieged by a Maoist insurgent group whose aim was to fight poverty and be trusted by poor villagers. Drawing from Bhabha's concept of *mimicry* which holds that the colonized seeks to copy the colonizer thus producing a subject who is "almost the same, but not quite," (Bhabha, 1994:86). This paper seeks to read *Magic Seeds* as a fictional parody of political mimicry based upon the information on the movement provided by Dipanjan and Debu in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. Following Willie Chandran's trials and tribulations as a member of a Maoist guerrilla in India, Naipaul dissects the divorce between foreign political discourse and Indian cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS: India; intertextuality; mimicry; Maoism; Naxalism; parody; peasants

RESUMEN *Semillas Mágicas de Naipaul: una parodia de mimetismo político*

La exploración de la naturaleza de la colonia desde un punto de vista cultural y político es un elemento central en la literatura de Naipaul, autor de ascendencia india nacido en la India colonial. Su interés en reflexionar sobre la historia de la India y comprender su identidad cultural es clave en sus obras de ficción. En *Semillas mágicas*, Naipaul abandona la India colonial bajo dominio británico en la que nació su protagonista, Willie Chandran, para centrarse en una India poscolonial asediada por un grupo revolucionario de corte maoísta que busca luchar contra la pobreza y ganarse el apoyo de los campesinos. Partiendo del concepto de mimetismo de Bhabha según el cual el colonizado busca imitar al colonizador convirtiéndose consecuentemente en un individuo que es «casi lo mismo, pero no del todo», este artículo propone una lectura de *Semillas mágicas* como parodia en clave de ficción del mimetismo político a partir de la información proporcionada por Dipanjan y Debu en *India: tras un millón de motines* acerca del movimiento naxalita. A través de las vivencias de Willie Chandran como miembro activo de la guerrilla maoísta en India, Naipaul disecciona el divorcio entre el discurso político foráneo y la herencia cultural india.

PALABRAS CLAVE: India; intertextualidad; mimetismo; maoísmo; naxalismo; parodia; campesinos

Mimicry as the imitation, repetition, or copy by the colonized of the colonizer's values is a key concept in postcolonial literature in general, and in Naipaul's narrative in particular. For him, it constitutes an essential feature of postcolonial societies from every possible point of view: psychological, cultural, and political. Colonial mimicry is the result of the desire of the colonized to be like the colonizer creating, thus, a "blurred copy" (Ashcroft et al, 2000:125) of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. For this reason, mimicry is never very far from mockery since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics (Ashcroft et al, 2000: 125). The political dimension of mimicry entails the repetition, copy, or imitation of borrowed political models and their translation to an alien cultural *milieu* where they become void of meaning, a make-believe. Unlike Bhabha, who recognizes in mimicry an ambivalence that is "at once resemblance and menace" (1994: 86), Naipaul does not appreciate in mimicry any subversive potential; on the contrary, he sees in it a source of identity conflict and cultural dislocation:

New postures in India, attitudes that imply new ways of seeing, often turn out to be a matter of words alone. . . . Indians have to reach outside their civilization, and they are at the mercy then of every kind of imported idea. The intellectual confusion is greater now than in the days of the British, when the world seemed to stand still, the issues were simpler, and it was enough for Indians to assert their Indianness (Naipaul, 1977: 411).

The consequences of political mimicry in postcolonial countries immediately after their independence have been widely explored by Naipaul in different geographical contexts: the Caribbean in *The Mimic Men* (1964) or Africa in *A Bend in the River* (1979) to name some of them; however, being of Indian origin, his narrative production would not be complete without a look at India.

