

POST- COLONIAL PERSPECTIVES IN V.S. NAIPAUL'S *A BEND IN THE RIVER*

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Abstract

*Naipaul's fictional world is located in the inter-play of realistic external situations and personal lives. Naipaul writes about democracy, freedom and independence in an ironic mould. His people live in the Free State, trying to escape from tyranny; they expose themselves to a situation more insidious than the tyranny. In this context, freedom becomes a progressive illusion. Naipaul presents his view of history as a complex interaction between the individual and circumstances, the collective slave and the separate individual, the exploiter and the exploited, and slavery and colonialism. Naipaul seems to believe that the redemptive action of free man is possible out of the disturbance unrest. He has become a controversial figure for writing about the half-made societies of the post-colonial world. In *A Bend in the River* (1979) 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.*

Key Words: *Insidious, Slavery, Colonialism, Post-Colonial, contradictions.*

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Colonialism is acquisition and colonization by a nation of other territories and their peoples which is as old as society. The term took on a more specific meaning in the late nineteenth century when colonists saw it as the extension of civilization from Europe to the inferior peoples of 'backward' societies. Typical aspects of colonialism include: racial and cultural inequality between ruling and subject people, political and legal domination by the imperial power, and exploitation of the subject people. Although independence from former colonization has been achieved almost everywhere, accept that it has been replaced by neo-colonialism: the policy and practice of a strong power extending its control territorially over a weaker nation of people.

The beginning of the process of decolonization reflected a changed power relationship between colonial powers and colonial nationalist movements, which arose to assert national self-determination and challenged traditional imperial hegemony. The era of European decolonization is generally held to run from the creation of an independent India, Pakistan, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Burma (renamed Myanmar in 1989), Indonesia in the late 1940s, South Africa 1994, China of Hong Kong 1997 and Macaul 1999. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Postcolonial theory is merging with cultural theories of globalization, with the metropolitan emphasis coming frankly to the fore. A book riding the wave is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000). By and large, the main themes of postcolonial literature divide themselves between the experience and legacy of colonialism and the experience of migrancy and exile.

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to a situation more insidious than the tyranny. In this context, freedom becomes a progressive illusion. Naipaul presents his view of history as a complex interaction between the individual and circumstances, the collective slave and the separate individual, the exploiter and the exploited, and slavery and colonialism. Naipaul seems to believe that the redemptive action of free man is possible out of the disturbance unrest. He has become a controversial figure for writing about the half-made societies of the post-colonial world.

In *A Bend in the River* (1979) 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.

In fact, it is undoubtedly difficult to understand V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* without having a kind of historical perspectives through which the critic reader can comprehend, not to say analyze, the sociology of the novel. Some critics consider Naipaul to be a spokesman for a new form of colonialism, i.e., neo-colonialism. The common factor of both colonialism and neo-colonialism, as constituents of imperialism, is the presumption of the superiority of the white/Western colonialist over the black/ Native colonialized, and the right of the former to oppress the latter, whose role is only reaffirming the superiority of the former. In *A Bend in the River* for example, black Africans cannot govern themselves and will never be able to.

A Bend in the River is set in an unnamed newly independent African state governed by dictator, the "Big Man" who claims to have brought peace and social justice by combining nationalist feelings with the nationalization of property belonging to foreigners. The setting is undoubtedly intended to be both metaphorical and realistic:

'The namelessness of the country makes it stand for most of the Third World countries which are faced with the dilemma of choosing between their present and their traditional past.' (Bruce 4)

However, the fact that the country is Francophonic, and there are similarities between the Big Man and President Mobutu, makes it easy to associate the country with Zaire.

It is, then Zaire to which we are taken, and which becomes a representative of the contemporary post-colonial Africa after the disintegration of colonial order. Political and social disorder, frequently turning to chaos, is for Naipaul the unavoidable product of contemporary liberation movements. From the very beginning we are told that ‘the country, like others in Africa, had had its troubles after independence,’ (Naipaul 3) and that ‘too many of the places on the way have closed down or are full of blood.’ (Naipaul 3) It is a chaotic, ambiguous world; hence we do not know, in the beginning, to whom the narrator is speaking.

The world we are confronted with is both fictitious and realistic, a world that is not responsible for the destruction of order in Africa. Rather, according to Naipaul, the individual Africans are responsible for the tragedy in their lives. Although the colonial system is the major reason for the backwardness in the old colonial countries, this responsibility is rejected from the beginning of the novel. The opening, with its anti-evolutionary dimension, summarizes the whole existential philosophy controlling the novel: ‘The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.’ (Naipaul 3)

From its inception, Naipaul’s novel suggests that Africans are nothing, and allow themselves to become nothing; they have no place in the world. 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 walls still stood.....all the fittings had been destroyed. 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.’ (Naipaul 91)

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 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. 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- Naipaul's narrator says, 'If it was Europe that gave us on the coast some idea of our history, it was Europe, I feel, that also introduced us to the lie.' ' (Naipaul 19) Breaking with the past, the Big Man mimics a political career, imitating the display of power he sees in the West:

'But he always made a point of sending me his regards, of having some official come to ask how I was getting on. He needs a model in everything, and I believe he heard that de Gaule used to send personal regards to the wives of his political enemies' (Naipaul 120).'

Of course, the Big Man never understands the theoretical nature of French politics. It is not something that has been produced in his own culture: he can only mimic the external gestures of political life which are alien to the African experience. Naipaul's narrator says:

'We began to understand that what the President was attempting was so stupendous in his own eyes that even he would not have wanted to proclaim it. 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' (Naipaul 116).'

By mimicking Europe and trying to bring it to Africa, the Big Man decides to build the New Domain; a place for educating the African youth by European teachers. The Domain becomes, with its modern luxurious buildings, a European model with Western values. We are told that what the Big Man was building was meant to be grander. But this "miracle" falls into ruin. The reason is explained by the narrator:

'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 and write; you leveled the bush and build a polytechnic and you sent him there. It seemed as easy as that, if you came late to the world and found readymade those things that other countries and peoples had taken so long to arrive at- writing, printing, universities, books, knowledge' (Naipaul 118).'

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.

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

'Of that whole period of upheaval in Africa-the expulsion of the Arabs, the expansion of 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 books written by Europeans... 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. There was a stockade on this beach .the walls werelike a rare piece of history' (Naipaul 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).'

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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