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POST-COLONIALISM AND DARK VISION IN NAIPAUL'S "A BEND IN THE RIVER"

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ABSTRACT

*A Bend in the River* (1979)<sup>1</sup> gains much attention from postcolonial theorists. The post colonial future seen in *A Bend in the River* is bleak. The country seems stranded between a past it cannot return to and a future it cannot attain. There is no real leadership, and people seem incapable of creating something new. In *A Bend in the River* Naipaul treats a violated and colonial society with understanding and detachment. The writer depicts a society of third world countries which is marked by a shared experience, a past threatened by a dark age of colonialism and by the movement of freedom. The novel centers on the conflict between traditionalism and Westernism; this is the same dynamic that has generated many of the contradictions now characteristic of other post-colonial societies that manifest themselves in the clash between such categories as the modern and the traditional, the new and the old ways of life, and hence between Western and native cultures and values. V. S. Naipaul's represented *Africa in A Bend in the River* as dark and a place of horror while Achebe as an African writer represents true Africa. In timeless study of post-colonialism, it was observed that portrayal of hybrid Africa in *A bend in the River*.

Introduction

Colonialism has remained its effect even after its own time and brought political and social issues to the colonized side. The post-colonial period is a kind of process that caused many major alternations in Africa. One of the visible changes is the society itself. With the novelty of industrialization and the power, it sustained to the European people, societal racism manifested itself and ended up with a social genocide in Africa.

Vidiyadhar Surajprasad (VS) Naipaul, a 'Postcolonial Mandarin'<sup>2</sup>, like the sun piercing the prolonged darkness has emerged on the Britain's soil of colonial writing, as 'a prophet' of our 'world-historical moment', and has produced a luminous account of the most compelling literary works, of the last fifty years. He is Britain's the only living Nobel laureate (2001), in literature.

Engdahl, in his Presentation Speech for the 2001 Nobel Prize in Literature, said the following of Naipaul, "Naipaul is no worshipper of fantasy or utopia, no creator of alternative worlds. Dickens' ability to describe London with the open gaze and simplicity of a child is his declared ideal" ("Nobel Prizes").

Indeed, what Naipaul has successfully done is to paint for the reader a picture of a part of Africa that is so realistic that the reader is able to effortlessly detect the sense of futility in the novel, and the nihilistic trends that shape the country on the whole, and the existential nihilism which seems to be the preoccupation of the individuals featured in the novel. This realistic portrayal by Naipaul of Africa is reflected by Mohan in her book, *The Postcolonial Situation in the Novels of V.S. Naipaul*, in which views Naipaul's approach to *A Bend in the River* as a sympathetic gesture. "In *A Bend in the River*, there is a considerable difference in the treatment

of Africa. Not only is he more sympathetic but there is a sincere attempt on his part to analyse and arrive at an understanding of the problems that grip post-independence Africa"<sup>3</sup>

Naipaul's rearrangement of temporality through space, evident in his characters' experience of a postcolonial form of the urban uncanny, leads to a metaphysics of Postcoloniality whereby the terms "post" and "colonial" enter into a mutually haunting, as opposed to sequential, relationship, illustrating Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that in ex-colonial locales, "historical time is not integral . . . it is out of joint with itself" (16). The novel's uncanny chronotope, legible in its urban spaces, structures Naipaul's portrayal of postcolonial and post-imperial nations as well as his unique view on the meaning and utility of the marker of "post" in these two interconnected contexts.

### Post Colonial concept

*A Bend in the River* mainly illustrates alienation from the perspective of a solitary subjectivity in the postcolonial world. Exploring alienation in relation to the postcolonial concepts of displacement, migration, otherness and Diaspora, Naipaul's cultural critique and historical observations show that alienation has become a universal phenomenon in the world at large.

