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Post Colonial World in V S Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*

Abstract: The present article presents the irony of freedom in the post-colonial Africa with special reference to V S Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River*. It also illustrates Naipaul's Eurocentric inclination. Naipaul, a Caribbean of Indian decent although shares a long colonial past of India and Caribbean, fails to share the ethos and sufferings of a colonised and seems to be mouthpiece of Europeans .The current articles highlights the colonised psyche of Naipaul who through the central character of Salim shows his fondness for the Europeans and their culture and looks down upon the Africans and the Arabs. He supports colonialism and even promotes his imperialist views by glorifying slavery. Both Naipaul and Salim seem to be victims of colonial psychosis.

Keywords: Colonisation, Eurocentric, Exile, Displacement, Mimicry,

As has been rightly said by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in the introduction to their seminal book, *The Empire Writes Back*, that about 'More than three-quarters of the people living in the world have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism,' speaks volumes about the overarching impact of colonialism on people all over. V S Naipaul, a postcolonial British writer of Indo-Caribbean origin too has had his life shaped by the experience of colonialism and its immediate as well as its aftermath can be easily seen on him and on his writings.

Owing to his long association with British colonialism since his birth, the colonial psyche plays an important role in shaping his vision which is mostly Eurocentric. Edward Said charges Naipaul of being Eurocentric and informer of the west. He opines that Naipaul has 'allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the western prosecution' (Said, "Intellectuals...", 53). Naipaul seems to suffer from exile, rootlessness, identity crisis and alienation. His novels depict the legacy of British Empire's colonialism and abound in postcolonial themes like displacement, exile, Eurocentrism, mimicry, ambivalence, hybridity, neo-colonialism, and the like.

A 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.

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.’”

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).

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)

Salim expresses his indebtedness and gratitude towards the Europeans for writing the Arabs’s history and letting them know of their glorious past. 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)

Salim like Naipaul does not nurture a sympathetic outlook towards the third world people. Slavery a heinous act which seized all kinds of freedom and reduced human to the stature of mere commodities has been glorified by Naipaul. He says that slavery provided a sort of protection and security to native Africans from other African people and therefore the slaves deliberately wanted to remain slaves even when it was outlawed by the Europeans: To an African, a child of the forest, who had marched down hundreds of miles from the interior and was far from his village and tribe, the protection of a foreign family was preferable to being alone among strange and unfriendly Africans. This was one reason why the trade went on long after it had been outlawed by the European powers; and why at the time when the Europeans were dealing in one kind of rubber, my grandfather could still occasionally deal in another. This was also the reason why a secret slavery continued on the coast until the other day. The slaves, or the people who might be considered slaves, wanted to remain as they were. (14)

He further states that the slaves of east coast who were sent to Arab homes enjoyed their status of a slave and were treated just like family by their Arab masters. He says:

The slavery of the east coast was not like the slavery of the west coast. No one was shipped off to plantations. Most of the people who left our coast went to Arabian homes as domestic servants. Some became members of the family they had joined; a few became powerful in

their own rights.(14)

Salim mentions another example of a slave family who resides in Salim's family compound. He tries to show that these people of slave's family were very eager to be taken as slaves to other countries and have been waiting for that. In addition, they as Salim states, 'wanted it to be known –to other Africans, and to poor Arabs and Indians- that they were really slaves' in order to show 'their special connection with a family of repute'. (15)

Naipaul has also mentioned about racial mixing or hybridity which is a chief feature of post colonialism. Often when people from two different races came in contact during colonization, there was racial mixing. This racial mixing of blood also took place when the slaves from Africa went to Arabian countries and married their masters or the reverse when the Arabs came to Africa and married the African women. The hybridity dissolved the hierarchical purity of culture and led to transculturation to such an extent that the hybrid Arabs in Africa could no longer retain their ancestral identity of royal blood and almost became African. This could be well noted when Salim speaks of both the servants Mustafa and Metty who resided in his family compound:

The people in our servant houses were no longer pure African. It wasn't acknowledged by the family, but somewhere along the line, or at many places along the line, the blood of Asia had been added to those people. Mustafa had the blood of Gujarat in his veins; so had Metty, the boy who later came to all the way across the continent to join me. This, though, was a transferring of blood from master to slave. With the Arabs on our coast the process had worked the other way. The slaves had swamped the masters; the Arabian race of the master had virtually disappeared.(16)

Salim explains that how the racial inter mixing of blood has exterminated the Arabs of their royal and chivalrous traits and reduced them to mere external resemblance to their primitives. 'They forgot who they were and where they had come from. They only knew that

they were Muslims; and in the Muslim way they needed wives and more wives.’(16)

Salim confesses that he got his vision to look at his community people from the Europeans. He states that the depiction of Arab Dhows in the British postage stamp being stated as the most striking thing about Arabs made him change his perception for Arab and realised him of his inferior and backward status as compared to the modern cargos of the British. He says:

Small things can start off in new ways of thinking, and I was started off by the postage stamps of our area. The British administration gave us some beautiful stamps. These stamps depicted local scenes and local things; there was one called ‘Arab Dhow’. It was as though, in those stamps, a foreigner had said, ‘This is what is most striking about this place.’ Without that stamp of the dhow I might have taken the dhows for granted. As it was, I learned to look at them. Whenever I saw them tied up at the waterfront I thought of them as something peculiar to region, quaint, something for the foreigners would remark on, something not quite modern, and certainly nothing like the liners and cargo ships that berthed in their own modern docks.(17)

The European perception of the Arabs disturbed Salim’s perception of the self and other Arab man and he realised that as a community they had fallen behind and that gave rise to insecurities in him. The insecurities which he faced were also experienced by Indar his Indian friend. The diasporic people feel alienated with their new place due to colonial domination. They fail to identify themselves with the people of the new place and suffered from rootlessness and alienation. They feel weak for not having a flag of their own. Indar’s remark clearly reflects his insecurities. While Indar decides to overcome them by moving to England, Salim moves to a town at the bend of the river.

