

Narrative of Subversion: An Analytical Study of Norman Mailer's Critique of Dominant Culture in *An American Dream*

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Abstract

In an era dominated by the stranglehold of capitalist culture, counter-cultural narratives present significant resistance to the dominant system. Double-voiced narratives, polyphonic speeches, etc., look toward subverting the dominant hierarchy of the era. Within this context, this paper aims to examine American author Norman Mailer's work of fiction, *An American Dream* (1965), as a subversive narrative against the dominant culture of the 1960s USA. It will focus on multiple meanings, intentions and personas reflected within the dialogues, thoughts and language of the novel. This paper incorporates theories propounded by Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva among others to highlight the subversive elements embedded within the structure of the novel under discussion. This paper further argues that the text by Mailer posits its uniqueness through its crafty use of polyphony, parody and subtle negation of the maxims of dominant culture. The paper also aims to conclude that the novel under discussion demonstrates the difficulties of subverting the layers of a dominant culture by figures living within that system.

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In the aftermath of World War II, the United States of America rapidly transitioned into a consumer society defined by a capitalist economic system. Although capitalist ethos, industrial expansion had already extended its roots into the core of society since the beginning of the twentieth century, and particularly after the prevalence of war economy during World War II, the post-war era was known for the rapid growth of the American suburbia — the suburban housing projects providing millions of Americans with affordable housing. The construction of thousands of subsidised housing units outside big cities created an affluent, overwhelmingly White consumer society that thrived on the corporate economy. Politically, this era was the era of consensus that presented the nation as one happy, prosperous society built upon capitalism as a bulwark against the communist threat. Conformity was the hallmark of this society. Conformity in political questions like the ills of communism, the Soviet threat, belief in the American dream of one man

climbing the ladder of success through sheer hard work, and belief in the successful nation as a force of good against totalitarianism marked the immediate period following the War. Christopher Gair, in his work *The American Counterculture*, talks about the era as “the era is still celebrated by those on the political right as a time of sexual innocence, cultural accord, and moral and economic stability. For them, the ‘50s was a period when Americans united against the threat from the Soviet Union and Communism, and benefited from the economic boom that provided high disposable incomes and increased leisure opportunities (18).” The huge number of soldiers returning from the War now settled down in their suburban homes with a good amount of disposable income to spend on consumption, partly thanks to the post-war economic boom and availability of affordable homes. This was the era of conformity, collectivism and social morality under President Eisenhower, extending up to the presidency of John F. Kennedy. Kennedy’s call to the nation, after his election, “ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country (Clarke XVI)”, many a time stood at odds with the individual’s unique needs. But, ignored or suppressed under this ubiquity of a White nation, were laid the dwindling status of the Blacks who were still struggling under the pre-civil rights era of discrimination, the disquiet of a younger generation who found the monotonous uniformity of America soul crushing and who expressed their rebellion through the adoption of jazz music from the Black rebels, Beat or Hippy movements in the fifties and the sixties, use of psychedelics to escape the conformism of the dominant White consumer society.

In this context, a group of countercultural authors emerged in the 1950s and 60s, critiquing the prevailing dominant socio-cultural structure. Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) was a pioneer of this subversive current. Contemporaneous to him, Jake Kerouac’s *On The Road* (1957), William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959), Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), etc., came up defying the dominant narrative of the era by their advocacy of supposedly ‘anti-social’ behaviours condemned by the era. While these authors belonged to the White class itself, a more stringent critique of the dominant White society appeared in works of Black authors like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and James Baldwin’s *Another Country* (1962). Norman Mailer’s *An American Dream* (1965) encapsulated the same rebellious current against the dominant culture of the era.