In his award winning novel *A Bend in the River* V. S. Naipaul tells the story of an Indian name Salim, a shopkeeper and a Muslim by caste. The novel is set in Zaire, currently in Democratic Republic of the Congo during the rule of Mebuto Seko in the late 1960s and 1970s. The novel takes such topics such as cultural independence of Africa and Europe, the influence of ideology and ethnicity on an individual's identity and a complexities of African nation-hood following independence from Belgium colonial rule, "The world is what it is; men who are nothing who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (BR, p.01). The novel grapples with weighty postcolonial themes in an undaunted manner for which Naipaul has been both praised and bitterly criticized. The novel starts in the colonized regions and days of Africa where novelist is aggressively perusing his way socially and financially. Tribe war terrorize and attempt to liberate Africa in every aspect. Africa is being broken and built again in a similar fashion to the antagonist. One can watch Africa lose its property value and the violence of war envelops the coastal region where the book is set.

The novel is symptomatic of many post-colonial themes like Eurocentrism, exile, displacement, cultural disintegration, neo-colonialism and the like. Naipaul's presentation of post-colonial Africa with its scenes of chaos, violence, warring tribes, ignorance, poverty reflects stereotyped images of a colonised. In this respect he seems to share the racist and Eurocentric vision of Conrad. Naipaul though claims to be an unbiased observer of Third World Countries yet he fails to stand by his claims and his Eurocentric inclination becomes evident in his negative portrayal of the Third World Countries. As Irwing Howe said in a *Times* review of in *A Bend in the River*(1979), 'Naipaul is 'Free of any romantic moonshine about the moral claims of primitives or the glories of blood stained dictators and without a trace of western condescension or nostalgia for colonialism."

*Bend in the River* has been analysed to find the post-colonial themes in it. The novel was published in the year 1979 and ranked 83 on its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century by the Modern Library in 1983. It is set in an unnamed African country and narrated by Salim, a young Indian Muslim shopkeeper of a small growing city in the country's remote interior. He is like Naipaul an observer and observes the changes occurring within the country with an outsider's perspective. He lives in Indian community of traders on the east coast of Africa. He too like Naipaul is born into exile and feels separated with his Indian ancestry.

French has observed that Naipaul criticised his own people in order to achieve his ambition. He states: "Naipaul's dismissal of his homeland became part of his persona, a persona he invented in order to realize his early ambition to escape the periphery for the centre, to leave the powerless for the powerful and to make himself a great writer"(French , xv)<sup>4</sup>.

Similarly Salim in the novel is found criticising his ancestors for not keeping the historical record of their life and important events in Africa. Salim complains:

We simply lived; we did what was expected of us, what we had seen in the previous generations do. We never asked why, we never recorded. We felt in our bones that we were a very old people but we seemed to have no means of gauging the passing of time. Neither my father nor grandfather could

put dates to their stories. Not because they had forgotten or were confused; the past was simply the past. (12)

Third World, colonialism and history are the three categories which govern Salim's Western-oriented narration: He says:

Of the whole period of upheaval in Africa- the expulsion of the Arabs, the expansion of the Europe, the parcelling out of the continent- that is the only family story I have. That was the sort of people we were. All that I know of our history and the history of the Indian Ocean I have got from the books written by Europeans. If I say that our Arabs in their time were great adventurers and writers; that our sailors gave the Mediterranean the lateen sail that made the discovery of the Americas possible; that an Indian pilot led Vasco da Gama from East Africa to Calicut; that the very word *cheque* was first used by our Persian merchants; if I say these things it is because I have got them from European books. They formed no part of our knowledge or pride. Without Europeans, I feel, all our past would have been washed away, like the scuff marks of fishermen on the beach outside our town. (13)

This shows a clear appreciation of the European basis of colonial education and the inability of the non-Westerner to write their own objective history. What Salim, and all Third World peoples, learn about themselves comes only through the European vision. This raises the question as to whether Salim's consciousness is European or Indian. Is not his conscious narration directed only to European readers? How does he come to have powers of political analysis? There is a replacement of literary questions by political and ideological issues: „I had heard it said on the coast- and foreigners I met here said it as well- that Africans didn't know how to live" (Naipaul 45).“ And when Salim is asked about the inventors of the new telephone, he associates scientists with white men and with Europeans and Americans who are „impartial up in the clouds, like good gods. We [Africans] waited for their blessings, and showed off those blessings –as I had shown off my cheap binoculars and my fancy camera to Ferdinand — As though we had been responsible for them" (Naipaul 50).“

