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## **Search for Authentic Selfhood in V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River***

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### **Abstract**

Fragmentation, alienation, and exile are common terms associated with postcolonial literature. Imperialism played a key role in bringing a sense of alienation and disorder to the countries where imperialists ruled. This paper deals with the presentation of the postcolonial state of affairs in Naipaul's novel, demonstrates an immediate and insensitive concern with the former colonized societies. The major themes that emerge are related to the problems of the colonized people, their sense of alienation from the landscapes, their identity crisis, the inconsistency of freedom and the problem of neocolonialism.

### **Keywords**

Post colonialism; Alienation; Identity crisis; Rootlessness.



*A Bend in the River* is set in an unnamed African Country undergoing political exploitation. However, the landscape with the river, the rapids, the steamer service and the close modelling of the Big man's character on Mobutu as well as the events described make it obvious that the unnamed country is no other than Congo or Zaire. In the novel Naipaul's major themes concentrates on revealing the disturbing realities of post-imperial Zaire. The identity crisis that his characters face is due to the eradication of their past and those who eventually overcome the crisis are ones who have recovered from their past or somehow managed on their own histories. Although a sense of the past is still important, at the same time it is clear that there can be no return to the past.

In *A Bend in the River* Naipaul focuses on the "African contradictions" which are the outcomes of the contact with Western civilization. The Bigman embodies this reduction in his revival of the African worship of ancestors through the "cult of the mother" even as he fashions his modern Africa at the Domain. The domain with its careless splendor has not come out of Africa and is as alien as the water hyacinth that has "floated up from the south, seeding itself as it travelled" (60). In this novel Naipaul depicts the ordeals and absurdities of living in the new third world countries.

Salim, the protagonist-narrator, instead of being dejected by his rootlessness, developed the habit of conscious self-assessment because of his western education, realizes that his community has fallen behind. He awakens to the anomaly of their position in coast. Even Indar, his East Indian, Hindu friend arrives at the same insight. Salim is prompted into action when Indar tells him that he is leaving for England. He decides to break away from his family and make a new beginning elsewhere. When Nazruddin, a man belonging to his community, offers him a shop and business in the town he readily accepts. Salim becomes a trader in the central Africa at a bend in the

river. The town was a settlement and then built by the Europeans. It is now without Arabs or Europeans. He sounds as an intriguing figure in this novel.

When Salim arrives at the town he finds that it was destroyed during the tribal war that has just swept by. Salim is unnerved to see the ruins, which speaks about the desolation. It is clear that there can be no fresh beginnings anywhere. It is now possible for Salim to return to the coast because of an uprising in the coast. Salim's family too has had to scatter and Metty, a family slave is sent to stay with him.

At the town, Salim comes to know of three Indian families and he becomes especially close with Mahesh and Shoba. The only Africans he comes into direct contact with are Zabeth, his customer and her son Ferdinand, whose guardianship Zabeth entrusts to Salim. Ferdinand attends the lycee but Salim sees that the education he receives at the lycee only confuses Ferdinand and fills his mind with "all kinds of junk." This serves as a mocking comment on the quality of education given in missionary schools like the lycee.

Father Huismans, the lycee's Belgian headmaster, has deep interest in African cultural artifacts. He makes expeditions into the interior villages to collect African masks and carvings. Indifferent to the political situation, he sees the destruction of the town as only a temporary setback- as things that happened when something big and new being set-up, when the course of history was being altered.

In spite of his reputation as a lover of Africa, he has a reverence for "everything connected with European colonization" (81). He visualizes true Africa as "dying or about to die" and as its last lucky witness seeks to collect and preserve its cultural artifacts. It is father Huismans who interprets to Salim the meaning of the two Latin motto of the lycee and reads the words of an ancient Roman writer who had written that out of Africa there was "always something new." The town soon sees itself westernised and modernised beyond its needs. Salim notices little enthusiasm in the Africans for newness brought

in society. Being suspicious of the unfamiliar things, the Africans are determined to destroy the new creations of the Bigman who wants to create modern Africa.