An American Dream critiques this era of American society by diving into its other side; a maze of industrial exploitation, structural discrimination and hidden violence upon which the dream is erected. Scott Gac, in his collection of essays, *Born in Blood*, states that the settler American society had a culture soaked in violence, “Late eighteenth-century White American leaders situated themselves within a tradition that defended the use of force over persons whom they deemed manageable only by such force (115).” In the novel, the protagonist, Stephen Rojack’s own life is based on this tradition of violence. Rojack, an upstart intellectual in the city of New York, climbs up the ladder of post-war USA as a

celebrated military veteran who earned the nation's praise as a soldier during the War by bravely killing four enemy soldiers on the battlefield. Rojack, in this way, is the personification of the American military culture. After returning from the War, he marries Deborah Kelly, heir to a rich Sicilian mafia family, as a means of social mobility, establishes himself as a University professor and a television host, embodying the very spirit of the American dream of upward mobility through his efforts. Rojack ends up murdering his wife, Deborah, nine years after their marriage, and the novel recounts these events.

Significantly, in 'telling' this story, the novel employs the first-person narrative form in which Rojack retells his life and mind before and after the murder. Mikhail Bakhtin, in the work, *The Dialogic Imagination*, states that novel as a specimen of narrative genre, is a polyphonic form in which dialogic utterances among multiple voices occur. Bakhtin states that the novelistic utterance doesn't exist in isolation but it emerges from and responds to multiple social, historical forces that surround it, "Novelistic images, profoundly double-voiced and double-linguaged, are born in such a soil, seeking to objectivize the struggle with all types of internally persuasive alien discourse that had at time held sway over the author (348)." When a character utters something, he engages in a dialogic relationship with other voices in the novel, i.e., other characters, the authorial voice, dominant and suppressed social forces, etc. Thus, multiplicity of voices or polyphony occurs in a novel. This dialogic nature of novelistic discourse questions and subverts the official or dominant discourse of society. In the work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin further shows that, in a polyphonic novel, the author doesn't assert complete dominance over the characters, voices and perspectives:

Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel. He created a fundamentally new novelistic genre. Therefore, his work does not fit any of the preconceived frameworks or historico-literary schemes that we usually apply to various species of the European novel. In his works a hero appears whose voice is constructed exactly like the voice of the author himself in a novel of the usual type. A character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is... (7)

Thus, a polyphonic novel breaks away from the dominant narrative of the author to present a continuous dialogue among multiple voices. In such a novel, the discourse evolves on itself without having a dominant authorial voice.

Julia Kristeva, in her later formulation on Bakhtinian principles in *Desire in Language*, demonstrates how the novelistic language includes multiple voices within one sentence, even when it is uttered by one figure: "[T]he juxtaposition of a *discourse* invested in a subject with another utterance different from the author's. They make possible the deviation of the novelistic *utterance* from its subject and its self-presence (47)." The author's voice and the character's voice juxtapose in the language, both of which result in multiple meanings within a single sentence.

While considering Rojack's perspectives later in this article, one would notice the presence of the same multiplicity, responding to the currents of the corresponding social milieu. Rojack, primarily, and other figures in the novel, like Deborah, Cherry, Barney Oswald Kelly, etc., subvert the prized "American dream" and demonstrate the foundational myth of American society as hollow and corrupt. They do it not only through their utterances but also through their acts and very presence in the discourse.

Rojack's own story as an embodiment of the American dream, based on his military exploits, followed by his opportunistic move to marry Deborah to rise in society and subsequently achieve social mobility, turns the cherished lore of the modern American self-made man upside down. This dream is based on deception, violence, and opportunism, like his marriage of convenience with Deborah. While Deborah had her fair share of opportunism as an established New York socialite, who attempted to patronise and control other figures like the Black singer Shago Martin, or even Rojack, their union suggested the American post-war consumption-oriented industrial life as an assortment of heterogeneous tendencies assembled only for self-serving motives. Rojack, the quintessential American veteran, starts his narrative in a tone that admits his careerism:

I met Jack Kennedy in November, 1946. We were both war heroes, and both of us had just been elected to Congress. We went out one night on a double date and it turned out to be a fair evening for me. I seduced a girl who would have been bored by a diamond as big as the Ritz....

Forgive me. I thought the road to President might begin at the entrance to her Irish heart. She heard the snake rustle however in my heart. (Mailer 1)

Here, Rojack is strikingly clear about his opportunism. In this self-admission, he subtly mocks the self-centred nature of his own class.