Salim's existentialist thoughts and comments concerning his own experience and that of other's lead us through this pessimistic journey from one cycle of destruction to another. The political order falls apart around him and the only solution is emigration. All the characters Salim encounters confirm his observations and his hopeless conclusion. His physical relationship with Yvette, Raymond's wife, is one of those relationships which leave important traces in his life. Sex which he has only experienced with prostitutes becomes different with Yvette in that it leads him to discover new dimensions of himself: „Women make up half the world; and I thought I had reached the stage where there was nothing in a woman's nakedness to surprise me. But I felt now as if I was experiencing anew, and seeing a woman for the first time" (Naipaul 3).“ Significantly Yvette is European, not African; she is married to a man, Raymond, who loses his glamour, an event that leads her to move from one affair to another She comes with her husband to Africa expecting to find a new, exciting life, but she ends up beaten violently by Salim. She activates in him what he himself condemns as African rage. Their relationship is a metaphor for the relationship between Africa and Europe.

Naipaul's Africans are either obsessed with modernity and its technology, which they do not produce, or they totally reject whatever is new and unfamiliar to them. The contradiction between traditional culture, rooted in village life, and the seemingly modern Westernized city is appalling. Hence one can comprehend the recurrent thematic implications and images of mimicry and destruction: "the rage of the rebels [against the Belgians] was like a rage against metal, machinery, wires, everything that was not of the forest and Africa" (86). Africa, and the Third World, cannot, and will not, preserve their traditional values in the modern world. Instead, individuals and cultures tend to repudiate their traditional past and mimic the lives and cultures of their colonial masters. The novel centres on the conflict between traditionalism and Westernism; this is the same dynamic that has generated many of the contradictions now characteristic of other post-colonial societies that manifest themselves in the clash between such categories as the "modern" and the "traditional," the new and the old ways of life, and hence between Western and Native cultures and values. In response to the alienation from the colonial past and neo-colonial present, there are widespread efforts throughout the Third World at returning to and coming to terms with the past by revising it and renarrating it, since -- as Naipaul's narrator says -- "our history ... [we] have got from books written by Europeans" (11).

### The Concept Darkness

V. S Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* is published in 1979 in a post-colonial context. In the novel, we see the negative portrayal of Africa as a nation of violence and decadence. In this novel, Africa is being portrayed as a nation of failure. If we read the novel carefully we will see this negative representation of Africa throughout the novel.

Within Naipaul's oeuvre, *A Bend in the River* marks another move in the direction of an attention on the nature of evil and a greater reality in its representation. Dissimilar to some of Naipaul's earlier works of fiction that utilized the idea of mimicry to test the tragicomic failure of postcolonial island nations, including *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *Miguel Street* (1959), *A Bend in the River* offers an unremitting vision of human evil, unalleviated by silliness or incongruity. Distributed nearly two decades after his celebrated early work *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), *A Bend in the River* is the first of Naipaul's novels to offer an expansive, completely articulated, and unflinching treatment of his freshly discovered feeling of human vulnerability.

To understand the author's intentions in *A Bend in the River*, it is necessary to dive past the details of the plot and to appreciate the connotations of Naipaul's utilization of "civilization," the word that grounds each aspect of the novel. In his essay "The Universal Civilization," the 1990 Wriston Lecture displayed at the Manhattan Institute, Naipaul singled out the privilege to "the quest for happiness" from the American Declaration of Independence along with the Christian doctrine of "do unto others" as prominent components of what he meant by a redemptive universal civilization. Naipaul should have included in his definition the Declaration's other two rights, "life" and "freedom," and it is "life" in particular, that most fundamental of human rights, with which he is most worried in *A Bend in the River*. At the focal point of the novel is Naipaul's newly discovered grasp of the terrifying fragility of human presence in the absence of civilization and his deepening understanding of the implications for moral action that such awareness entails.

