

Culture and Nature in *The Jaguar Smile*

Dr. Sunita Meena
Assistant Professor
SBD govt college Sardarshahar

Abstract:

The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey written by Salman Rushdie is a non-fiction book that gives the reader insight into the internal turmoil taking place in the nation of Nicaragua. Salman Rushdie is a British-Indian novelist who gained his fame for his novels about the post-colonial relationship between cultures of the East and West. Rushdie became interested in Nicaraguan affairs when the Reagan administration started its 'war' against Nicaragua. Rushdie made his trip to Nicaragua in July of 1986. He came to know a wide range of people from the President to the everyday citizens. His perceptions were always heightened by his sensitivity and his unique flair for language. In this book Rushdie brings before us the true Nicaragua where nothing is simple, everything is contested, and life-or-death struggles are an everyday occurrence. This environment has become the culture of this place. Rushdie talks about how in order to understand the living, it is necessary to first understand the dead. This is a powerful statement because it gives you an idea of how many lives were lost during the Nicaraguan Revolution. He immediately follows this statement by describing in great detail the presence of the toppled statue of the ex-dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle. This contributes to the image that Nicaragua is a nation in shambles after the constant turmoil of the past. Rushdie spends a lot of his time in Nicaragua with members of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional, otherwise known as the FSLN. The FSLN was the group that led the campaign in the revolution against the Somoza dictatorship.

Key Words: Travel, Politics, Journalism, Culture, Nature, Nicaraguan Revolution

Indian writer Rushdie adds his personal narrative to the crescendo of anti-contra books. He, too, finds little to support unbridled U.S. intervention in violation of international law. In his view, the Sandinistas see themselves as the saviors of Central American independence and the Nicaraguan people as struggling to maintain a measure of what they have gained. The Nicaraguan experience and Rushdie's very brief love affair with communism found expression in the travelogue *The Jaguar Smile*. Rushdie's three-week trip to Nicaragua was at the invitation of *Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers* which was billed as, "the umbrella organization that brought writers, artists, musicians, craftspeople, dancers and so on, together under the same roof".(Salman 1987)

In the review in *Time*, reviewer Pico Iyer praised Rushdie's account. Iyer felt that Rushdie was quick to overlook Sandinista totalitarianism and censorship due to his ideological sympathies with their cause. Predicting the readers' expected response, Iyer said, "Since his own views seem largely unchanged by what he encounters, the tourist is unlikely to change the views of his readers. Those who share his assumptions will be reassured by his brief; those who do not will be outraged by it."(Iyer 1987)

The book relates his travel experiences, the people he met as well as views on the political situation then facing the country. The book was written during a break the author took from writing his controversial novel, *The Satanic Verses*.(Andrew 2004)

In this brilliantly focused and haunting portrait of the people, the politics, the land, and the poetry of Nicaragua, Salman Rushdie brings to the forefront the palpable human facts of a country in the midst of a revolution. Rushdie went to Nicaragua harboring no

preconceptions of what he might find. What he discovered was overwhelming: *a culture of heroes who had turned into inanimate objects and of politicians and warriors who were poets*; a land of difficult, often beautiful contradictions. His perceptions always heightened by his special sensitivity to “the views from underneath”. Rushdie reveals a land resounding with the clashes between history and morality, government and individuals.

The 1980s were a tumultuous time in Central America. Though late Cold War, the Reagan administration was still sticking its nose into the region to attempt to prevent communism from spreading—which is an underhanded way of saying keeping a handle on its own economic interests. Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, and numerous other countries, including Nicaragua were caught up in the resulting mess of violence and social turbulence—memories that haunt to this day. Secret armies formed and disbanded, attacks taking cities and even the sleepiest villages by surprise, and revolutions a dime a dozen, about the only constant for the people was the uncertainty of life—aka war. Invited by the then government of Nicaragua to see the country and hear the political ideology under discussion, *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* is Salman Rushdie’s account of three weeks in the country in July 1986.

A very well-written piece of journalism, *The Jaguar Smile* holds more in common with Orwell and Steinbeck's international accounts of the war. Rushdie forever keeping an eye on the interaction of politics, religion, society, theory, and practice, the relatively short book of 170 pages is packed with the ideologies at stake, lives of the people, political concepts attempting to be implemented and implemented intentionally or otherwise, and just enough background history to contextualize events.

