



UPROOTED SELF-IDENTITY IN V.S.NAIPAUL'S A BEND IN THE RIVER

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Abstract:

V. S. Naipaul's fictionalized struggle to locate himself in terms of the 'others' seems to exemplify in suggesting both are possible mapping of a position and the inevitable undecidability of its outcomes. Naipaul is uniquely endowed to reflect upon bereavement. Indian by blood, Trinidadian by birth, Briton through his choice of home, and an exile through his experience and spirit, Naipaul is concerned with the loss of old dreams and old definitions, the loss of what formerly seemed to be guiding verities. A man of no single nation, his allegiances held in abeyance, he casts a dark and perceptively ironic eye on his varied worlds. He sees with awful clarity the doddering old and the brutally new. For him, the old world is a dream only vaguely, though poignantly recalled. V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* is a novel about postcolonial political and personal anxiety and about the effort to create an identity in a society whose form and history were provided by Europeans. The crisis of identity formation is seen in personal, economic, and political dimensions, from Salim's and Indar's "wild panic" to the economic rise and decline of the copper market to the Big Man's alternate imitations of European styles and his radical inventions of a mythical African past. The principal themes of *A Bend in the River* are reflected in the action, characters, and images of the novel. It therefore recalls themes of the journey within, of exile, of work, responsibility, and dependence, and of the necessary corruption of personal and sexual relationships in a corrupt political system.

Key Words: V. S. Naipaul, Self-Identity, Protagonist, Exile.

Uprooted Self-Identity in V. S. Naipaul's A Bend in the River:

Literature finds its place in the studies of youth and the affections of men and women by virtue of the fact that it is one of the fine arts. It ministers to none of men's material needs, does not increase their physical comfort, and is not valued primarily for the lessons it teaches or the information it conveys. Furthermore, its enjoyment is limited to no one person or group of the elect, but it is open to all who can understand, appreciate, and realize by experience. It is not enough that art in any form should merely reflect people and things as they pass. The personality, the impression, the mood of the artist, the background, and this human element must intervene between life and its imitation in order that we may have art; works of literature do not simply caused by their contexts. They have a productive effect in history.

Thus novels are read for their engagement with the empire and with the idea of secular democracy. But rather than read the novels only in terms of their politics, the book pays scrupulous attention to the poetics and aesthetics of representation, the deployment of the genre of self-writing for the novel, the novels' novelistic use of time, space, the emphasis on migration, diaspora, hybridity, home, homelessness, gender, caste, religion, and the use of language. It is the novel that has given to us the greatest number of awards, big royalties, global readership and acceptability. The development of Indian novel in English follows gradual progression from the initiative stage to the realistic to the psychological and then to the experimental stage.

Naipaul's choice of themes, his attitude to life around him, his belief in language and its communicative powers, his pre-occupation with social reality mark him as 'contemporary' rather than a 'modern' novelist. Naipaul's novels project a vision of the complex web of social and moral loyalties and obligations, sanctions and commitments to which an individual is born and against which he struggles to free himself. But at every turn, he meets with disappointments and frustration. He suffers badly from the tension between identification and alienation, between belonging and not belonging. There is snore of anguish than anger is Naipaul's observation on India and it had reflected greatly in his writings. In respect of themes, forms, techniques and language, V.S. Naipaul stands out as a novelist who has broken new grounds with admirable virtuosity and grace.

Naipaul's work is of utmost relevance in a world in which we are all in a sense smiles he has explores with great sensitivity the predicament of the exile- the pain of homelessness and loss of roots. His ruthless adherence to his own dark vision his refusal to pretend to an optimism he cannot feel gives a compelling persuasive power to his depressing fictional world. He has no comforting message only the break knowledge that in today's rapidly changing world the yearning for performance can never be more than an unfulfilled ache- "everyone is far from home". The exiles basic response to his condition is a search for identity; his writing is a process of self-discovery. Cut off from his home he uses words to rebuild the lost home in fictional terms.