In *Magic Seeds* (2004), Naipaul delves into the Naxalite movement in India in the six chapters devoted to the seven years Willie Chandran, the protagonist, spent in the movement as a guerrilla fighter. Nevertheless, *Magic Seeds* brings up interesting differences with *The Mimic Men* or *A Bend in the River* in terms of political mimicry. First, because the political focus of the novel is on the Naxalite revolution, twenty years after the independence of India in 1947. Irrelevant as it may seem at first sight, it brings about a rupture with the traditional idea of mimicry based on the binarism *colonizer/colonized* to move on to a "second- hand" mimicry; a repetition of a repetition, because the revolution depicted in *Magic Seeds* mimics Maoism which itself mimics Communism, both ideologies alien to Indian cultural or political tradition. Naipaul himself points at Naxalism as a case of political mimicry in *India: A Wounded*

Civilization when he writes that "The Naxalite movement – for all its tactical absurdity – was an attempt at Maoist revolution" (Naipaul, 1977: 386). In this context, "attempt" becomes Naipaul's translation of Bhabha's tenet "the same but not quite" (1994: 86) transferred to the Indian context, and "tactical absurdity" hints at mimicry as a form of mockery "since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics" (Ashcroft, 2000: 125). A second difference is seen in the six chapters devoted to the Indian revolution in *Magic Seeds* which constitute a fictional version of the inner history of the first years of the Naxalite movement as told to Naipaul by Dipanjan and Debu, two old guerrilla fighters, in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) where he devotes a whole chapter, "After the Battle," to the methods and goals of the Naxalite revolution in its early years. From this point of view, *Magic Seeds* might be read as a hypertext of *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. Naipaul himself suggests this in an interview on the novel for the BBC when he declares, "I met some of the middle-class people who'd gone out to join the revolution. . . And I really thought at that stage after about three visits, this is so shallow ... nothing that can support a book. Then as I was thinking about things, I saw how the very shallowness and the very triviality could be part of the narrative" (Naipaul 2004).

This paper explores Willie Chandran's experiences with the Naxalites in *Magic Seeds* as a hypertext of "After the Battle", the chapter in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, based on Dipanjan and Debu's memories as members of the Naxalite revolution. It posits a parallel reading of both pieces that would unveil *Magic Seeds* as a palimpsest of "After the Battle" where Naipaul abandons the position of witness to hide himself behind the mask of Willie Chandran. The result is a narrative half way between fiction and non-fiction that unfolds Naipaul's unromantic approach to Naxalism in a parody of political mimicry that illustrates his critical position towards the Naxalite movement, its leaders, their warfare strategies, and their lack of concern with the despondency of the peasants' situation. It also shows his deep knowledge of the history of the Naxalite revolution in India: a revolt of the peasantry against extreme poverty and powerlessness, taken over by the Communist Party of India (CPI) under the leadership of Mazumdar, that would turn the peasants' battle "for specific concessions from established rulers" (Chowdhury, 2018: 86) into an ideological struggle to seize political power. Since the killing of Mazumdar in 1972, Naxalism has undergone many splits; as a result, some groups chose the political path while its most radical supporters preferred to continue with People's Protracted War. To this day, its failed military strategy has not been able to accomplish

any political goal, and has switched its initial commitment with the peasantry into random violence. Debu puts it clearly in a conversation with Naipaul: "He could chart, precisely and convincingly, how the revolution of love and compassion has turned into simple nihilism, with people talking of revolution and peasant power, but never actually taking on the state, or the powerful or the protected, concentrating instead on the weak and exposed" (Naipaul, 1990: 862).

In *Magic Seeds*, Naipaul poses a deconstruction of Naxalism through parody that Linda Hutcheon has defined as

repetition and difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony . . . The pleasure of parody's irony comes not from humour in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual "bouncing" . . . between complicity and distance" (1985:32).

That critical distance constitutes a "trans-contextualization" (Hutcheon, 1985: 32) of the hypotext in such a way that a reading of the hypertext without the hypotext would nullify the parodic effect generated by an overt relation between them. Therefore, parody "becomes an opposition or contrast between two texts . . . one text is set against another with the intent of mocking it or making it ludicrous" (Hutcheon, 1985: 32). In this light, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* can be read as a hypotext of *Magic Seeds*.

