



A BEND IN THE RIVER AS A POSTCOLONIAL TEXT

Dr. Priyanka Singla

*Associate Prof. of English,
Government College for Women, Hisar, Haryana, India*

ABSTRACT:

The present paper which intends to explore and analyse the postcolonial situation as depicted in *A Bend in the River*, defines Naipaul's central area of interest in all his later novels, that is, the review and scrutiny of the situation prevailing in the third world countries. Set in a newly independent African nation, the story of the novel comes to the readers through the consciousness of Salim, whose narrative takes the readers to a river town located deep within the nation and makes them assess the situation through his perspective. The African country which becomes the setting of the novel remains unchristened and unnamed, probably, because Naipaul wishes to present a representative tale of violence and bloodshed, decay and destruction, chaos and disorder, turmoil and upheavals taking place in the third world countries in general and African countries in particular. Written in 1979, *A Bend in the River* unfolds before the readers as a magnificent work of art, a brilliant manifestation of the author's perceptive mind, his keen insight and his unusual and unparalleled ability to perceive and discern the truth behind the historical upheavals and social breakdown in post- imperial states. Naipaul shows with terrifying clarity, the extent to which the situation in the postcolonial societies has deteriorated and exposes the forces which are responsible decay and decline in the postcolonial situation. The picture which emerges before the readers is that of a world falling apart, torn into pieces by the crude politics, exploitative tendencies and the selfish motives of the people who have stepped into the 'shoes of the departing colonial masters'. The present paper is a humble attempt to make an honest postcolonial reading and deliver critical insights of such a seminal text.

KEYWORDS: Colonialism, Post colonialism, Imperialism, African Perspective.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:	REVIEW ARTICLE
Dr. Priyanka Singla Associate Prof. of English, Government College for Women, Hisar, Haryana, India Email: priyanka.ind81@gmail.com	

A bend in the river as a postcolonial text

“Nobody is going anywhere. We’re all going to hell, and every man knows in his bones” (V. S. Naipaul in *A Bend in the River*, 319). Perhaps in no other work of V. S. Naipaul than in *A Bend in the River*, the readers come across such a poignant depiction of the postcolonial existence, where chaos and violence engulf people as well as places, epitomised in the above lines from the text, which present the picture of a fragmented world, torn apart by nihilistic and narcissistic forces. Written in 1979, *A Bend in the River* unfolds before the readers as a magnificent work of art, a brilliant manifestation of the author’s perceptive mind, his keen insight and his unusual and unparalleled ability to perceive and discern the truth behind the historical upheavals and social breakdown in post- imperial states. Not surprisingly, Naipaul’s perception and documentation of truth, at times, seems to be conditioned by his own situation and experiences in life, which are obviously those of a third world expatriate enjoying a privileged position at the metropolitan centre or those of an ex- colonial who was a witness, first to the disruption caused by the forces of colonialism, then to the passing away of the colonial order and the subsequent chaos and disorder, in the postcolonial societies. Nevertheless, Naipaul’s commitment to his artistic purpose, that is, to deliver the truth is so intense and absolute that he does not let his personal feelings and emotions obstruct his assessment of the postcolonial situation and what the readers get is an unbiased and honest account of the events and incidents taking place in the erstwhile colonies.

The present paper which intends to explore and analyse the postcolonial situation as depicted in *A Bend in the River*, defines Naipaul’s central area of interest in all his later novels, that is, the review and scrutiny of the situation prevailing in the third world countries. Set in a newly independent African nation, the story of the novel comes to the readers through the consciousness of Salim, whose narrative takes the readers to a river town located deep within the nation and makes them assess the situation through his perspective. The African country which becomes the setting of the novel remains unchristened and unnamed, probably, because Naipaul wishes to present a representative tale of violence and bloodshed, decay and destruction, chaos and disorder, turmoil and upheavals taking place in the third world countries in general and African countries in particular. This assertion is confirmed as Salim’s narrative reveals: “The country, like others in Africa, had its troubles after independence” (3). Salim, the narrator protagonist, is a young man who identifies himself as belonging to a Muslim family, which he describes as “a special group. . . distinct from the Arabs and other Muslims of the coast, in our customs and attitudes, we were close to the Hindus of north western India, from which he had originally come” (12).