Jake Kennedy is an allusion to President John F. Kennedy. Here, Mailer's authorial voice's criticism of American politics as corrupt merges with the narrator Rojack's act of admitting no moral superiority before the readers, but full acceptance of his self-serving attitude. As shown by Kristeva, the double-voiced structure critiquing mainstream society of the time could be traced here. This polyphonic presence in the very first part of the work sets the tone of subversion of the dominant socio-political sphere. As Rojack speaks subsequently, demonstrating his male chauvinism and wickedness, he simultaneously vents his anger about the system that has apparently turned him into a cynical brute:

... I might have despised the money if it had not become the manifest of how unconsummated and unmasculine was the core of my force. It was like being married to a woman who would not relinquish her first lover.

At any rate, such were my parts. Without Deborah they did not add to any more than another name for the bars and gossip columns of New York. With her beside me, I had leverage. ... (Mailer 16)

Here, in the first portion of the speech, Rojack demonstrates his patriarchal self who would not like to see an assertive wife. The White masculine conqueror of the virgin land of America during its early colonial day's rings in this patriarchal voice. However, in the second portion, he negates and mocks this masculinity by showing its dependence upon the very woman's reputation to survive in the consumer culture of post-war America. This later voice in the second portion criticises this hollow social system that has led to his predicament.

Rojack's speech becomes the meeting point of many voices, at times contradictory to each other. One voice within the speaker's mind is that of a war returnee upstart, an ambitious man with a tinge of masculinity over feminine Deborah or Cherry, his later mistress. This voice, persona comes from the long history of American White male patriarchy that founded the nation in the early colonial times. The national myth was that of a European settler who conquered the land of America through bloodshed, exemplified by instances like the Anglo-Powhatan wars (1610-46), the Peach War (1655), King Philip's wars (1675-78), or later in the war for national emancipation. This military tradition is voiced in Rojack's persona as a war hero. However, there are other strands of this masculine voice, as Rojack recounts the events on the battlefield after vanquishing enemy soldiers; their eyes stared at him at the final moment:

[F]or I could not face his eyes, they now contained all of it, the two grenades, the blood on my thigh, the fat faggot, the ghost with the pistol, the hunchback, the blood, those bloody screams that never sounded, it was all in his eyes, he had eyes I was to see once later on an autopsy table in a small town in Missouri, eyes belonging to a redneck farmer from a deep road in the Ozarks, eyes of blue, so perfectly blue and mad they go all the way in deep into celestial vaults of sky, eyes which go back all the way to God is the way I think I heard it said once in the South, and I faltered before that stare... (Mailer 4)

While here, another voice appears within the speech of the masculine war hero that draws the parallel between war violence and the systematic discrimination that the marginalised, abandoned populace, like the redneck Missouri farmer, faced under a system of industrial capitalism. This Southern Redneck farmer's blue, mad eyes encapsulate the angst, the great divide of the nation between the North and the South. One part of Rojack's conscience speaks about the conflicts within the nation, while the masculine self-prides itself on its military valour. This double-voiced structure of his speech continues across the novel. The eyes of angst, self-deprecation, and damnation haunted his other "American" self's journey through murder, philandery. Likewise, after killing Deborah, Rojack expressed the masculine self's hatred for the domineering woman as:

I felt a mean rage in my feet. It was as if in killing her, the act had been too gentle, I had not plumbed the hatred where the real injustice was stored. She had spit on the future, my Deborah, she had spoiled my chance, and now her body was here. I

had an impulse to go up to her and kick her ribs, grind my heel on her nose, drive the point of my shoe into her temple... (Mailer 44)

This speech brings out a masculine brute who looks forward to violently crushing a rebellious female.