As a vehicle for exploring this awareness, Naipaul's decision of a helpless protagonist adrift in an unstable corner of central Africa was an inspired artistic choice. Cast into the political anarchy of a fictionalized central African republic, Salim finds his assumptions of individual autonomy challenged, especially as he grasps the likelihood of his own imminent downfall. Wherever he looks, Salim experiences the phantom of death. Significantly, in any case, it isn't just human mortality, death as the natural end of presence, that agitates him, yet another kind of death altogether. What this young fellow faces in the unraveling of socialized standards is the probability of a corrupt, absolutely banal end at the hands of an unfeeling minor official. Stripped of the most fundamental of human rights, he finds himself in the grip of a police state, and an unstable one at that, in which the execution of anyone caught in officialdom's net turns out to be absolutely a matter of routine.

Among Naipaul's finest novels, *A Bend in the River* most directly addresses this, perhaps the most important moral worry of our circumstances: the widespread failure to acknowledge and bolster opportunity and the govern of law with regards to an increasingly ideological origination of governmental issues and society. While tyranny has always threatened and frequently overpowered freedom, perhaps just in our opportunity has the assault on flexibility been so industriously and energetically carried out in the name of advance? While in a broader sense the tyranny of the cutting edge state may be seen as essentially a manifestation of the enduring issue of human evil, the individuals who guarantee a utopian future as an end-result of the loss of flexibility are especially dangerous because of the temptation of their appeal. What progressivism shares with the more blatant tyrannies of the past is the drive to secure control over countless at whatever cost to human happiness.

Writing what seems to be *A Bend in the River*, the narrator's revelation plays out in his perception of the winter mist and early darkness that imbue the river valley with an "absence of knowledge of where I was" (99). This turn from a romantic view of the landscape to a more complex one is consciously reflected into the narrator's book, as he transfers "all this uncertainty emanating from the valley . . . to my Africa," the literary Africa of *A Bend in the River* (99). The literature than once imposed its views on the landscape is now accepting the landscape's imprint, a reversal of the mechanisms of meaning-making that once determined how the narrator viewed the English countryside. Temporal and spatial disorder opens up not only new meanings, but also new ways of creating meaning. Where the land once merely affirmed the narrator's desire to link himself

to England, it now makes manifest his out-of-place existence. This new landscape-informed identity is not a negative one, though, as it inspires the narrator's art by forcing him to grapple with the truths of his own existence.

The links between this new identity and the hybridity present in *A Bend in the River* go further, as the ruins, *Bend's* true manifestation of the postcolonial picturesque, are equally as ubiquitous in the countryside of England. The editors of *Ruins of Modernity* describe "the reality of ruins [as something that] at least calls forth a constructive, "manly" rhetoric of looking into the abyss . . . and thus retroactively confer[s] some modicum of meaning" on to the ruin (5). The abyss is the above mentioned void, the realization of the inevitability of landscape-construction. Where Singh can only find the destruction of ideal landscapes as an inevitability, the narrator grasps a parallel inevitability in their (re)generation. Again remembering Jack, the narrator states "All around him was ruin; and all around, in a deeper way, was change, and a reminder of the brevity of the cycles of growth and creation" (93). Within the equation that links ruins to change, the aesthetics of hybridity arise. Bhabha's own mechanism for hybridity lends itself to an infinite cycle of hybrid formation, crystallization of the once-new idea, and then its annihilation at the hands of a new, nascent hybrid, a cycle of growth and stasis that the narrator experiences in the ruins of the countryside. His ability to focus on the generation and to accept the destruction as natural and beneficial allows the narrator to enjoy and sustain his ideal landscapes.

Naipaul's acknowledgment of the flagrant insecurity of life in the absence of the control of law was prodded by a frightening happenstance the prior year he began chip away at *A Bend in the River*. In his essay "Argentina and the Ghost of Eva Peron," the author introduces a clear account of his confinement by policemen in the northern Argentinian area of Jujuy. It was just his ownership of a distinctively shaped tobacco pipe that saved him from further detainment and conceivable execution: the pipe's odd appearance, more British than European and certainly not Argentinian, convinced local officials that Naipaul was in fact an outsider and so "por no interesar su detención."<sup>5</sup> Naipaul was released, however having come so near to torment if not death, he thought that it was difficult to finish the journalistic account of Argentina he had intended to compose. That same year he began take a shot at *A Bend in the River* and in this way, as he noted, "transferred . . . the feeling of Argentina, and even the isolated police building in the shrub of Jujuy, to my Central African setting."