The novel opens with Salim’s long drive from the east coast, where his family had lived for centuries, to the interiors of Africa. In Naipaul’s fiction dealing with the chaos of postcolonial existence, moving vehicles come to assume a tremendous significance. Lillian Feder says in this connection:

In societies seeking independence and in those having recently attained it, the narrators and characters of Naipaul’s novels contend with political and social upheaval in a variety of ways. They enter into the fray; they retreat in helpless despair: they use any available

A bend in the river as a postcolonial text

resources to escape the chaos threatening them... An automobile, or some other moving vehicle, becomes more than a means of transport (194).

In *A Bend in the River*, Salim's drive from the coast to the interiors signifies his passage from the known to the unknown, from light to darkness, from knowledge to ignorance. As he drives through bush and 'more bush', the glimpses of the 'African rage' that the readers get, is only a prelude to the long array of violent and blood events, they are to witness, as the narrative progresses. At the very outset, Salim makes it clear that his narrative is a recollection of past events and the situation in text reveals: "That isn't the kind of drive you can do nowadays in Africa. . . . Too many of the places on the way, have closed down or are full of blood" (3). The town where Salim moves to in order to take over a store from one of his relatives. Nazaruddin, thrives primarily because of a bordering river, which had earlier turned the city into a busy market place, which the native Africans, scattered throughout the vast African bush, frequently visited for shopping purposes. When Salim arrives at the town, he is dismayed to see the ruins and ravages which spoke of "the depth of that African rage, the will to destroy regardless of consequences" (30). The once-fashionable European suburb of the city lay ruined and overgrown, reclaimed by the bush. Even the Africans who once thronged the 'market square' in the city had retreated "to the bush, to the safety of their villages, which layup hidden and difficult creeks" (5). The recent surge in violence had crippled the life of the people who lived in an atmosphere of oppressive anxiety at their river town. The violent rebel attacks and civil wars had either fully destroyed or distorted the relics of the previous regime. The 'ghost town', however, was not without its economic potential and commercial viability, and so, according to Lillian Feder, Salim gets an opportunity to begin his life anew, which he does by taking over Nazaruddin's shop in "the expectation that the inevitable time of renewal is imminent" (194).

At the town, Salim makes friends with a few Indian families and becomes especially close to the Indian couple, Mahesh and Shobha. Among the Africans, he comes to know Zabeth, a small retailer and one of his earliest customers, her son Ferdinand, a student at the town's lycee. Father Huismans, the Belgian teacher at the lycee, the President who never appears as a character in the novel, but whose influence as the 'Big Man' can always be felt in the lives of the people of the town, Raymond, the Big Man's white man, and his wife Yvette, with whom Salim has an affair and Meatty, the half- African family servant of Salim who had been sent from the East Coast to live with him, are some of the others, who become part of Salim's life while he is at the river town. Zabeth is an African woman whose character is introduced by the author to bring to the fore the hardships in the lives of the natives who required great perseverance and resilience to get through the daily travails of life. For people like Zabeth, independence did not imply freedom of any kind-social, economic or political. Being exploited and oppressed for long, their discursive or analytical powers necessary to deal with the modern world had been destroyed and their only solace lay in the bush life which provided them with the necessary cover from the impending dangers. This, however, was not the case with Ferdinand, who represent the new generation of Africans who view their freedom as a prized possession. They are the ones who receive knowledge and education and

even become part of the administrative machinery. Expatriates like Salim can only feel envious of their new found status and position. Salim expresses his feelings of envy for Ferdinand, whose guardianship had once been entrusted to him by Zabeth:

Yet I couldn't help thinking how lucky Ferdinand was, how easy it had been made for him. You took a boy out of the bush and you taught him to read, write; you levelled the bush and built a polytechnic and you sent him there. It seemed easy as that; if you came late to the world and found readymade those things that other countries and people had taken so long to arrive at- writing, printing, universities, books, knowledge. The rest of us had to take things in stages. . . Ferdinand, starting from nothing, had with one step made himself free, and was ready to race ahead of us (118).