Salim's own feelings about the domain are mixed and difficult. While he knows that the inferior grandeur is a hoax, he cannot help envying Ferdinand for having access into the world of the domain. After Ferdinand has left for the polytechnic, Salim discovers that Metty has a family somewhere in town. He feels betrayed and his own loneliness makes him reflect on the desolation of the world where it is no longer possible to have a settled life. The situation in the town worsens. This time there is a lot of violence and bloodshed in the town itself. The external chaos puts a strain on Salim and Yvette's relationship, which finally ends up in a disgusting manner with Salim insulting Yvette. Salim leaves for England and gets engaged to Nazruddin's daughter. He decides to wind-up his business in the town and make a fresh beginning. On returning to the town however, he comes to know that his shop has been taken over by the state under the new policy of "radicalization." Citizen Theotime is the state trustee in charge of the shop and Salim has to become Theotime's manager. In his desperate attempt to get out of the place Salim is caught and put into prison, because he gets involved in the illegal Ivory trade. He is saved by Ferdinand, who turns out to be the new commissioner and arranges for his escape. Ferdinand's parting words to Salim summarizes Naipaul's vision of the world.

Through the rich array of characters, Naipaul is successful in delineating the complexities of modern life. Naipaul demonstrates his dexterity in his sensitive behavior of Ferdinand's character. Ferdinand represents the modern Africa who has been selected from busy life only to be placed in a more helpless position in the civilized jungle of the town, which provides unstable protection. The Big man, though not physically present, looms large in the big photographs put up everywhere. He is a typical example of the "Black man"

who has assumed the lies of white men. Through Indar and Salim, Naipaul portrays the plight of the displaced exiles, who have nowhere to go. Raymond and Yvette demonstrate that in the new dynamics of power, everyone is in a marginal position. Naipaul's views are expressed through the vision of Raymond. "We have no idea where the continent is going. We can only carry on" (115).

Naipaul's vision offers little hope to the third world societies that have been maimed beyond repair. However, through his depiction of London, he puts forward the view that displacement and alienation are a universal predicament in the post-war world and one must learn to live with this ultimate truth. Salim arrives at this portion of wisdom in his hard way of life and he decides to rejoin the world. It is clear that Naipaul holds that colonialism is totally responsible for their condition. Naipaul can see little good coming out of native liberation movements. Due to internal fractures in postcolonial societies, native liberation movement fails to play a positive role in the formation of an authentic third world consciousness. In none of his works therefore, does Naipaul offer collective action as a possible solution to the colonial condition. In Naipaul's vision the personality level is through self-decolonization that is by overcoming the colonial mentality of idleness and irresponsibility. Though Naipaul seems sympathetic to the African impulse to destroy all the physical reminders of the European presence, he makes it clear that destruction of surface features alone is not sufficient. Salim, with his acquired habit of self-appraisal knows where exactly he stands, and this insight makes him take the positive step of rejoining the world. Thus the novel concludes with Naipaul's failure to arrive at any positive conclusion about Africa, which according to him is a land of bush.

In this novel the situation further deteriorates as nihilistic forces unleash violence in all its extremities. There is total confusion and uncertainty, as no one knows what the Bigman's plans are. On the one hand he seeks to

modernize Africa and plans the Domain while on the other; he tries to revive age-old practices like the African worship of ancestors through the “cult of the mother.” The Liberation Army’s agenda is to exterminate everyone and everything that reminds them of the Europeans. Even Ferdinand, who is basically an African has anxieties and we realize that the hitch of power following independence has left everyone unsafe. Salim’s shop is taken over under the policy of radicalization and he manages to escape only because of Ferdinand’s help.

Naipaul’s novels throw illuminating light on the corrosive influence of colonial rule on the psyche of the colonized. The sense of insecurity that springs from the identity crisis leads to existential fears which result in psychosis. In Bigman’s case it leads to a nervous breakdown. The tainting influence of the colonial experience is visible even at the level of human relationships. Every relationship is experienced as a version of the colonial binary of domination, subordination and precludes intimacy. Even the most apolitical relationship, the one between the sexes, is grimy. The concept of identity in the later novels acquires fluidity and homelessness is begun to be viewed as a boon rather than a bane. The novel concludes with the terrifying thought that “nowhere is safe now.”

### **Works Cited**

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