Exile makes for total awareness. In Naipaul, it has meant a clear eyed assessment of his position as a writer. It has made him aware that he was using a form and a language, forged by one kind of society to depict a completely different society. He realized he would have to seek his own literacy tradition. The impetus behind his writing has been a kind of compulsion to understand his own situation; it is through his writings that he arrives at a vision of modern homelessness as product of historical forces, to an acceptance of his own homelessness as final and to a perception that his own plight was not singular but typical far postcolonial world. Naipaul's perception and anguish at his own displacement and rootlessness central to his creative talent. It has been the stimulus as well as subject of his work.

V. S. Naipaul's works are full of the ambivalent attitude toward postcolonial society and the former colonies. *A Bend in the River* (1979) testifies to what Naipaul describes "the great restlessness of our age," and discloses the sociopolitical turmoil of postcolonial condition of the country, which shows Naipaul's embarking on a mature phase of writing on contemporary colonial and postcolonial societies. The postcolonial reading of the novel is mainly from the perspective of Orientalism. *A Bend in the River* charts the picture of decolonization and its aftermath in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Though the place remains anonymous in the novel, the events that the novel refers to, make it obvious to the readers that the novel is set in post-independent Congo. The novel portrays characters from different strata of society struck in the newly decolonized world of Congo. The novel is narrated by Salim, an Indian Muslim shopkeeper, living in a small city. The story revolves around some of the important events in Salim's life projecting his identity crisis and inner conflicts due to the rapid changes that are taking place in his "homeland," Congo. Along with Salim and other characters' lives, the novel deals with the national issues in Congo and shows how the individual lives are affected by the economic and political changes in the country.

A Bend in the River is a novel about postcolonial political and personal anxiety and about the effort to create an identity in a society whose form and history were provided by Europeans. The crisis of identity formation is seen in personal, economic, and political dimensions, from Salim's and Indar's "wild panic" to the economic rise and decline of the copper market to the Big Man's alternate imitations of European styles and his radical inventions of a mythical African past. The principal themes of *A Bend in the River* are reflected in the action, characters, and images of the novel. It therefore recalls themes of the journey within, of exile, of work, responsibility, and dependence, and of the necessary corruption of personal and sexual relationships in a corrupt political system.

Like many of Naipaul's earlier novels, *A Bend in the River* is, about the exile's dilemma: the urge to depend on the past and the opposing need to reject it entirely and forge out of the fragments of present confusion a link with the momentum of history. In *A Bend in the River*, the identity is more complex than ever before. People in postcolonial societies are a hybrid of some sort, who is more of the Self or more of the other. This novel falls under the arena of postcolonial literature as it deals with the themes related to post colonialism.

A Bend in the River is a wonderful novel relating the story of human weakness and his power to survive and to retain his existence in a fictional paradigm. The literary significance, aesthetic appeal and political message of *A bend in the river*, irrespective of its geographic location in the 'margins' in terms of the world portrayal, depend as much on its authors own ideological location and conscious /unconscious intentions about the role and, purpose of their work, as on the nature, location and cultural orientation of reading and interpretive communities. In novels as in plays, characters vary all the way from extreme simplicity to extreme complexity. The more complex studies are likely to be more carefully worked out and more accurate, though they are not of necessity more attractive or more convincing. Simple characters fall more readily into stock types and suffer from the exaggerations common in types; while complex characters tend to preserve their individuality.

Almost as vital as the art of character portrayal is that of character grouping. Characters in novels do not stand alone and are not to be considered alone. Characteristics impress us more when they are apparent in various people in different strata of society. Frequently, a general unity of effect is obtained by presenting a considerable group of people all dominated by some common trait or tendency, though each one, true to his distinct personality, displays this in his own peculiar way. Thus, there may appear in one story a series of related studies in greed, ambition, or passion, displayed in diverse experiences in widely separated walks of life, yet combining in one harmonious impression upon the radius imagination. The protagonists of the novel are wanderers across continents in search of freedom and source of personal security as well. However, each one of them suffers humiliation of varying degrees intensity and finally ends up by entering into different kinds of bondage. They try to escape from disorder to order, from subservience to freedom, for misery to happiness but they always are frustrated in this search, and their aspirations are defeated.