The post-colonial country at the bend of the river had been taken up by the native top men who were no better than the European colonizers whom Fanon calls, the ‘compradors’

the elite class who were native from look and European from mind . Fanon calls them the ‘Black skin white mask’. These top men had replaced the Europeans in the exploitation task. So as Salim makes his journey towards the center, he had to bribe these top men on the way.

When Salim arrives, he finds the town destroyed in the tribal war. He is disappointed to see the ruins speak of “The depth of that African rage, the wish to destroy, regardless of the consequences.”(32).He gets disturbed to see the ruined suburb near the rapids, valuable real estate and being reclaimed by the bush. In the midst of ruins, which looked like dead civilization, he feels like “.....a ghost, not from the past, but from the future.” (32)

Soon the second rebellion springs and the town in the bend of the river is destroyed as it reminded of “the intruders who had ruled in it and formed it....” (32). As result of the nativism, the post colonial Africa recedes back to its primitive state of dead civilisation. Salim remarks:

Sun and rain and bush had made the site look old, like the site of dead civilization. The ruins, spreading over so many acres, seemed to speak of a final catastrophe, but the civilization wasn’t dead, it was the civilization I existed in and in fact was still working towards. And that could make for an odd feeling: to be among the ruins wasto have your time-sense unsettled.(30)

Naipaul’s own ambivalent nature is depicted in the African’s ambivalence towards the Europeans and non-Africans. They are shown to hate and love the exotic non-Africans simultaneously. At times they feel so hateful and furious for the non-Africans that they are unable to bear their presence in their place. They become intolerant and want to persecute them mercilessly but secretly admire the Europeans and even long for them. They want their children to have better future for which they entrust the Europeans. Zabeth, a tribal merchant wants her son Ferdinand to acquire education and have a better life so she gets him admitted to the local lychee run by father Huismans. She even wants Salim to teach his son the

European manners and ways of outside world. Salim reveals, 'It was also because I was a foreigner, and English speaking as well, someone from whom Ferdinand could learn manners and the ways of the outside world. I was someone with whom Ferdinand could practise. (41)

The white mercenaries appear and restore order in Africa soon after the break down. After peace has returned Father Huismans goes on a trip. He is killed by unknown assailants and nobody cares. Soon there is lot of development under the new president's rule who tries to boast of power and his plan to bring tremendous development in Africa as has never been seen everywhere. As reported by Salim, "He was creating modern Africa. He was creating a miracle that would astound the rest of the world. He was by-passing real Africa, the difficult Africa of bush and villages, and creating something that would match anything that existed in other countries" (100).

The "Big Man" turns out to be a mere imitator, a mimic man. He does seem to have any thought of his own. He plans to build the New Domain; a place for educating the African youth by European teachers by mimicking Europe and transforming Africa into Europe. He makes the New Domain with all its modern luxurious buildings, a European model with Western values, but all his vision of a Europe in Africa turns out to be a 'hoax'. He becomes a dependent personality and all his plans for the development dependent on the Europeans. As Boxil states The Domain, however, is a hoax. Moreover, the president maintains his power by means of European airplanes, and by posting gigantic photographs of himself, printed in Europe. European experts rebuild the destroyed town and even European mercenaries suppress the rebellion (Boxil 74). That is to say, without Europe, the "Big Man" and Africa would not be able to survive.

Although he claims to have an independent state, he is dependent upon European advisers and experts. When the "Big Man" nationalises the businesses of foreigners, he delivers them to his supporters, not to the people. What Theo Time, to whom Salim's store is

delivered, says is both pathetic and particularly significant:

The revolution had become ... [a] little rotten. Our young people were becoming impatient. It was necessary ... to radicalize. We had absolutely to radicalize. We were expecting too much of the President. No one was willing to take responsibility. Now responsibility has been forced on the people (256).

As has already been said, the “Big Man” soon converts the new domain into a university and conference center. Salim is visited by Indar who grew up with him on the East coast, then went to England to study and now has become a lecturer at the new institution. He takes Salim to a party in the Domain to meet Yvette and Raymond. Raymond had been the advisor and mentor of the President. Although in charge of the Domain, he finds himself now outside of the center of power. Loyal to the President, he continues to write for him hoping to be recalled to the capital. The “Big Man” fails to establish his power, soon another civil war breaks out. Salim plans to escape fearing threat to his life.

The novel *A Bend in the River* reflects the Eurocentric vision of Naipaul. Through the character of Salim he reinforces the colonial ideologies. He depicts the African people as mimic man, lacking free thinking. Their act of nativism instead of uplifting them brings them back to their primitive stage. Through the character of “Big Man”, Naipaul shows that the African lack any individual thinking and are only capable of only mimicking the Europeans. The Africans are depicted as the dependent personalities. Even the ‘Big Man’ is a dependent person. Instead of taking the country to new heights by following the path of self-reliance, he seems to make them a dependent people. Salim is shown as an outsider, who although has spent quite a long time in Africa but still remains alien to it. He does participate in any of the tribal wars and maintains a neutral stance. Naipaul seems to support colonialism and promotes his imperialist views by glorifying slavery.

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