Ferdinand, indeed, races ahead of everyone because he is now equipped with knowledge, a knowledge of his own past, his nation's past which was obviously one of slavery, plunder and exploitation. Martin Luther King's comments on Africa's past are worth quoting in this connection:

For years and for centuries, Africa has been one of the most exploited continents in the history of the world. It has been the "Dark Continent". It has been the continent that has suffered all of the pain and the affliction that could be mustered up by other nations. And it is that continent which has experienced slavery, which has experienced all of the lowest standards that we can think about, and it has been brought into being by other nations (132).

The situation was almost the same in all African countries. Belgian Congo which had recently attained independence, was not an exception. In 1975, V. S. Naipaul had travelled to Zaire which resulted in the writing of two essays "A Congo Diary" and "A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa". The African background in *A Bend in the River* is clearly derived from Naipaul's visit to Zaire and the character of Big Man is obviously based on its President Mobutu Sese Seko whose exercise of power is presented as raw and arbitrary, even though aided by the Europeans. The President, the country and the town which remains veiled in anonymity, thus help to place the events and the characters beyond time into timelessness, beyond the local into the universal.

The chaos and tumult, the violence and turmoil that the first section entitled "The Second Rebellion" describes, are in sharp contrast to the details provided in the next section captioned "The New Domain", with peace being restored and the rebellion of the long suffering natives being kept on hold for a while and the business reaching its peak. The river town is re-established and begins to grow under the regime of the Big Man. All kinds of projects were started. Various government departments came to life again, and the town at last became a place that could be made to work. The post-colonial societies which Naipaul depicts are built on the debris of the empire and the grand projects of the government which Salim describes, are constructed on the ideas of modernity and civilisation borrowed from the Europeans whose missions of civilising the savages did nothing

exploiting the resources of the natives, inflicting pain and injustice upon them and breeding a sense of insufficiency and incompetence in them, which eventually led to widespread chaos, unrest and rebellion among the masses. Under these circumstances, Father Huismans, who was the exponent of empire in Africa, could only become a soft target of the rage and the accumulated anger of the Africans who sought to get rid of all the physical remainders of the Europeans. Father Huismans, a catholic priest, a collector of African artefacts, and Belgian headmaster at the town Iycee, saw “himself as part of the immense flow of history” (70). He was unaffected by the destruction caused by the tribal wars, he was indifferent to the strife prevailing in the country. For him, Africa was still “a wonderful place, full of new things” (70) and “for everything connected with the European civilisation” he had great reverence, and perhaps it was Father Huismans indifference towards the African situation and his idolizing the European civilisation which proves to be fatal for him and ultimately lead to his brutal killing by the Africans who perform it as a sacrosanct rite to purify themselves and their place of the evil spirit. The textual details of Father Huismans’ death confirms the Africans’ reversion to savagery and perhaps this explains why Salim finds shoddy grandeur of the ‘State Domain’ to which he is introduced by his childhood friend Indar to be a ‘hoax’.