Some idea of what Salim experiences can be gleaned from critic Michela Wrong's distinctive account of Mobutu's administer at the time, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo*. This was the period in which Mobutu attempted to transform the Congo into a revolutionary society of citizens and citizenesses demonstrated on various dictatorial administrations, including that of Mao Zedong. This was the strained phase in which, having rejected the remaining remnants of colonial administer, Mobutu drove his nation in a socialist trial in which a great part of the nation's private property was confiscated and redistributed by the state and, in this manner, the nation slipped into destitution and authoritarianism. In spite of the fact that not intended as a historical account in essence, and certainly not restricted to central Africa in its implications, *A Bend in the River* offers a detailed delineation of a similarly unraveling state in which individual lives are helpless before degenerate government employees who threaten the population with the president's assent. In Naipaul's fictionalized account, even the arrangement of river business, from time immemorial the primary means of circulation for nourishment and merchandise, is dispossessed as travel ends up unsafe. With the photograph of the president displayed all over, "getting greater and greater, and the quality of the prints finer" (168), the ruler attempts to administer by the power of his personality, yet failing that he soon falls back on unimportant power. Inevitably, this procedure is accompanied by a declining standard of living as assets are confiscated to prop up the administration.

All things considered, as several critics have noted<sup>6</sup>, the setting and delineation of African culture, including the business of the "Huge Man," the expat enclave, and the images of a rapidly disintegrating request, are not the primary worry of the novel. The moral spotlight is on what transpires within Salim himself. Everything in the book works toward the minute when Naipaul's Everyman grasps the reality of his vulnerable condition in the absence of cultivated run the show. Having lived with the indiscreet certainty of youth, his life focused on monetary gain and physical gratification, Salim is all of a sudden transformed by his acknowledgment of his own weakness and that of all men in absence of the redemptive structures of request



and conviction. All the rest is presently unimportant, including his disturbing and ultimately inconsequential affair with Yvette. Shockingly, Salim is unable to sustain the affectation of the meaningfulness of this intensely sensual relationship as conditions around him deteriorate. The affair closes abruptly as Yvette escapes the nation without notifying her sweetheart, proof of the shallowness of the relationship from her point of view as well.

The narrator shows corruption as a predominant feature of Africa. He talks of 'few more bank-notes', 'more of my tinned food' settle for 2 or 3 dollars instead of 21 or 3000 dollars. He depicts 'Africa' of chaos, bankruptcy, disruption, and frustration, and admits that: too many of the places on the way have closed down or are full of blood.... And then I had to talk even harder, and shed a few more bank-notes and give away more of my tinned food, to get myself--and the Peugeot--out of the places I had talked us into(p.3). The narrator's despair becomes quite prominent when he talks of the despair, the disillusionment which he experiences in Africa:

As I got deeper into Africa--the scrub, the desert, the rocky climb up to the mountains, the lakes, the rain in the afternoons, the mud and then, on the other, wetter side of the mountains, the fern forests and the gorilla forests....There can't be a new life of this(p.4).

Salim compares his journey in Africa with the strange journey of the slaves. He finds it similar to the experience they had and says that the more they got discouraged and frustrated with the journey they made on foot, and in the opposite direction, from the centre of the continent to the east coast, the more they became interested to accept their new life instead of running back home. Salim emphasizes the town-- *at the bend in the river*, which was more than half-destroyed. He shows that gradually as the Africans began coming back to the town, the demand went up and the business flourished. The narrator talks about Zabeth--one of her regular customers, and her difficult ordeal. For her Africa symbolised hard life--a real life which she did not want her son--Ferdinand to accept. She wanted him to be in association with the Narrator so as to learn the mannerisms of a foreigner. Naipaul throws light on the culture of the Africans. Selim as a narrator describes Africa as a country where they always drink wine; even the children are habituated in drinking wine:

Beer was part of people's food here; children drank it; people begun drinking from early in the morning. We had no local brewery, and a lot of the cargo brought up by the steamers was that weak lager the people here loved. . . . About women, the attitude was just as matter-of-fact. Shortly after I arrived my friend Mahesh told me that women slept with men whenever they were asked; a man could knock on any women door and sleep with her. . . . To Mahesh the sexual casualness was part of the chaos and corruption of the place (p.44).