In the prologue to *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, Naipaul explains his narrative strategy when he writes that "Ideas are abstract. They become books only when they are clothed with people and narrative" (Naipaul, 1990: 473). Accordingly, he discovers India by way of the stories of the different people he talks to in his quest for "people's experience, and for the experience to illuminate something" (Dhondy, 2001: 12). In *Magic Seeds*, he follows the same pattern and reveals the inner workings of the Naxalite revolution through the different revolutionary leaders Willie Chandran met during the time he spent in the movement. Dipanjan and Debu's experiences with the Naxalites provide Naipaul with the daily reality of Naxalite foot soldiers which he filters through parody to deconstruct the image they have of themselves as devoted revolutionaries. In so doing, Naipaul turns Bhoj Narayan, Ramachandra, Einstein, and Keso, Willie Chandran's squad commanders, into a caricature of Dipanjan, Debu, and "the many thousands of educated people in Bengal and other parts of India" (Naipaul 1990: 824) who joined a revolution that had attracted many college students in favour of the Maoist idea of violence and armed revolution as the only way to seize power. His depiction of guerrilla

fighters in *Magic Seeds* shows Naipaul's distrust of the motives and real political commitment of urban middle classes with the revolution, and is consistent with some sociological approaches to the movement as a melting pot of spurious interests.

Chitralekha, after some time in direct contact with the Naxalites, concludes that "they were not quite the selfless heroes willing to lay down their lives for a noble cause. Not very many were mercenaries either" (2010: 301). For her, the members of the movement can be divided into three main categories that she terms "Committed, Drifters and Opportunists". Committed insurgents believe in revolution and its power to change the low castes' living conditions. Although Debu and Dipanjan might belong to this group, Naipaul does not believe in the successful outcome of their political positions. In *Magic Seeds*, he shows his disdain for committed revolutionaries by not giving them a voice. They are represented by an absent Kandapalli whose political concern with the peasants is always indirectly mentioned through Willie Chandran, his fellow guerrilla fighters, or his sister Sarojini.

Kandapalli stands for a "committed" revolutionary discarded by a mainstream radical Maoism detached from peasants' real interests; something Willie Chandran discovers soon after joining the movement, when he realizes that "'Kandapalli was right. If I was concerned with making a revolution for the defeated and the insulted . . . these are not the men I would want with me. I would go to the poor themselves'" (Naipaul, 2014: 54). Their absence in the novel is the metaphor of the inner corruption of a movement that has become a den of drifters and opportunists to the point that Willie Chandran does not know what cause he is serving (Naipaul, 2004: 66).

Chitralekha defines "drifters" as those who join the revolution "as an occupational choice of all sorts, taken in the absence of more attractive work/life options . . . Drifters stay because they believe there is nowhere significantly better to go to" (2010: 309), they come from prosperous households (2010: 313) and few are or have been oppressed (2010: 310).

Raja and Bhoj Narayan are two of these "drifters". The former had dismissed the possibility to move upwards from the weaver caste, and the latter, coming from a successful low-caste family, is unable to appreciate the work and ambition of his ancestors, and has chosen revolution as a way to see himself as a man. For Willie Chandran "that is romantic and wrong. It takes much more to be a man. Bhoj Narayan was choosing a short cut" (Naipaul 2004: 96). In the previously mentioned interview with the BBC, Naipaul considers that Willie

Chandran's feeling of being a whole man, of becoming part of history by joining the guerrilla, is "a calamity, it's a great period of boredom and nothing happening and life being eaten away and mind being eaten away. And probably people like Willie are always in that position because they have no idea of history" (2004).

In *Magic Seeds*, Naipaul points at revolution as a shelter for weak men born under the protection of an incipient prosperity and equal opportunity who reject responsibilities and hide their idleness and incompetence in utopia. A spurious political commitment is represented by Raja, a failed medical student like Keso, who averts his boredom and lack of expectations in the forest by joining the revolution because "He had got too used to town life . . . When he went back to the family's weaver-caste house in the village . . . he was bored out of his mind . . . Once you learn about boredom in the village you are ready to be a revolutionary" (Naipaul, 2004: 82).

Naipaul's portrait of these pseudo-revolutionaries as frustrated, embittered and egocentric people with no resilience vis-à-vis life is consistent with his concept of Naxalites as vain, dull people "intellectually not a quarter as bright as they thought they were" (Naipaul, 2004). Keso is a failed medical student, Bhoj Narayan resents his backward caste, Einstein is a mathematical talent who "thought that it had fallen to him to correct Einstein" (Naipaul, 2004: 80), and Ramachandra is frustrated by the small size of his penis. The choice of the names of Einstein and Ramachandra for two of the revolutionaries is not innocent at all. The former, an obvious reference to the famous physicist, mocks at Einstein's narcissism; the latter, not so evident, but especially sarcastic, might be inspired in Vilayanur S. Ramachandran: a world expert in phantom limbs.

