



The Colonial Trauma in the Travel Writer V. S. Naipaul's

A Bend in the River

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Abstract

A Bend in the River (1979) is one of the classical works written by V. S. Naipaul, the 2001 Nobel Prize Winner in literature. In this paper, a textual approach will be used to illustrate the colonial trauma by observing the process of the acculturation of the characters in *A Bend in the River*. The characters' behaviors and emotions will be analyzed as they face the European influence. Acculturation is a terminology used in the field of anthropology to stand for the cultural change and adaptation as a tribal society encounters the west civilization. The colonial trauma, like the sense of loss and rootless, the anxiety, and the dislocation of identity, reflects the dilemma of primitive and colonial residents. *A Bend in the River* serves as a spokesman for the natives and colonial people. It portrays Naipaul's universal pan-human concern beyond races, geographical barriers, and time and space.

Keywords: V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, colonial trauma, acculturation



旅行文學作家奈波爾《大河灣》的殖民創傷

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摘要

《大河灣》是2001年諾貝爾文學獎得主奈波爾的經典作品，該小說講述著非洲在殖民政府的搜括下，歷史動亂、社會崩離的故事。非洲部落間混戰、權力爭奪帶來腐敗，非洲人被外部強加而來的歐美文化倉促送進現代世界，急劇的變化帶給非洲人茫然無措的焦慮感，非洲人在涵化過程中的產生了厭鄉情結、無家感、認同錯置等的殖民創傷。涵化是人類學研究之專業術語，指兩個社會由於接觸而造成的文化變遷，它常用來指涉從屬的部落社會對於居於支配地位的西方社會的適應。本論文將由殖民社會的涵化過程，探討及分析小說文本中小說人物與非洲社會面對西方文明衝擊及國家動盪不安的行為及情緒。由奈波爾的鋪陳刻劃，小說人物表現出的失根及失落心理，彰顯原始民族及殖民地住民矛盾的情結。《大河灣》中殖民創傷充份表達了原始民族及殖民地住民所處的兩難情境，反映後殖民的精神困厄，呈現出作者超越種族、國界及時空的人性關懷。

關鍵詞：奈保爾、《大河灣》、殖民創傷、涵化





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1. Introduction

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is the 2001 Nobel Prize Winner in literature. His novel *A Bend in the River* was published in 1979. Naipaul was born on the seventeenth of August in 1932 in Chaguanas, Trinidad to a correspondent for the *Trinidad Guardian*. The family moved to the capital, Port of Spain, when he was six. He studied at Queen's Royal College and he won a scholarship to Oxford in 1950. After graduation, he lived in London and worked as a broadcaster for the BBC's *Caribbean Voices*. In 1961, he received a grant and began to travel in India, South-America, Arica, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and the U.S.A. After his long journey, he wrote *A Bend in the River*.

A Bend in the River is set in an unnamed African country after independence and the story is narrated by the protagonist Salim. He is an Indian Muslim trader from the East Coast of Africa. He runs a shop at the bend in the river to make his fortune. Through his eyes, the reader is informed of the transformation of Africa from a colonial society into a chaotic continent ruled by the Big Man.

2. Literature Review and Method

V. S. Naipaul is controversial in some aspects regarding his negative and pessimistic attitude towards Africans and Muslims. Postcolonial theorist Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism*, criticizes Naipaul's views about the Third World. Said declares that



Naipaul allows himself consciously to be a witness for the Western prosecution. Besides, Paul Theroux and Derek Walcott declares that Naipaul is melancholic and his works are full of darkness and depression. S. Rushdie claims that there is no passion and love in Naipaul's novels.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said has commented that V. S. Naipaul "allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution¹." Derek Walcott, the West Indian poet who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1992, notes that Naipaul is praised for his frankness.

The Committee of Nobel Prize, the Swedish Academy, praise his work for having "united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories." The Committee also noted Naipaul's affinity with Joseph Conrad and commented that Naipaul is Conrad's heir. "Naipaul is Conrad's heir as the annalist of the destinies of empires in the moral sense: what they do to human beings." His authority as a narrator is grounded in the memory of what others have forgotten, the history of the vanquished.

John Didon in the *New York Review of Books*, portrays the world Naipaul sees is a world alive with the complications and contradictions of actual human endeavor. V. S. Naipaul travelled for long periods in India and Africa. Naipaul's tormented personal life is portrayed in Patrick French's authorized biography of Naipaul in 2008. It was at a time of de-colonialization and at that time many people over the world had to reassess their identity as well as the meaning of culture and history. *A Bend in the River* is said to be a pessimistic novel about Africa proclaiming the corruption.