Among the most interesting points of *The Jaguar, Smile* is conversations with the most powerful people (men, actually) in what was a war-torn yet burgeoning socialist democracy. From the elected president Daniel Ortega (who interestingly is once again the president of Nicaragua) to the Minister of Agriculture, and from the wife of the nation's leading counter-culture newspaper who was assassinated to the street people of Leon, Rushdie went to Nicaragua with a full agenda and transposes the encounters concisely. With fear of the Reagan-funded Contras always in the back of his mind, Rushdie visited the countryside around the capital, Managua, including an Independence Day celebration at a small city in the mountains. He was also taken to the east coast of the country where he encountered not only entirely different ethnic groups and languages not Spanish or English, but a whole new way of life—one not as impeded by the climate as he initially thought.

Nicaragua a nation of poetry, apparently, there are also conversations with street poets and more formal purveyors of the rhythmic word. Utilizing the output, Rushdie even scatters a handful of poems throughout the text as point/counter-point to the discussion at hand.

The Jaguar Smile could have been far worse; Rushdie never waves a red flag, indulges in jingoism, or allows through the door puffed up hyperbole regarding the glory of Ortega and his Sandinistas. Rather than a strict ideological approach, Rushdie filters his experiences through a personal lens. As critical of the Sandinistas as he is supportive, the reader must be prepared for a skewed presentation.

In the end, *The Jaguar Smile* is a quick but highly informative overview of the social and political situation of Nicaragua as of the middle of 1986. The geography, language, ethnic groups, and general social concerns having changed little in the time since, the book

also remains relevant to current times, making it both history and good background reading for anyone thinking of visiting the country. The text full of life, including Rushdie's own insight as well as regional poetry, the narrative is anything but dry.

Given this passionate interest in public events - and their consequences on individual lives it is not all that surprising that Mr. Rushdie should eventually become interested in recent developments in Central America, another third world arena with a long and tortured history of conflict. He went there for three weeks, a period, he says, that came in retrospect to feel: it had been just seven years since Anastasio Somoza Debayle's departure and the takeover by the Sandinista Front. The International Court of Justice in The Hague had ruled that United States aid to the contras was in violation of international law; the House of Representatives had, meanwhile, approved President Reagan's request for \$100 million in aid for the counter-revolutionaries; and the Sandinista Government had closed down La Prensa, the country's one opposition newspaper.

"The Jaguar Smile" is thus stirring and original in its simple descriptions of the country and the people. Mr. Rushdie notices things as he notices that "the Nicaraguan fondness for naming their ministries acronymically" can result in unfortunate Orwellian echoes (the Ministry of Culture, for one, is known as "Minicult"). He notices that farm cooperatives tend to possess "resolutely optimistic names ("La Esperanza," "La Paz"). And he notices that American culture has a firm foothold in Nicaragua: old Jack Nicholson movies run on television; Madonna songs play on the radio; and the Inter-Continental Hotel, "a sawn-off concrete pyramid," stands "amidst the wraiths of old Managua like an omen: an ugly American, but a survivor, nevertheless."

As a piece of reportage, "The Jaguar Smile" obviously does without the more extravagant flashes of surrealism found in "Midnight's Children" and "Shame," but Mr. Rushdie's point that history is a kind of nightmare, full of distortions and absurdities - is not lost on Nicaragua. Indeed, he is able to make us see that the factual reality of this country already verges on the surreal: a country in which newspapers (under the Somoza regime) printed "photographs of Marilyn Monroe and other Hollywood movie stars in place of the banned articles," a country in which 19-year-old soldiers can be veterans with six years' fighting experience, a country in which a tree across the road becomes an ominous and frightening sight.

And yet, reports Mr. Rushdie, literature continues to flourish in this war-ravaged land. Many of the country's leaders - including President Ortega (whose most popular work was called "I Missed Managua in Miniskirts") and Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal - are also well-known poets, and debates over declining standards in verse co-exist, happily, with more overtly political discussions. Near the end of his travels, Mr. Rushdie wonders about "the relative absence of novelists in this poet-stuffed country." "There was never time for novels," a poet explains. "You could squeeze in poetry between other things. Not a novel."

Twenty-one years ago this year (2007), Salman Rushdie ventured into Nicaragua; a country in Central America known almost exclusively in the first world due to the "fact" that "the communists" had "taken over" the country, and the CIA was funding the resistance movement. The people had not only spent countless years repressed by dictatorial rule by the Somoza family but then had endured seven years of CIA funded attacks after they were liberated from that dictatorship. Rushdie was there as a visiting author but was so taken by

the place that he decided to write a book about it. It is the story of a remarkable war-torn nation and the determination and positivity of its people.