Naipaul does not believe in the political commitment of Naxalites. For him, most guerrilla fighters cling to rancour, to a grudge they believe they have the right to feel and project on others; a victimhood that finds ideological shelter in a movement of "people seeking in various ways to revenge themselves on the world" (Naipaul, 2004: 52). Bhoj Narayan's bitterness is caused by the inferiority complex he feels for his backward caste (Naipaul, 2004: 60). Einstein and Ramachandra's resentment, on the contrary, rests on their upper caste because "such people were having a hard time in the world outside; . . . populist governments had set all kind of barriers against them since independence; many of them . . . were now migrating. Ramachandra and Einstein were doing something else. Within the movement, they were embracing their persecutors" (Naipaul, 2004: 102).

Naipaul sees in Naxalism an obstacle to the development of India, a country where "men and women had moved out of the cramped ways and expectations of their parents and grandparents, and were expecting more" (1999: 472). For him, India is a country on the move, fuelled by "the individual mutinies. And 'mutiny' is a simple word meaning people wishing to assert themselves. People coming up, the wounded people, the wounded civilisation, using these British-given institutions to assert themselves after independence" (Dhondy, 2001: 12). He transfers this same idea to *Magic Seeds* through Willie Chandran when he tells his friend Roger that India has changed: "'If someone like my father was growing up now he would automatically be thinking of a profession, and I, coming after him, would automatically be thinking of a profession as well. It's the kind of change that's profounder than any guerrilla action'" (Naipaul 2004: 199).

Magic Seeds starts with Willie Chandran in Berlin where he has arrived to spend some time with his sister Sarojini, who spurs him to join a guerrilla movement in India as a way to dispel his apathy and lack of commitment. Aware of Willie Chandran's ignorance and indifference towards politics, Sarojini lectures him on the leading role of Maoism in the Indian revolution. On the one hand, her radical speech provides the political background to the novel, and points at Naxalism as an example of political mimicry: "When, in a hundred years, the definitive history of twentieth century revolution comes to be written, and various ethnocentric prejudices have disappeared, Kandapalli will be up there with Lenin and Mao" (Naipaul, 2004: 12). On the other, it is, together with her allusion to Gandhi and Indian history, the narrative instrument to justify Willie Chandran's involvement in the Naxalite movement. Everything Sarojini knows about Maoism and revolution in India has been learnt from her German lover, a leftist film-maker, to the point that she thinks they are still together because she is someone he can teach (Naipaul, 2004: 17). Her political mimicry echoes Naipaul's idea that "no people . . . are as capable of mimicry as the Indians" (Naipaul, 1964: 62), and is represented by the evolution of her attire: from the sari she used in India, to the "cardigan over her sari and socks on her feet" (Naipaul, 2001: 104) that she used to wear in the early stages of her political awareness, to "jeans and chunky pullovers" (Naipaul, 2004: 168) when political commitment has become an essential feature of her identity.

According to Chitrলেখকা's classification of insurgents, Sarojini might be considered an "opportunist" because she has not suffered oppression, and is one of "the least likely to die for

the movement" (307). She is a bogus revolutionary with a borrowed political discourse uttered like a lesson learnt by heart that overtly refers to China, and more specifically to the official line represented by Mao, as the one to be mimicked in India, "The whole world knows Lin-Piao. He gave us the idea of liquidating the class enemy . . . In India we also liked it because it came from China and we thought it put us right up there with the Chinese" (13). Finally, Lin-Piao was purged by Mao for supporting private property, turning revolution into a "middle-class theatre" (13); a change of policy that Indian Maoists mimicked under the leadership of Kandapalli. Naipaul never refers to Maoism or Naxalism in *Magic Seeds* in an explicit way, but when Sarojini mentions Kandapalli as the person to implement Mao's mass line in India, Naipaul is turning him into a metaphor of the Naxalite movement as mimicry of Maoism:

He proclaimed the death of the Lin-Piao line. Instead, he announced the mass line. Revolution was to come from below, from the village, from the people. There was to be no place in the movement for middle-class masqueraders. And –would you believe it? – out of the ruins of the earlier, false revolution he has already set going a new revolution (Naipaul, 2004: 15).