The story takes place in a town at the bend of a great river in a newly-independent African nation and was narrated by an Arab-African man, Salim. Salim's family is of Indian descent and has lived on the eastern coast of Africa for generations. Aware of the country's growing unrest, Salim becomes unsure of the future of his family in that area. He buys a store in the interior of the country. The town is a natural market point by a bend in the river. There he works and waits for the town to rebuild from the destruction of the revolution. Salim begins dealing in gold and ivory and tries to get as much money as possible out of the country. He is caught with

ivory and jailed, because he will bribe the police. In jail, he is untouched, but he watches as boys who have been kidnapped from their villages are beaten and forced to memorize tributes to the President. The young man, he has watched over since childhood, bails him out. The young man has gone from a schoolboy to a government official with authority over the town.

The man tells Salim the country is in desperate turmoil and holds no safe place for him. He tells Salim to leave the next day. The family servant begs Salim to take him along, but he doesn't have a passport or visa. Salim gives him his car and tells him to lie low and wait for the unrest to end. The steamer Salim gets on is attacked, and when an attached barge full of people is cut loose, the people onboard are killed. The story ends with Salim on the steamer ship, sailing away in the dark. The meticulous, minute account of ceremonies in the first part of the book brings out what is at stake when this society is threatened by change, and could not be further from the dark pagan mysteries, the primitive chaos, of European myth and stereotype concerning Africa. The crisis of identity acquires cosmic proportion in this novel.

Salim in *A Bend in the River* is the well-defined protagonist of the novel. He weighs and assesses his various worlds. Yet Salim's voice, as that of the first person autobiographical narrator, is finally sympathetic and reductive. He is one of them. The adventurous son of a business and slave-owning family of considerable importance and antiquity on the east coast, he finally admits to Metty, his slave-servant, that he is scarcely able to take care of himself leave alone be responsible for him. His humiliations resolve themselves into a philosophical understanding of men. The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow they to become nothing, have no place in it. (BR 3)

Salim, the narrator-protagonist, is a 'voluntary exile' who calls himself a Muslim of Indian origin. But both culturally as well as religiously, he is completely alienated and does not belong to anywhere or to anyone. He does not have any national identity either, except that of a migrant who feels like a total outsider in the postcolonial environment he is in'. "With no family, no flag, no fetish," *A Bend In The River* focusing on the lives and problems of migrants and exiles, rather than the natives, in a world of increasing ethnic intolerance and persecution, reflects a perspective more akin to the colonizers than to their victims. This novel portrays life in a very poor, economically backward and plundered African ex-colony, from the perspective of an sympathetic and persecuted 'outsider', written by an author who grew up in another former colony (India) but who has earned his living and made his literary reputation while residing in the colonial center (London).

Naipaul defines the motivation behind these realities as 'self-cherishing' or 'self-regard': the understanding of the self and the other in terms of power, possession and superiority rather than equality. The objective world of political and societal reality, as a think in itself, does not exist in this novel. It is real and meaningful only in so far as it impinges on the experiential awareness of the character and forms the stuff of his subjective existence. Objective reality, mingled with the past and present, with aspiration and fantasy, is distorted and made bizarre. If choice is the core of true existence there does not seem much to choose between. At least the material world (money and automatic living) provides a foothold for survival for people who have exhausted their resources and know their limits. Transcontinental and international travel ends in repeated journeys. For Salim, the decisive car rides are between his shop and flat and the residences of the various people with whom, out of his needs, he establishes ties, particularly with Yvette at the Domain. Heightened subjectivity, expanding the consciousness, has narrowed the scope of existence. Freedom is in conflict with security. In the end, we couldn't say where we stood. We stood for ourselves. We all had to survive. But because we felt our lives to be fluid we all felt isolated, and we no longer felt accountable to anyone or anything. (BR 68)

Salim has grown up with ideas of societal and social reality which have no base in personal experience. And his failing is also the failing of his society. His secure childhood gives him an expansive personality itching for adventure and success. His too secure future, planned and organized by his elders, instigates him into rebel action given the necessary encouragement by Nazruddin, in this way the narrator preserves the unity of the narrative, literal and literary, to give us a multi-level picture of the horror, chaos and disorder of the town.