Compared to the masculine ego seen in the above expression, another portion within the same narrating voice also finds itself being condemned by the glance of the dead woman. The eyes of Deborah follow him to every subsequent act of masculine assertion over the woman's body:

[M]ore than once had I sat up in a strange woman's bed feeling claws on my chest, a familiar bad odor above the liquor on my tongue and Deborah's green eyes staring at me in the dark, an oppression close to strangling on my throat. She was evil, I would decide, and then think next that goodness could come on a visit to evil only in the disguise of evil: yes, evil would know that goodness had come only by the power of its force. I might be the one who was therefore evil, and Deborah was trapped with me. (Mailer 32)

As apparent in this speech, this other voice within him showcases a sense of remorse for the violent actions of the masculine, brutish self, seen in the previous speech.

While the masculine voice of Rojack prides itself on its hatred for the dominant female, the other voice within him sees the deep disquiet left within the masochistic consciousness by those acts of violence. All those killings in the War, the murder of Deborah are acts that scratched the bravado of the masochist ego. His apparent manliness can't create a false halo to shield the self from its own violence. If Rojack exemplified the American dream, the American military culture, his inner disquiet from memories of bloodshed reflected the nation's inner fault lines as captured in the cold eye of the redneck farmer. Like Rojack's fragmented self, filled with contradictions and multiple emotions, a masculine, militaristic veneer, and an inner troubled self, the dominant industrial, White American culture also contains those contradictions. At times, Rojack appears as the agent of this culture. He embodies its core principles of progress and social mobility through swift careerism. He escapes the judicial system despite murdering his wife by a play of his wit and connections; an ironic negation of the maxim of the self-made American man achieving his goals by wit and intelligence. At other moments, there appears a peripheral voice within his narrative that presents him as an alienated individual captured by a national power hierarchy. While having sexual intercourse with Cherry, the involved human bodies are narrated by Rojack as made of iron and steel cages:

I had some distant awareness that my breath could hardly be good and her lungs breathed back an air of ashes and the tomb, but this rot of liquor and nicotine we now passed back and forth had nothing to do with the part of me now alive. I traveled (eyes sealed) through some midnight of inner space, aware of nothing but

my will, that casing of iron about my heart, and of her will anchored like a girdle of steel about her womb. (Mailer 112)

This description by Rojack about the sexual intercourse shows a mechanical process in which the body is separated from the mind, the individual has lost control over his own body, and he is controlled by an alien system from afar.

Here, the industrial system has permeated into the individual's body and soul. Rojack, here, presents himself as an individual whose life has been corrupted by the allure of the industrial-political hierarchy. A voice in him attempts to attribute his actions to the larger system of economics and politics. This idea of a corrupt system creating villains like Rojack or Barney Oswald Kelly finds manifestation across the novel. Rojack is supposedly saved by an elusive "big brother" after killing his wife. It appears at the outset that Kelly might have saved Rojack to protect his own secrets. However, Rojack's narrative soon directly and indirectly points towards a deeper nexus of hidden powers controlling Kelly and Rojack. Kelly tells:

'Threads.'

'And Mr Ganucci's friends?'

'Lots of knots,' said Kelly...

'Rojack, I'm not as powerful as you think,' said Kelly. 'I dabble. It's the hardworking fellow at the desk who has the real power. The career man. (Mailer 212)

An allusion to a modern bureaucratic system is made here, consisting of corporate executives, politicians like Jake, Socialites, etc., under the corporate system of the USA that produces twisted figures like Rojack or Kelly. The novelistic discourse of Rojack thus presents a bureaucratic, corporate power hierarchy in the post-war USA controlling the lives of individuals, and he attempts to subvert this hidden system through the polyphony of his narrative. It is to be noted that the critique of this system doesn't emerge in straightforward language. It emerges through the use of irony and the multi-layered, self-deprecating language and images as seen in these speeches that turn down the implications of the foundational myths of America. Rojack's masculine voice, for instance, becomes a self-mockery, the American dream becomes a mirage, haunted by dead bodies.