Naipaul emphasizes the political mimicry behind the Indian revolution by means of the reiteration of allusions to the traditional commitment to doctrine so characteristic of communist parties: "Do you know what was easy for me, what I could understand right away and relate to my needs? Lenin, Marx, Trotsky, Mao" (113); "Can they begin to understand Marx and Lenin?" (142); "But the serious intellectual work of the morning was studying the texts of Mao and Lenin." (162-63); "and all this study of Mao and Lenin in the evening is too big a price" (166); "The other people can discuss Lenin and Mao until the cows come home" (169). Boredom, ideological endogamy, "an intellectual folly" (Naipaul, 2004); another example of the multifarious faces of mimicry:

Naxalism was an intellectual tragedy, a tragedy of idealism, ignorance and mimicry: middle-class India, after the Gandhian upheaval, incapable of generating ideas and institutions of its own, needing constantly in the modern world to be inducted into art, science, and ideas of other civilizations, and this time borrowing something deadly, somebody else's idea of revolution (Naipaul, 1990: 387).

Naipaul does not forget either those "opportunists" for whom revolution is "a quick route to mainstream politics" (Chitralkha, 2001: 309). Detached from direct action, Einstein refers to them after a failed military operation, when he regrets that "the leaders are letting us

down. Too much high living. Too many conferences in exotic places. Too much jostling to go abroad to do publicity and raise funds" (Naipaul, 2004: 138).

Once in India, Willie Chandran's first contact should have been with Kandapalli's group, but he joins some violent breakaway group that Sarojini describes as "psychopaths" (Naipaul, 2004: 63). This unexpected twist in the plot is relevant because it reflects Naipaul's deep knowledge of the inner history of Naxalism. First, it refers to the many splits in the history of the Indian Communist Party. Second, the group's radical strategy stands as a metaphor of Mazumdar's policy, one of the most violent periods of Indian Maoism. Both ideas are reproduced in *Magic Seeds* when Einstein tells Willie Chandran that Kandapalli is wrong in his defence of the idea that people should be organized through the people since "this movement is not a movement of love. No revolution can be a movement of love. If you ask me, I will tell you that the peasants ought to be kept in pens" (Naipaul, 2004: 105). The successive splits in the movement and its increasing radicalization are represented in the pathetic depiction of an old guerrilla survivor whose activism becomes in the hands of Naipaul a parody of political commitment, of revolution as a refuge for "drifters":

Ever since he had been in revolutionary movements in the village. The first of those movements, historically the most important, had faded away; the second had been crushed, and now, after some years of hiding, he was in his third. He was in his mid or late forties, and no other style of life was possible for him. He liked trampling through villages in his uniform, browbeating villagers, and talking of revolution; he liked living off the land, and this to some extent meant he liked being important. He was completely uneducated, and he was a killer. He sang dreadful revolutionary songs whenever he could; they contained the sum of his political wisdom. (Naipaul, 2004: 101)

Willie Chandran's experiences in the revolution constitute Naipaul's narrative instrument to turn Naxalism into a metaphor of political mimicry. In *Magic Seeds* he uses attire as a metaphor of political indoctrination. An instruction that Communist parties traditionally carry out in two steps: the first is to educate the masses in the principles of the movement; to this end guerrillas choose the peasant outfit. They wear it when they go from village to village to create political awareness among tribals. This is relevant from the point of view of strategy because Maoism seeks the implementation of Communism in oppressed agricultural societies. Willie Chandran refers to that outfit as disguise in an ironic allusion to the fact that most guerrillas were university students: "Willie put on his civilian clothes (themselves theatrical, a