To illustrate Naipaul's world view and universal pan-human concern, a close examination on the characters' adaptation to the Western influence is necessary. In the

¹ Edward W. Said. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. (London: Penguin, 1978)





following, a textual approach, that is, a close analysis on the novel, will be used to illustrate the process of acculturation and colonial trauma in the characters.

3. Discussion

3.1 The Dislocation of Identity

A Bend in the River embodies V. S Naipaul's world view and his status as a rootless wanderer. It paints the portraits of the outcasts. The first sentence of the book is considered emblematic of Naipaul's world view. "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it."²

Most characters in *A Bend in the River* are influenced by the European culture as the European come to Africa and even when Africa claims its independence under the reign of the Big Man. In the following, characters like Salim, Ferdinand, and Indar serve as examples to show us the influence of Western power to the tribal people and residents in Africa.

Salim, Yvette, Indan and Ferdinand all feel themselves lost and floating. The boy from the bush Ferdinand serves to be a typical example to show the Africans' sense of uncertainty and the loss of the sense of belonging.

Ferdinand, the native Zabeth's son, is of mixed tribal heritage, and in this part of the country he is a stranger. "He had no group that was really his own, and he had no one to model himself on."³ Ferdinand does not know what is expected of him. As Salim observes, Ferdinand does not follow the native custom to go down on one knee to show respect to the elderly. "This going down on one knee was a traditional reverence. It was what children of the bush did to show their respect for an older person. It was a custom of

² V. S. Naipaul. *A Bend in the River* (London: Penguin, 1979) 9. Hereinafter cited as *Naipaul*.

³ *Naipaul* 51.



the bush....It was a custom that had spread from the forest kingdoms to the east.”⁴

Ferdinand is a stranger in the world outside the bush. But “no one here could be without a tribe; and Ferdinand, again according to tribal custom, had been received into his mother’s tribe.”⁵

Indar says that he has learned to trample on the past. “That omission was our own past, the smashed life of our community.”⁶ Indar goes to England to study because he wants to belong to the other world. He says that they have to learn to trample on the past. He hopes to stop grieving for the past declaring that the past is something in his mind alone, and it doesn’t exist in real life. He wants to trample on the past and crush it.⁷ Indar feels that he has lost an important part of his idea of who he is. He feels that he has been granted the cruelest knowledge of where he stands in the world.

Yvette serves as another example of outcasts in the novel. She has seen her own life as fluid. She feels that she isn’t as prepared as the rest people. “We saw our lives as fluid. We saw the other man or person as soldier. But...all our lives were fluid.” “None of us had certainties of any kind.”⁸ Characters in the novel feel their lives to be fluid; they no longer feel accountable to anyone or anything.

3.2 The Corruptibility

Characters in the novel become corrupted and they lose their moral judgment. For them, everything is evil and they are no longer responsible for their own behaviors.

Mahesh says, “it isn’t that there’s no right and wrong here.”⁹ “It isn’t that there’s no right

⁴ *Naipaul* 43

⁵ *Naipaul* 41.

⁶ *Naipaul* 131.

⁷ *Naipaul* 120.

⁸ *Naipaul* 198.

⁹ *Naipaul* 99.





and wrong here. There's no right."¹⁰ They find excuses for their wrong doings by saying that they have no moral choices since everything is evil in Africa. "To talk of trouble was to pretend there were laws and regulations that every one could acknowledge." "Here there was nothing." "There had been order once, but that order had had its own dishonesties and cruelties."¹¹

Characters are stripped of all the rules and tradition. Though Salim refuses to send Ferdinand away to America to study after his request, Ferdinand still tells Mahesh a lie that Salim is sending him abroad. Ferdinand even steals the ledger of the lycée. Metty is irresponsible, too. He has an illegitimate child and has no intention to marry the mother of his illegitimate child. Salim asks Ferdinand not to go around telling people lies and disapproves of Metty's irresponsible attitude towards his girlfriend and baby. Ironically, Salim is also corrupted and he commits severer crimes like adultery, smuggling ivory and gold. Salim has an affair with Yvette, Raymond's wife, and he even beats her up. At the end of the story, he breaks up with Yvette and is engaged with the former shop owner's daughter. He does evil things and even defends his wrong doings saying that they all had to survive.

3.3 The Process of Acculturation

The Africans suffer from the colonial trauma as they encounter the European culture and the process of acculturation. Acculturation is a terminology used in the field of anthropology to stand for the cultural change and adaptation as a tribal society encounters the west civilization. The Big Man's speech is an irony to show the Africans' process of acculturation under the western influence. He talks about sacrifice and the bright future.