Away from the clutches of this dominant culture existed the subterranean world of Jazz clubs and the perpetually marginalised Blacks. Rojack, after being chased by the "dread" of hidden eyes, seeks refuge in the world of the Jazz clubs of New York, associated with the Black singer Shago Martin and the poor Southern Girl Cherry. These figures, leftovers of the dominant White conformist system, appear as offering prospects of emancipation from the bondage of the system. Cherry, the Jazz "cat" is a symbol of defiance of the White morality of the consensus era; "In this light she was a pure cat, cat's eyes, cat's nostrils, cat's knowing mouth (Mailer 95)." The term "cat" originated in the countercultural Jazz language and the Black

hipster persona to refer to a person nonchalant about the dominant cultural values and standards. “[T]he knew hipster resembled that of feline indifference, and it was no accident that ‘cool cat’ became the ultimate compliment (Moretta 17).” The White teenage counterculture of the 1960s USA went against the ethics of White conformism by adopting Jazz music from the Black rebels of the preceding decades. She, too, was a poor White girl who revealed the monstrosity behind the small town’s morality. Her townsmen shielded her brother by praising his masculine paternalism of the orphaned family when she was a child, but pretended ignorance about his incestuous activities with Cherry’s sister that would later drive her into insanity. Her voice carries with it a succinct mockery of the conformist era’s White morality; “I came to know that people in town were on to what was going on. But it didn’t seem to hurt our hard-ass little respectability (Mailer 150).” “[A]nyway, we pretended we had kept our family secret, and were as nice as anybody (Mailer 150).” She showed the hidden underbelly of the conformist White society of the era. It was also reflected in her poverty, squalor-ridden existence in an era known for consumerism, abundance in the suburbia. Against the backdrop of the suburbia of opulence, she, the marginalised, poor outcast of the White society, lived in a dilapidated apartment among screaming Puerto Rican babies. This nation of contradiction came alive in the voice of Rojack:

The garbage was out on the landings, the high peppery smell of Puerto Rican cooking, that odor of garlic, pig’s viscera and incompatible condiments, a teeming misery. At the top of each flight, the door to the latrine was open, moisture seeped off the floor. The stench of slum plumbing gave a terror of old age — how ill is illness, how vile the suggestion of villainous old bowels. (Mailer 107)

The squalor and economic deprivation of the underclass on the other side of the prosperous post-World War II nation can be seen in this depiction of her apartment.

Continuation of having sexual relations with Shago Martin, the Black singer, is a radical act to subvert the White Southern morality marked by segregation. Kentucky, her home state, was known as a major spot of segregationist laws and discrimination against Blacks during the 1950s and 60s. The marginalised, poor White girl from the hotbed of segregation defied the taboo of race intermixing by becoming a Jazz singer. Her voice and acts in the Jazz club take a more subversive turn in her songs, stating the depredation of life in White America:

She was singing *Love for sale, love that’s fresh and still unspoiled, love that’s only slightly* ...Then she did something tasty with *soiled*, something rueful as though to show that what had been lost was worse than the dirt. Yes, the voice was only a lift above ordinary, but the experience in the voice was not... (Mailer 84)

In this description, Rojack’s narrative voice contains a sympathy for the rebellious White girl. It is not just her act of subversion; it is also narrator Rojack’s act of subversion of the dominant society through his narrative.

Shago Martin, on the other hand, is a radical voice that subverts the hierarchy of White dominant culture through his rejection of the White liberal class. His anger, aggressive language, defying the supposedly refined literary language, and use of expletives are a rejection of the dominant forces that control the standard language. Rojack narrates his voice; “‘Haul ass, the black man is on the march,’ Shago said to me suddenly, ‘and he won’t stop until his elementary requirements are met (Mailer 167).’” For his radicalised mind, having Cherry as his mistress is a revenge upon the White class which had oppressed his community. He attempts to destabilise the dominant White society and its sensibilities by his violent rejection of Cherry’s sensibilities in acerbic language, “‘Her womb is full of blood,’ he said to me. ‘She had a kid and afraid to have it. Afraid to have a kid with a black ass. What about you, uncle, going to give a kid with a white ass, with a white diarrhetic old ass? Kiss my you-know-what’ (Mailer 165).” Here, his virulent masculine assertion of his identity is simultaneously accompanied by another voice of dejection at his own community’s status. He retorts to Cherry’s charge of being a disgrace, “‘Every nigger’s a disgrace. Look at Sambo here. He’s a disgrace to the fat white race. What you doing with him? Why he’s a professor, he’s a professor (Mailer 165).’” Though it can reasonably be argued that this utterance by Shago might be an attempt to shield his own patriarchal violence behind social discrimination, this utterance still emerged from the social experience of injustice felt by the Black community. Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* asserted that no utterance emerges in isolation in the speaker’s mind. It comes from a dialogical exchange between various speakers or listeners:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (276)