semi-peasant disguise) . . . hung her long fine peasant towel over his shoulder, and put on his leather slippers . . . First they walked out of the teak forest. That took more than three hours. Then they came to villages and little fields" (Naipaul, 2004: 56). A peasant look that was mandatory for Willie Chandran and his group; a make-believe to pretend they were part of the peasantry, "The instructions were that on the road they should dress as they might have dressed in the village" (Naipaul, 2004: 76). The second step is re-education and control. For Naxalites, as it was for Maoists, it is essential to make sure that the masses are loyal to the party line, and to identify counter-revolutionaries. "Every squad was given its own route, the list of villages it had to occupy and re-educate" (Naipaul, 2004: 107). In this context, the uniform and the cap become a metaphor of empowerment within the movement that "spoke reassuringly of organization; and it gave anyone a new, easy, sheltering identity" (Naipaul, 2004: 50).

For the tribals the uniform with trousers, alien to Indian dress tradition, becomes a metaphor of otherness, hierarchy, and authority, "Sometimes for all their revolutionary talk, they wished to wear trousers to be seen as trousers-people" (Naipaul, 2004: 77). Therefore, the whole process of indoctrination of the tribal groups copies Maoist procedures in which a group of newcomers, many of them university students, mimic the peasant outfit, or the Maoist uniform to foster, under duress, if necessary, the tribal groups' involvement in a revolution based on a foreign ideology they do not understand.

In his first book on India, *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul illustrates his idea of colonial mimicry as "incongruous and absurd" (Naipaul, 1964: 62) by way of an Indian Army officer:

The Indian Army officer is at a first meeting a complete army officer. He even manages to look English; his gait and bearings are English, his mannerisms . . . his slang is English. In the Indian setting this English mimicry is like fantasy. It is undiminishing absurdity . . . this is a mimicry not of England, a real country, but of the fairy-tale land of Anglo-India. (Naipaul, 1964: 62-63)

Magic Seeds, published forty years later, in 2004, might be interpreted as Naipaul's "trans-contextualization" (Hutcheon, 1985: 32) of his idea of mimicry transferred to the Naxalite revolution. A movement inspired not by Maoism but by an idea of Maoism. From this point of view, Naipaul's depiction of the Indian Army officer could be rewritten almost in the same terms to portray a Naxalite insurgent: *the Naxalite guerrilla is at a first meeting a complete Maoist. He even manages to look Maoist; his gait and bearings are Maoist; his*

political slang is Maoist. In the Indian setting this Indian mimicry is like fantasy. It is undiminishing absurdity . . . this is a mimicry not of China, a real country, but of the fairy-tale land of Sino-India.

Naipaul turns the apparent solemnity of the uniform into disguise, and the martial spirit associated with it into a masquerade by describing guerrilla military training like some sort of soldier-like role-play in which "for three hours they jogged and did physical exercises and sometimes they practised crawling on the ground with a gun in their hands . . . They were to communicate by making bird calls, and they spent much time practising these bird calls" (Naipaul, 2004: 51). Ridiculous instruction that mocks the guerrilla ignorance of a forest packed with the bird sounds "of the noisy peacocks and other forest birds, fully a mile off, one bird in particular giving strident, desperate sounding calls of alarm when it thought that some predator was getting too close to its eggs" (Naipaul, 2004: 51). Willie Chandran, aware of the pointlessness of this fake training, considers they are not being trained (Naipaul, 2004: 55) to face a situation of real attack because they "just did the boy-scout and cadet stuff. Shouldering arms and presenting arms and standing at ease. That's all right if you are the only one with a gun. But now there is someone else with a gun, and I don't know what to do" (Naipaul, 2004: 124).

Finally, Willie Chandran understands that he is among "absolute maniacs" (Naipaul, 2004: 145) who "will be good to fire a gun at someone who can't fight back. And that is really what they want" (Naipaul, 2004: 55). For him, training in guerrilla tactics is just a mere exhibition of force to unleash terror over unarmed, harmless people, and a metaphor of Mazumdar's policy of extreme violence to export armed revolution to remote areas in a "renewed emphasis on the idea of liquidating the class enemy . . . Murders of class enemies – which now meant only peasants with a little too much land" (Naipaul, 2004: 143). Fear and browbeating is for Ramachandra the only way to make the peasants participate actively with them because "these people will begin to understand the revolution only when we start killing people" (Naipaul, 2004: 117).