The State Domain, built on the ruins of the European suburb, was a dream project of the President, and it was created with great expectations. But more like a holiday resort, it gave holiday ease to the people whose lives at the domain were full of romance and glory, promises and excitement. The difference between the two worlds, the romantic world of domain and the realistic world of the town is actually felt by Salim. The textual details make it clear that the hiatus in the lives of the people living in the new Domain, is too visible, the gap between the rulers and the ruled is too wide, it cannot be bridged, it can only add to the existing vows, dissent and discontent of the masses and hence lead to more violence, more rebellions and more uprisings. There is a great similarity in the situation prevailing in all the postcolonial societies, and it is the gravity of the crisis which prompts committed writers like Naipaul to take on the role of the “communicator, the moulder, rather than the man of imagination” (194), and so while fictionalising the drama of decolonisation, Naipaul brings the major players of the African politics centre- stage and focuses on the corruption of causes and the abuse of power by the self- serving, self- willed and confused African rulers and shows it to be the main source of the ensuing violence, conflicts and rebellion in the post- imperial societies. The failure of the political endeavours of bringing modernity through borrowed ideas, he attributes to the incompetence of the rulers who fail to understand that the importation and implementation of ideas into settings not suited to their application can only lead to disastrous consequences.

So, the Big Man’s mega project fails, imported ideas fail, black men assuming the lies of white men fail and the end result is unending chaos and disorder. Naipaul unambiguously critiques the ‘governing elites’ who conform to the type of civilised savages, and remain obsessed with ideas of their own greatness and glory. Their crude policies and incongruous ideas borrowed from the West further degenerate a nation which has already suffered the blows of slavery and exploit. Naipaul is not the first writer to criticise the rulers/ leaders of the neo- colonialist regime who

assume the role of the harbingers of change and growth in newly independent nations, but soon revert to the colonialists' mode of rule of government and start exercising their powers arbitrarily. There are a host of other postcolonial writers who have critiqued the misuse of power by the corrupt politicians in newly emergent nations. Wole Soyinka, for instance, tells Biyi- Bendele Thomas, in a 1993 interview, how shocked he was to meet the ministers of independent Nigeria:

Within five minutes, I knew that we were in serious trouble. It was clear that they were more concerned with the mechanisms for stepping into the shoes of the departing colonial masters, enjoying the same privileges, inserting themselves in that axial position towards the rest of the community. . . And then I realised that the enemy within was going to be far more problematic than the external, easily recognisable enemy (145).

The chaos of the postcolonial revolution which engulfs the nation, and which Soyinka attributes to the enemy within, is more or less in conformity with Naipaul's assertion of the inability and failure of the natives to govern themselves. Naipaul's indictment and criticism of the postcolonial societies has been taken by some critics with a pinch of salt, who have accused him of being a 'colonial anglophile', who has aligned himself to the norms and values of the West. Naipaul's criticism of Africa in *A Bend in the River* is undoubtedly harsh, but underlying this criticism is the serious concern of the 'communicator' of truth, whose foresight compels him to identify and explain the problems that arise from the arbitrary use of power by the ruling cliques who rely heavily on concepts and ideas borrowed from the West. Champa Rao Mohan is of the opinion that Naipaul's "impatience is directed towards intellectual and cultural parasitism and the mimicry of the West, which are the maladies common to all the ex- colonial societies of the post-imperial world" (149). In his scathing review of the collapsing African situation, Naipaul does not even spare the Europeans whom he accuses of practising double standards and creating ideological confusion. He also accuses the Europeans of leaving behind 'junk'. Salim describes the stock of his shop as 'antiquated junk' made in Europe, United States and Japan.

In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul makes use of menacing and heavily symbolic landscape to create an atmosphere of fear and horror and to convey his sense of dismay and despair at the extent and magnitude of decay and destruction caused by the nihilistic forces. The text, for instance, revels, "The steamer monument had been knocked. . . pedestals had been defaced. . . ruins had been left as ruins. . . But more unnerving than anything else was the ruined suburb. . . The big lawns and gardens had returned to bush; the streets had disappeared; vines and creepers had grown over broken, bleached walls of concrete or hollow clay brick" (29-30). The novel is replete with the images of ruin and decay which characterise the African landscape and which Naipaul uses to show the 'cyclical recurrence of rebellion and repression' and sustained decay of the society and the nation. Another instance in the novel shows, "The town at the bend in the river was more than half destroyed. . . Even the African cites were inhibited in only corners and in decay elsewhere with many of the low, box- like concrete houses in pale blue or pale green abandoned, hung with quick-growing, quick- dying tropical vines, mattings of brown and green" (4-5). The ruins signify the