Thus, Bakhtin states that the utterance of a speaker is shaped by his experience and dialogical exchange with other prior voices. So, this utterance of being a disgrace is primarily taken from the collective memory of Black life in the USA. It is a marginal voice of angst that found expression side by side with the masculine other self in the above utterance by Shago. This collective experience of Black marginalisation within the White society becomes more explicit in his use of the word “Sambo”, “‘listen, Sambo,’ he said to me, ‘you look like a coonass blackass nigger jackaboo to me bcause you been put-putting with blondie here, my wife, you see, dig? digaree? Evil! Evil? Why the white girl’s evil, you see (Mailer 165).’” “Sambo”, a derogatory term originally used to refer to Blacks, is applied to Rojack by Shago. This statement in the mouth of Shago is taken from the White supremacist stereotyping of all Blacks as violent, promiscuous, sexually corrupt, while the White Americans are seen as inherently ethical. Since Rojack himself is indulging in these acts in the novel, Shago’s use of the same derogatory term reserved for Blacks to Rojack is a brilliant indictment of the dominant cultural and

linguistic forces of the era. He turns the hierarchy of the language upside down, exposing how the dominant ideological forces use language to marginalise and stereotype Blacks based on prejudices. Also, with the use of ironical undertone, he mocks the ideals of self-made, White liberal intellectual by stressing on the words “Harvard” and “ivy league” while talking about Rojack’s rendezvous in Cherry’s apartment, ““Why, bless bless, my Cherry, if I got to lose, I got to lose to a square with heart, I mean he’s all that heart and no potatoes, just Ivy League ass. Harvard, I presume, Doctor Rojack’ (Mailer 167).” In this instance, his voice becomes the voice of a marginalised working class rebelling against the urban liberal class that Rojack and Deborah epitomised. Shago represents the militarised, radical opinion that sought to break the smugness of the liberal establishment. For him, Deborah, who tried to control his radical style by turning him into a charity singer or a part of other liberal establishment-controlled emancipation projects, represents the worst of the White liberal class. Hence, she is the “bitch”. “Why I knew your wife was society bitch. That’s a *bitch!* I knew what she was promising, all that White House jazz, mow my grass, black ball, you’re so sexy (Mailer 169)”. His tone favoured a more radical action by Blacks themselves for their progress rather than relying on White liberals. Here, in this dialogic interaction among Rojack, Shago, and Cherry, emerge the fault lines between the White liberals and the Blacks for the struggle of Black emancipation. For Rojack and Cherry, Shago’s disruptive behaviour is “evil” and a disgrace because it threatens a violent, unpredictable break from the oppressive structure by the victims themselves. It is a threat of a revolution which is no longer controlled or directed by the intermediary liberal class:

Actually, I did not enjoy him altogether. His talent was too extreme. He was not often evocative of the smell of smoke in a fog or the mood which is near a young girl when she comes into a room, he did not suggest that the nicest affair of the year was about to start, he did not make me think, as other singers often did, of landscapes in Jamaica, of mangoes, honey, and a breast beneath a moon, of tropical love... (Mailer 162)

This description of Shago’s voice is striking in the sense that, on the one hand, it showcases the White liberal side’s displeasure at an uncontrollable Black radical; on the other, another voice in the narrator also parodies the sensibilities of the liberal class by mocking their desire to hear about fog, or landscapes in exotic places in the singer’s voice.