Salman Rushdie heads to Nicaragua in 1986 at the invitation of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers for the seventh anniversary of the triumph of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN)*. He traveled around the countryside, meeting and greeting with personalities such as then-President Daniel Ortega (who has been re-elected this year), Sergio Ramirez, Luis Carrion, Ernesto Cardenal, and the unlikely president-to-be Violeta Chamorro.

During Rushdie's adventures, he meets with all kinds of different people, talks about war, the hope of peace, and the Sandinistas, and gains an understanding and respect for the people of Nicaragua and their situation. *The Jaguar Smile* begins with an introduction; written ten years after the initial publication of the book in 1987. At the time of the original publication, Ortega was president, and under immense international pressure. At the time of the reprint, Ortega was out, Chamorro was in, it was a different place entirely. The country was being rebuilt, the communist scare was mainly over. Rushdie suggested certain errors of reporting when he initially wrote it. And now, twenty years after publication, Ortega is president again. I wonder what Rushdie would have to say now.

What was important, though, was the profoundly political nature of the change in Sandinista posture. It recognized that the way to defeat Somoza militarily was to isolate him politically and that the road to that goal led through a policy of deliberate deception. In a sense, there was nothing new about the Sandinista scheme for political-military success. It adhered to the familiar Leninist doctrinal necessity of extreme tactical pragmatism in the

formation of revolutionary alliances, coupled with equally extreme strategic-ideological rigor in deciding how long, and under what circumstances, they would last. In Nicaragua, that necessity was summed up in a single, otherwise impenetrable sentence attributed to Humberto Ortega: "Sandinism is Marxism-Leninism, and Marxism-Leninism is Sandinism."

Since 1979, the political and economic direction of Nicaragua has proceeded as it might in any country locked within the paradigm of those principles: the national economy is in worse tatters than ever; the scope of civil liberties has dramatically shrunk; tens of thousands of Nicaraguan citizens, including much of the professional middle class, has fled the country. More striking still, foreign powers, represented by Soviet, Cuban, and other Eastern-bloc advisers have a greater say in the running of Nicaragua than at any previous time in the country's history, including during the notorious U.S. Marine intervention of the 1920's. Yet that is never how the Sandinista revolution has appeared to the outside world. The ready answer remains, of course, the United States. On the one hand, undeniable U.S. hostility toward Nicaragua's new ruling class is according to that class the continuing excuse for every Sandinista domestic failing. On the other hand, that excuse is readily accepted, not only by members of the international left-wing intellectual community but also by a significant fraction of the U.S. Congress. Salman Rushdie's own distinguished stature may be the most interesting thing about his mildly qualified apology for the Sandinista regime.

What is most remarkable about Rushdie's book is its breathlessness, little different, in its way, from that of an American undergraduate arriving for the Nicaraguan coffee-picking season. Rushdie adds his own Third World twist to that naiveté: "In my first hours in the [Managua] city streets, I saw a number of sights that were familiar to eyes trained in India and Pakistan: the capital's few buses . . . were crammed to bursting-point with people, who

hung off them in a very subcontinental way." As they do, subcontinental, in almost every major Latin American city. But to Rushdie, the point is of a metaphysical Third World solidarity. "It was perhaps also true that those of us who did not have our origins in the countries of the mighty West or North had something in common . . . some awareness of the view from underneath, and of how it felt to be there, on the bottom, looking up at the descending heel."

Much of Rushdie's book consists of admiring conversations with Nicaragua's various *commandants* and other leaders, saying much the same things that they have said for years. Nicaragua's Vice President, Sergio Ramírez, defends Sandinista agricultural policy with the assertion that "Nobody who stayed in Nicaragua to work his land had it confiscated." Members of the country's Superior Council of Private Enterprise who remain in Nicaragua might disagree, but it would appear that Rushdie never talked much to them. Nicaragua's mercurial Foreign Minister, Miguel D'Escoto (whose father once served as a Somoza Foreign Minister), tells Rushdie that "I've never said it before, but now I think the Americans will come. The invasion will happen." In fact, D'Escoto has been warning shrilly of a still-to-arrive U.S. invasion of Nicaragua since 1980.

In essence, Rushdie's book reproduces the scanned tour that the Sandinistas are known to give to virtually any sympathetic dignitary who hits town, with additional brief space allotted to a few regime opponents such as Violeta Chamorro, a member of Nicaragua's original governing junta who has emphatically broken with the Sandinistas. It is difficult to imagine any author taking a similar tour of, say, Chile, and reproducing it so uncritically.