immensity and infinity of the problems confronting the postcolonial societies which are on the verge of collapse. Fawzia Mustafa opines: “Africa, then, provides Naipaul with a setting within which he can further ascertain and develop his propositions about third world collapse” (146). Bloody rebellions, violent conflicts and uprisings mark the African scene and the vision of a safe and stable state seems to be a distant dream for the people who only experience a sense of chaos and negation. The tenor of the impending apocalypse is fully realised and finally articulated towards the end of the novel when yet another civil war breaks out and Salim, who has already been stripped of his shop in the wake of a nationalisation project, is forced to flee the country in the midst of bloody killings, gunshots and violence. Ferdinand’s parting words to Salim pronounce Naipaul’s verdict on the future of the postcolonial societies: “Nobody’s going anywhere. We’re all going to hell and every man knows this in his bones. . . nowhere is safe now” (319-20).

Naipaul shows with terrifying clarity, the extent to which the situation in the postcolonial societies has deteriorated and exposes the forces which are responsible decay and decline in the postcolonial situation. The picture which emerges before the readers is that of a world falling apart, torn into pieces by the crude politics, exploitative tendencies and the selfish motives of the people who have stepped into the ‘shoes of the departing colonial masters’. Naipaul’s presentation of Africa and his evocation of the dark and foreboding African landscape reminds the readers of Conrad’s depiction of Africa in *A Heart of Darkness*, a novel which exerted a strong influence on Naipaul’s portrayal of Africa in *A Bend in the River*. In an early essay, entitled “Conrad’s Darkness”, Naipaul had already acknowledged his indebtedness to Conrad, and his fascination for the African background “the demoralised land of plunder and licensed cruelty” (58) which seemed to him “the most effective part of the book” (58). Naipaul’s evocation of the same in *A Bend in the River* confirms his solidarity with Conrad’s tradition. Whatever the influences on Naipaul’s writing, the fact still remains that the author’s concern at the pitiable and deteriorating condition of the postcolonial societies, overrides all the other considerations and makes his documentation of the third world realities more authentic and reliable. Recording moments of transition from colonialism to independence and highlighting the complex fate and fortunes, the volatile political atmosphere and the fragile social order of a newly emergent nation, *A Bend in the River* stands out as a powerful work of art where the author’s vision, his artistic powers, and his commitment to deliver the truth combine and conspire to produce one of the great classics of English literature, which in the times to come, would be remembered for its thoughtful reflections and insightful observations on the situation in the third world nations.

WORKS CITED

- Adewale, Maja Pearce. *Wole Soyinka: An Appraisal*. Heinmann, 1994.
- Fawzia, Mustafa. *V. S. Naipaul*. CUP, 1995.
- Hammer, R. D. (ed.) *Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul*. Heinmann, 1979.
- Hayward, Helen. *The Enigma of V. S. Naipaul: Sources and Contexts*. Hampshire Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

A bend in the river as a postcolonial text

- Joshi, Chandra B. *V. S. Naipaul: The Voice of Exile*. Sterling, 1994.
- Lillian, Feder. *Naipaul's Truth: The Making of a Writer*. Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000.
- Naipaul, V. S. *A Bend in the River*. Picador India, 2002.
- ---. "Conrad's Darkness". *New York Review of Books*, October 17, 1974.
- V. S. Naipaul Interviewed by A. Rowe- Evans, *Quest*, p.55. Qtd. Joshi, Chandra B. *V. S. Naipaul: The Voice of Exile*. Sterling, 1994.
- Rao, Mohan Champa. *Postcolonial Situation in the Novels of V. S. Naipaul*. Atlantic, 2000.