¹⁰ *Naipaul* 198.

¹¹ *Naipaul* 63.



As the Bid Man says, when he was a child, Europe ruled his world. “It has defeated the Arabs in Africa and controlled the interior of the continent. It ruled the coast and all the countries of the Indian Ocean with which we traded; it supplied our goods.”¹²

It was Europe that gave the Africans the descriptive postage stamps that gave them their ideas of what was picturesque about Africa. Europe also gives them a new language.¹³ Europe no longer rules them but it still feeds them in a hundred ways with its languages and sends them its increasingly wonderful goods.

The Africans cease to be driven by their ideas of their position in the world; they forget who they are and where they have come from and try hard to jump into the civilized world. They know of their history and the history of the Indian Ocean from books written by Europeans. Without Europeans, they feel that “all their past would have been washed away.”¹⁴

Europe gives them the idea of who they are and gives them that idea of their modernity and development. Europe makes Africans aware of another Europe full of great cities, great stores, great buildings and universities and to that Europe only the privileged or the gifted among Africans have journeyed. To Africans, there is no going back and nothing to go back to. They have become what the world outside has made them and they have to live in the world as it exists.

Most characters in *A Bend in the River* are influenced by the European culture as the European come to Africa and even when Africa claims its independence and was under the reign of the Big Man. The white man Raymond plays the role as the advisor of the president for several years. Raymond is loyal to his work and offers his ideas to the Big Man.

¹² Naipaul 237.

¹³ Naipaul 237.

¹⁴ Naipaul 18.





Besides, the white men came and brought the local people modern inventions from the West, like binoculars and telephones and so forth. The Americans, the Europeans or the Belgians have great influence on local residents. It's fancy to live in the American or European way. In some ways, the characters like Salim, Metty, and Ferdinand become pretentious in showing off his belongings. For instance, when Salim reads a popular science magazine, he shows his binoculars and fancy camera on purpose to Ferdinand to show that he himself is somebody. On the other hand, Metty also pretends to belong to a big family, and he even boasts that he is going to Canada.

The local people try hard to own the Western invention, receive Western education and have chances to visit the Europe. They import burgers, airplanes, telephones, machines and even the famous brand, Nescafé.

Zabeth, the native magician or sorceress, lives a purely primitive life. For her only Africa was real. But for her son Ferdinand, she wished something else. She wants something better for her son. This better life lies outside the timeless ways of village and river. It lies in education and the acquiring of new skills. For Zabeth and many Africans of her generation, education becomes something only foreigners can give. Therefore, Zabeth asks her son to learn from Salim because Salim is a foreigner and Salim speaks English well. She wants Ferdinand to “learn manners and the ways of the outside world.”¹⁵ Later Ferdinand even asks Salim to send him away to America to study but this request is refused.

Furthermore, the preservation of cultural heritage appears to be another problem for the Africans as they face the Western influence. Father Huisman, a lover of Africa, is killed near the end of the story. It's sarcastic that Father Huisman, a white man, cares

¹⁵ *Naipaul* 42.



about the preservation of African masks than any Africans. After his death, his collections of African masks, which are the richest products of the forest, are shipped to the United States to be the nucleus of the gallery of primitive art. As Salim states, the spirits of the river and forest, all the spirits seem to have left the place, as and after Father Huisman's death; the spirits appear to have left his masks. The masks lying flat on the shelves symbolize the fate of African cultural heritage.

After the rebellion, the civilization of Europe becomes more secure at the bend of the river. Salim, who used to have the sharpest sense of the beauty of the river and forest, now feels disappointed that the mystery and the magic of the place have gone. The African colonial residents face the dilemma as they abandon their own culture and adapt to the western civilization.

4. Conclusion

The colonial trauma, like the sense of loss, uncertainty, the dislocation of identity and so on, reflects the dilemma of primitive and colonial residents. *A Bend in the River* serves as a spokesman for the colonial people. It depicts the changing and adaptation of the African natives and residents as they encounter the west civilization. In the novel, the characters, like Indar and Salim, stop grieving for the past. They see that the past is something in their mind alone that doesn't exist in real life. The characters have to trample on the past and crush it and that is the way they have to learn to live. The sympathetic portraying of the omission of identity and past shows Naipaul's universal pan-human concern beyond races, geographical barriers, and time and space.

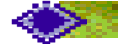
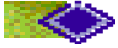




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