Naipaul goes a step beyond in his critical approach to Naxalism with a parody of the ideological and strategic incoherence of Naxalites by rewriting the story of the killing of a zamindar in revenge for the murder of a worker that he reproduces in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. To do away with him, the squad needed three attempts. In the first, they attacked him in a

bus, but nothing happened. In the second, they shot at him, but they missed. In the third, eight people attacked his house with hand grenades and killed the zamindar, his mistress and a baby (Naipaul, 1990: 796). In *Magic Seeds*, Einstein, the leader of Willie Chandran's group, suggests kidnapping a politically irrelevant minister in protest for the arrest of Kandapalli, the group's political enemy, in an impromptu, politically meaningless decision, since they have nothing against that particular minister (Naipaul, 2004: 138). To that end, he outlines a haphazard, makeshift action that oozes improvisation and self-confidence (Naipaul, 2004: 137):

I volunteer myself for the action. I have made some research. I have a certain man in mind, and I know it can be done. All I need is three men and three pistols and a car. I will need another man to stand at the traffic lights near the minister's house and to stop the cross traffic for three or four seconds while we are making our getaway. This man will make believe he is doing it for the minister. The action itself should take no more than two minutes. . . . The minister's house is in Aziznagar. We need to be there a week in advance, or four days at least, to get used to the layout of the streets. We need a car. We will hire it from somewhere else. . . . The minister's house is hidden from the Street by a high wall. Perfect for us. A guard will come and ask us what we are doing. We will mark this guard down as the man to deal with when the time comes. We will say we are students from college- I will find out which one to say- and we want to ask the minister to come and talk to us or something like that. . . . As I walk one of the men with me will shoot the guard in the hand or the foot. I will now be in the minister's house. I will shoot anyone who is in my way. I will burst into the minister's office or greeting room with a great deal of noise and shouting. I will shoot at his hand, rapid fire, shouting all the time. He will be very frightened. As soon as he is wounded I will hustle him out of the front door to the car blocking the gate. . . . All this has to do with coolness and precision and determination (Naipaul, 2004: 137).

This plan is Naipaul's reconstruction of the story of the zamindar like a performance, a burlesque. The overuse of "will" is the perfect language tool to give the whole plan the idea of improvisation, recklessness and childishness, nearly like a game of cops and robbers rather than a serious outline of a terrorist action. The result is a failed plan to attack the minister's house that subverts the basics of any terrorist attack: a good analysis of the target dispositions, detailed knowledge of the routes of entry and exit and reconnaissance of the spot. All the action is based on the element of surprise:

Einstein had said that the high wall of the minister's official house was good for the action because it would hide Einstein and his friends . . . What the wall also did was to hide the full security arrangements of the house . . . He had thought that there was only one armed guard and he was at the gate. What he discovered . . . was that there were two further armed guards inside. He decided to call the whole thing off. (Naipaul, 2004: 141)

In spite of Naipaul's ironic approach to the Naxalites, parody in *Magic Seeds* also serves a serious purpose: to shed light on the peasants' ghastly situation by giving voice and visibility to their suffering since the Mogul era. His empathy with them has its roots in his own background: "I don't forget my peasant origins in this way, and that we were unprotected, our family, people like us in Trinidad. We had no voice. . . . And I could always understand them, the peasantry, the landless, the people below giving themselves a break for the first time for centuries, perhaps even for a millennium or more" (Dhondy, 2001: 10).