Conclusion:

However, the Court's judgment in favor of Nicaragua was never enforced. The US refused to accept the Court's jurisdiction and the Nicaraguan government eventually withdrew the case in September 1991, illustrating the often debatable effectiveness of international law in the face of national sovereignty. Despite the legalese, the case made for heavy reading, and was, strangely, what had decided my gap year destination back in 2007—and this book by Salman Rushdie cinched it. In the end, I would also visit other countries in Central America, but it was Nicaragua that had inspired me to that side of the world in the first place. Also, my teenage political sensibilities having been informed, a little, by Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky, I was hugely fascinated by this revolutionary period in Nicaraguan history, and it was the same fascination that had catalysed Rushdie on to Nicaragua for three weeks in July 1986 at the height of the Contra War, seven years after the Sandinistas had come to power and right after the International Court of Justice had pronounced their ruling in favour of the Sandinistas. The result is this slim volume of literary dispatch bearing witness to the state of the nation at the time, in which Rushdie describes the Contra War as a “David-and-Goliath saga” and was later skewered by critics for his sympathetic view of the Sandinistas. In his retrospective preface to the 1997 edition, Rushdie admits that he had probably been too soft on the Sandinista hard-liners, though he had gotten more “half-right than half-wrong”. Moreover, he was himself “the child of a successful revolt against a great power”, and: It was perhaps also true that those of us who did not have our origins in the countries of the mighty West or North, had something in common—not, certainly, anything as simplistic as a unified ‘third world’ outlook, but at least some knowledge of what weakness was like, some awareness of the view from underneath, and of how it felt to be there, on the bottom, looking up at the descending heel.

From *Heaven Lake* also shows Seth's abiding interest in the encounter of different cultures: in the course of his journey, he discusses the influence of Islam in Sinkiang, the interaction of Tibetans and Han Chinese, and the contrast between Indian and Chinese life. The book makes vivid the hardships as well as the pleasures of travel, both of which are occasionally described in verse:

Cold in the mudlogger truck
I watch the southern sky:
A shooting star brings luck;
A satellite swims by.
The Silver River flows
Eventless through the night.
The moon against the snows
Shines insular and bright.
Here we three, cooped, alone,
Tibetan, Indian, Han,
Against a common dawn
Catch what poor sleep we can,
And sleeping drag the same
Sparse air into our lungs,
And dreaming each of home
Sleeptalk in different tongues.

Work Cited

1. *Rushdie, Salman (1987). The Jaguar Smile. Viking Penguin Inc. ISBN 0-317-56603-2.*
2. *Pico Iyer (1987-03-06). "Surfaces the Jaguar Smile". Time. Retrieved 2007-06-22.*
3. Teverson, Andrew (13 October 2004). "The Jaguar Smile". The Literary Dictionary Company. Retrieved 2007-06-19
4. Dedi Felman; <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/the-jaguars-smile-a-nicaraguan-journey>
5. Anand Bose Posted on December 4, 2017; <https://psiberite.wordpress.com/2017/12/04/analysis-of-the-jaguar-smile-by-rushdie/>
6. JAMES LEMOYNE; Three Weeks in Managua; <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/18/specials/rushdie-jaguar.html>; March 8, 1987
7. *The Jaguar Smile by Salman Rushdie*; Victor Perera; **March 15, 1987**; http://articles.latimes.com/1987-03-15/books/bk-10646_1_jaguar-smile-by-salman-rushdie
8. Daruwalla, K. N. (2006). *Collected Poems 1970-2005*. New Delhi: Penguin Books. 316.
9. Ibid, 318.
10. Nayar, P. K. (2013). *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley Pvt. Ltd, licenses of Pearson, pp. 10.
11. Ibid, 10.
12. Ibid, 70.
13. Daruwalla, K. N. (1980). *Winter Poems*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers.19

14. Nayar, P. K. (2013). *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley Pvt. Ltd, licenses of Pearson, pp. 241-253. 58
15. Daruwalla, K. N. (1980). *Winter Poems*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers. 23
16. Ibid, 35-36
17. Ibid, 64.
18. Nayar, P. K. (2013). *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley Pvt. Ltd, licenses of Pearson, pp. 194.
19. Ibid, 198-199.
20. Ibid, 224.
21. Ibid, 98.