The narrator talks of post-colonial Africa as a dead civilization. He highlights the devastated town which was at the corner of the river:

...; the streets had disappeared; vines and creepers had grown over broken, bleached walls of concrete or hollow clay brick.... The ruins, spreading over so many acres, seemed to speak of a final catastrophe. With its ruins and its deprivations Nazruddin's town was a ghost town (p.29-30).

In Africa, the Narrator talks of men who were considered to be prey--the victims made by other people, who were more powerful. The slaves made their entries into the house just like children--who screamed, stamped and sulked which was a usual site on the coast. He depicts Africa as a place where brutal killings was a common site. The bleeding arms and legs lying on the streets was a common site. It was as if a pack of dogs had got into a butcher's stall (p.36).

Furthermore, Naipaul has constantly refused to avoid unwelcome topics and has arisen much controversy because of his politically views. *A Bend in the River* is often criticized as negative and even accused by some Muslim readers of narrow and selective vision of Islam. Naipaul endures harsh criticism for the allegedly unsympathetic portrayal of the Third World since his writings compel the reader to see the presence of suppressed histories.

## CONCLUSION

Naipaul's 1970s novels describe a world in which people, especially those from the Third World, suffer from alienation, insecurity and rootlessness. The novel's final scene returns to what Naipaul asserted at the beginning of the journey, that "men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place

in [the world]" (3). The terror of Naipaul's flirtation with death in Argentina and his experience of and reflections on central Africa have come together in *A Bend in the River* to create a novel of great moral authority. *A Bend in the River* is not merely an indictment of African dictators and the corruption of Western intellectuals who enable and excuse their misrule but also a cautionary tale for those who would willfully reject the advantages of their own civilization. It is an evocation of the fragility of all human life and a plea for the recovery of the higher forms of civilization that comfort and console, and also restrain, men in the face of their own weakness. In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul achieves a brutally honest and insightful work of fiction and one of particular relevance for our time.

The concluding paragraphs of the novel amplify the horror of the jail scene in which Salim has at last recognized the extent of human vulnerability. In this horrific denouement, the terror of the provincial jail and its casual violence both as Naipaul imagined it in central Africa and as he experienced it in Argentina is amplified as Salim witnesses the slaughter of an entire bargeful of fellow human beings who are attempting to escape the violence just as he is. After the barge carrying hundreds of passengers caged "behind bars and wire-guards" separates from the steamer, gunshots ring out. Detached from the barge, the steamer carries Salim to safety but not before its searchlights reveal myriad numbers of insects—"moths and flying insects.....white in the white light" (278). With its suggestion of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which whiteness conveys the horror of unconstrained evil, the final lines of Naipaul's novel achieve a devastating recognition of moral vacuity and loss. Floating adrift, the fate of the barge victims evokes not just a single collapsed society but the potential collapse of the universal civilization everywhere at the hands of a myriad of assaults on order and faith.

Naipaul offers no intimations of expectation or signals of point of view. It may be that the reality he grapples with allows him nothing however dismalness of voice. There is a complicated literary-moral issue here that cannot be explained in a couple of sentences, if fathomed at all. A novelist has to be faithful to what he sees, and few see as well as Naipaul; yet one may ponder whether, in some final reckoning, a genuine author can essentially allow the wretchedness of his delineated scene to wind up the point of confinement of his vision. Such novelists as Dostoyevsky, Conrad and Turgenev, also dealing with painful aspects of political life, battled in some ways to "surmount" or "transcend" them. Naipaul appears to be at this moment to be an essayist beleaguered by his own particular realities, unable to move beyond them. That is without a doubt a honorable trouble, far superior to anything indulging in sentimental or ideological elevate; however it exacts a price.

Hence, *A Bend in the River* is a political comparison, then, between the Third World and; it is a political evaluation of newly independent states and their possibilities, and of the technology and culture that Naipaul uses to represent both civilizations.

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