The idiom is consistently Salim's, its alteration of tone and texture coinciding with the growth of his awareness. He himself admits that contact with Yvette has changed his manner of seeing and expressing. The narrator does not intrude, comment or present any contrary evidence to that of Salim. All important events and personalities are seen, analyzed, categorized and philosophized by him alone. This conjunction of action and thought, stated in the beginning by Salim himself as a childhood habit, characterizes the movement of the narrative giving it coherence, unity and a sense of purpose as well as rhythm. It also enacts Salim's own final act of purpose as well as rhythm. It also enacts Salim's own final act of withdrawal from the world in shame and self-castigation. Unreflected, impulsive action leads to his search for adventure as reflection leads to withdrawal and inaction. Investing the world with him has led to pain. Now he wishes to see the world uninvited with the self and so his double vision, a childhood trait, matures. It explains pain and despair but discourages creative participation. All the richness of his experience has resulted only in self-doubt and he becomes incapable of acting and is only acted upon yet through this disturbing change is visible the truth of Ralph Singh's comment that personality, like the narrative, is 'one and indivisible.

The narrator thus refines himself away by depicting a small world as the largest reality of Salim. Naipaul, by arbitrarily dividing the narrative—disturbing its flow—into sections, titled after significant events, a place which represents a contemporary cultural complex and an important man whose dominance in contemporary politics cannot be overlooked—presents Salim's despair as partially illusory and self-created. These events, places and people have remained unreal, being only marginally present in Salim's consciousness, never becoming a contrary balancing reality. By placing Salim's world in the context of one he had ignored, Naipaul creates the ironic context. Salim's world, multiple though it is, is viewed by him in its sameness not its difference, in its ultimate not its relative value. For all his seeming sophistication he remains the 'island innocent'. Distanced, the despair would have been less pervasive for he would have been conscious of material reality as subject to a particular time and place.

To Salim, Indar represents the contrary vision, something to aspire to, something that makes him feel small. But from Kareisha he learns that Indar, like any other 'innocent' from the third world made a faith out of ideas and tried to live up to it only to fail. Treated like an outsider, a superfluous person, by the West, he thinks of going home. Ultimately he has returned to where he began, seeking comfort in old ways of feeling, living a truly invisible life, not wanted where he was and having trampled on his past, having no place to return to:

That illumination I held on to, about the unity of experience and the illusion of pain, was part of the same way of feeling We fell into it—people like Indar and myself—because it was the basis of our old way of life. But I had rejected that way of life—and just in time... There could be no going back; there was nothing to go back to. We had become what the world outside had made us; we had to live in the world as it existed. The younger Indar was wiser. (BR 261-62)

The narrator of *A Bend in the River* submerges us immediately into the personal reality of Salim where we see these links being broken, forged and reforged continually as he orients himself to the present, accompanied by all the horror that unbearable pain, whether real or imagined, arouses. Salim is the victim of society but for different reasons. We see him struggling to free himself from the grip of a meaningless society which subsists on archaic ideas through which contemporary existence continues to be viewed and lived removed from present reality and an assumed past. Like the hunter he struggles through the jungle of the historical past, travelling backwards in time reversing the route the slaves took from the centre to the coast of Africa.