The White liberal voice in Rojack narrates Shago’s impulses as abrasive, his raw energy as extreme for the sympathetic Whites. Murray Friedman, in an article entitled “The White Liberal’s Retreat”, published in the January 1963 issue of *The Atlantic*, highlighted this schism between the White liberal class and the radical Black movements:

In the final analysis, a liberal, white, middle-class society wants to have change, but without trouble. And this an aroused Negro community cannot provide, as was demonstrated in the freedom rides crisis. When the first riders went into Anniston

and Birmingham, Alabama, in May, 1961, and were initially greeted by violence, there was strong sympathy for them. As the rides continued, however, the public mood shifted to apprehension.

The “Freedom Riders” was a radical protest by Black activists to break bus segregation in Southern states by travelling to them in desegregated buses, resulting in violent racial clashes. In the novel, Shago also mentioned that he had participated in those rides, showcasing the yearning for a militant approach to the question of Black emancipation while symbolically rejecting the White liberal’s mild approach in his disdain for Deborah, Rojack and Cherry. Cherry, although herself a marginalised and ostracised rebel from the hegemonic culture, finds herself as a part of the hegemonic framework of the dominant culture. She, while rejecting and condemning Shago for his violence over her body, condemns him in stereotypical terms used by the segregationist White society of the time, asserting her racial superiority over him, “‘You black-ass ego,’ she said, ‘you’re not white, you’re just losing your black. That’s why you still got your spade in you and I got my white in me (Mailer 171).” This reflects the deep roots of the dominant culture in the unconscious realm of language, even of those sympathetic to or part of the subversive segment against the dominant ideology. In the essay, “Marxism and the Philosophy of Language”, V. N. Volosinov stated that ideology shapes consciousness rather than the latter preceding it, “[T]he individual consciousness is a social-ideological fact (52).” Cherry’s unconscious act brings forward the difficulty of rising above the worldview and framework of expression given by the dominant ideology. Rojack, whose narrative subverts and mocks the dominant hierarchy on many occasions, reflects this inability to go above the dominant ideology’s hold over the mind of the subversive agent. When faced with Shago’s militant presence, Rojack’s supposed racial superiority comes to the fore and “saves” the honour of White masculinity by beating up the violent Black militant. These inability to fully unlearn the structure of the dominant culture by its members prompted Shago or other militant Black movements to be critical of the White liberal class. This same contradiction, found within the 1950s and 60s, White youth-led counter-cultural Beat and Hippy movements created a paradoxical situation. A critical tone against it emerges in the authorial voice in the novel. These movements emphasised “dropping out” of the “dying” consumer societies of the USA. But, John Anthony Moretta mentions, “[I]t was almost impossible for black Americans to empathize with white kids who had all that blacks wanted (187).” These movements were dominated by White middle-class suburban youths who had grown up having all the luxuries of the consumer society they criticised. However, for the really poor segment, for Blacks, disengaging with society was not a viable option. They had to fend for their precarious materialistic existence within the consumer society. Hence, a critical tone towards the White rebels like Rojack or Cherry appears in Shago’s discourse.

The salience of Mailer’s novel can be seen in this multiplicity of language, polyphonic narrative and multitudes of perspectives that problematize the fixed

layers of the dominant culture of the era. The frequent use of slang, “offensive”, sardonic language by the key figures subverts the accepted norms of the dominant culture. This narrative strategy attempts to violently shake the conformist attitude of the era. Although both the author and the protagonist came from the dominant White class, they presented a profound dissatisfaction with the White consumer culture of the era, in line with their contemporary Beatniks or Hippies. Though Mailer wasn’t a direct associate of the Beat movement, he shared their disillusionment with the era. His first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), based on first-hand experience as a soldier, had already highlighted the disillusionment of the author, mortified by the horrors of the war. This disillusionment, further exacerbated by the monotony of the post-war nation, shaped the text under discussion. The White rebels of the novel could be seen emerging from this prevailing socio-economic atmosphere. However, the question raised by Shago about the break between these White rebels and the truly subjugated classes, like the Black, shows a contradiction within the counter-cultural currents. It highlights the unconscious stranglehold of dominant culture over rebels within the system, like Rojack or Cherry, making it difficult for them to subvert the system from within. This schism between a rebellious liberal class and those truly experiencing subjugation calls for in-depth engagement with the problem.

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