His deep concern with the peasants' secular abandonment is closely linked to his bitter disappointment with a revolution that exerts an additional pressure on their long history of neglect. Not only do Naxalites sleep in their houses, and eat their scant food, but they also press them to back their political strategy with violent actions against local oppressors (Naipaul, 2004: 117, 131, 132) that they, "nervous and passive" (Naipaul 2004: 108), refuse to carry out because the middle-class urban activists could not penetrate the Santhal worldview. They prioritised their ideas over the secular demands of the *adivasis* (indigenous people), which got lost in the hegemonic left ideologies of the revolutionaries (Chowdhury, 2018: 86). It is Dipanjan's "invisible partition between us and the villagers" in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (Naipaul, 1990: 843), the impossible dialogue between foreign radicals and peasants whose "Subaltern history of protest was against 'outsiders', who entered their indigenous terrain . . . and transmogrified their political, economic, cultural and familial world forever" (Chowdhuri, 2018: 86). Naipaul, aware of the peasants' ongoing exclusion, voices his blunt, clear-cut vindication of their hopeless situation through a letter that Willie Chandran writes to his sister Sarojini while he is in prison after seven years of militancy in the movement:

That war . . . had nothing to do with the village people we said we were fighting for. We talked about their oppression, but we were exploiting them all the time. Our ideas and words were more important than their lives and their ambitions for themselves. That was terrible to me, and it continues even here, where the talkers have favourite treatment and the poor are treated as the poor always are. They are mostly village people and they are undersized and thin. The most important thing about them their small size. . . . if you see them from a distance . . . you would be moved by the workings of the human soul, so complete within those frail bodies. Those wild and hungry eyes haunt me. They seem to carry the distillation of the country's unhappiness. I don't think there is any simple action that can help. You can't take a gun and kill that unhappiness. All you do is to kill people. (Naipaul, 2004: 167).

Naipaul's portrayal of Indian revolution in *Magic Seeds* might be considered a fictional rewriting of *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, a transcription of his conversations with "people who people would not have looked at before" (Naipaul, 2001: 12). A literary work which seems to have been inspired by Sharpe's concept of "history from below"; an approach to history as "an exploration of the historical experiences of those men and women whose existence is often ignored, taken for granted or mentioned in passing in the mainstream history" (Sharpe, 2001: 25). In the Indian context, Ranahit Guha poses a similar historiographic approach to Indian history in his *Subaltern Studies* (1996). He advocates the necessity to rewrite a historiography of India far from the traditional statism that understands the history of the world as the history of state systems, because it leaves people with no choice about their relation to the past. He holds that "To choose means, in this context, to try and relate to the past by listening to and conversing with the myriad voices in civil society. These are small voices which are drowned in the noise of statist commands" (Guha, 1996: 3).

Willie Chandran's experiences in the Indian Maoist movement are Naipaul's narrative instrument to create a palimpsest of the first decades of Naxalite history by means of a wide array of intertextual references between *Magic Seeds* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. This intertextuality portrays Naipaul's own "transcontextualization," to use Linda Hutcheon's words, of Dipanjan and Debu's memories via recoding the source text into a parody that shows his critical distance with Indian Maoism. Guerrilla fighters' ideological endogamy becomes, in the hands of Naipaul, a parody of political mimicry with Indian Maoism as a parasitic movement in the body politic of India that fights for the rights of the tribal people with an obstinate political discourse that turns a blind eye to their real needs. Naipaul himself is explicit on this point when he declares in an interview on the BBC "They (guerrilla groups in India) believe revolution is the answer. They have no idea what would follow revolution, and in fact where they liberate these areas they become centres of tyranny. . . . So the peasants who should have been liberated are really imprisoned as in the old feudal days." (Naipaul, 2004).

In this sense, Naipaul's depiction of Naxalism in *Magic Seeds* constitutes an almost literal, yet critical, rewriting of "After the Battle" translated into fiction: another example of Naipaul's well-known position on the blurred limits between fiction and non-fiction that, for him, constitute the janus-like quality of narrative and his way to ponder over the world. He is explicit on this aspect when he writes in the preface to *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, published twenty years later, "So there came this divide in my writing: free-ranging fiction and

scrupulous non-fiction, one supporting and feeding the other, complementary aspects of my wish to get to grips with my world" (Naipaul, 1990: 471).

From an ideological point of view, *Magic Seeds* constitutes Naipaul's recreation of his idea of revolution as a drawback to the development of India that can be witnessed in the anonymous and silent stories of progress: "Independence was worked for by people more or less at the top; the freedom it brought has worked its way down. People everywhere have ideas now of who they are and what they owe themselves" (Naipaul, 1990: 1076).

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