Simultaneously in his ancestor's otherwise gory history of slave trade, he discovers the sources of adventure power and romance. He journeys through these imaginatively elevating regions in his stay in the town which remains unreal because unknown by him and with which he develops no real sympathy. It is this failure of sympathy with the land the present which as the antagonist and the more powerful of the two strips him of historical and imaginative life to leave him to face his own hollowness and vulnerability, dependent on others for his survival. His life he owes to Ferdinand. His bruised and battered dignity is entrusted to Nazruddin and Kareisha to be restored. Though he has travelled far literally and literarily, he has moved only a short distance seemingly in a circle back to the stability of an inherited order he had tried to escape when he left the coast: back to the security of an arranged marriage and a business partnership with Nazruddin secure in his personal manhood having discarded all his acquired notions and liabilities as he leaves the town finally on his outward journey. His future with Kareisha promises romance as he has developed a personal relationship with her and he is now Nazruddin's equal whom all his life he has viewed as a superior.

The consternation that Salim exhibits when he finally arrives at the bend in the river reflects the same problem. Before he leaves the coast, he hears that "Nazruddin's adopted country" (presumably the Congo) has won its independence (presumably from Belgium) (BR 22). In other words, the Africans he so much dreads are now in charge of the region. Yet he soldiers on. He is overwhelmed by the alluring stories he has heard from Nazruddin about the wines, the restaurants, and the food available at the European town located at the bend in the river (BR 25). Therefore, when he discovers that the Europeans have abandoned the town—that Africans have taken it over, that the town is in ruins, that it has been looted, and that it is overrun by bushes—he is thunderstruck. He sees the event as Africa's final return to its erstwhile barbarism (BR 27).

A Bend in the River is a problematic novel, in part, because it overlooks or otherwise fails to underscore that important aspect of African reality, despite the fact that it sets for itself the objective of accounting for Africa's origins and destiny. Throughout the book, we are not allowed to break beyond the ideological boundaries of Salim's conviction that the African is *inherently* incapable of surmounting the crises that bedevil his environment in his post-independence era.

Naipaul could have solved that problem by including characters in the novel who would have conceptualized Africa from alternative points of view and given them equally important roles in the novel. In that respect, he would have brought Salim into contact with a character who would have pressured him to re-evaluate his simplistic perception of Africa and to respond to it accordingly. But Naipaul does not do so; we are introduced to Salim's biased mind with the first words he utters, and we are confined within that problematic frame of reference throughout the book. We are expected to receive Salim's prejudiced views regarding Africa as the most appropriate explanation behind Africa's crises.

But the most important point to note from Salim's appropriation of Eurocentrism, however, is the role he plays as a medium through whom Naipaul himself, as the author of the book, expresses his own prejudices toward Africa. As it will become clearer from the following examples of observers who have closely followed Naipaul's cultural, personal, and intellectual background in relation to his creative work, there are parallels in his thinking and Salim's that show that he intended Salim to serve, for the most part, primarily as a conduit for his own theoretical position on Africa. Thus, the identity of self and the nation becomes ruined because of political power and the actions of political authorities. The lives of people get affected unnaturally by making them fall into the trap of discontentment and lose their own self identity.

Conclusion:

All the themes of *A Bend in the River* which build up a picture of despair and social breakdown are dramatized by the dual consciousness of the narrator: alienation from society and from self- from the important world. Naipaul presented to us young people with all the promise of a fulfilling creative life turning sour for, in whichever direction they turn they discover their dreams to be insubstantial. In turning away they broke their connection with a known though unrealized world; now there is no social reference and therefore there is no cause to fight for. Continued existential fear has destroyed their will, and has led to the self-destroying security of habitual behavior. In this novel, Naipaul has meditated on the meaning of existential despair in terms of the third world. Existential despair without the 'leap of faith' has been the lot of third world people who have been influenced by the pseudo-existentialist living which characterizes the marginal men of the West, who, rejects from their own society, set up their flags in remote regions among the 'innocents' of simple cultures. The colonizer, along with handing over political power to the colonized has handed over his despair with it without the means of retreat assured to the secure of the world.

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