

An Insight into Naipaul's Africa in *A Bend in the River*

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Abstract- V.S.Naipaul's *A Bend in the river* talks of Africa in four parts: The Second Rebellion; The New Domain; The Big Man and Battle. In all the parts, he basically reflects the rebel and the conflict which goes on in the minds of the Protagonist, which can be generalised to the Africans and the outsiders. The fiction starts with the thought that "the world is what it is; men who are nothing who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it (p.3). The narrator—Salim, an ethnically Indian Muslim was a long resident on the coast of Central Africa. He talks about post-colonial time-- the time of independence when life was not easy, and Africa have had its own troubles. He talks about a 'Town' in the interior--at the bend in the great river, whose existence had come to a standstill. Naipaul talks of this town as a natural meeting place-- for people, and do the trade.

Just like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which does not mention the name of the river, Naipaul also does not mention the name of the river or the town at its bend. But some feel that he may have referred to the Kisangani on the Congo River. Irving Howe in *Dark Vision* in The New York Times says that there can hardly be a writer alive who surpasses V.S.Naipaul.

I. INTRODUCTION

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:

Beer was part of people's food here; children drank it; people began drinking from early in the morning....women slept with men whenever they were asked; a man could knock on any woman's door and sleep with her(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).

The narrator, though a bachelor, became a custodian of two boys--master of Metty and guardian of Ferdinand. He characterizes African living style by stating that they never learnt how to spend money wisely and keep their households. The narrator also states that he himself owned a shop which was no less than a sea of junk with buckets, plastics, tyres, oil lamps scattered on the floor. As junk gave him livelihood he had to have some respect for the same. "As soon as you opened the landing door you got the warmed-up, shut-in smell of rust and oil and kerosine, dirty clothes and old paint and old timber. And the place smelled like that because you could not leave any window open (p.46)". Salim expresses his desolation and loneliness in life. He feels that he could not do any worth in life, that his life was similar to that of Ferdinand and that his thoughts took him to the places where he did not want to be. Often he felt that everything he possessed was worthless--the Paintings, the books, the magazines, everything was a junk which made him feel frustrated with his life. Though he had come to the town which was at the bend in the river, to make fortune, it only gave him gloomy nights. He feels all the more miserable when he thinks of 'the Americans', 'the White People', and 'Europeans', who were makers of big things; who were scientists; who were no less than gods. The narrator, a young man from an Indian family, could find no difference between his life and the life of the Africans. Both were without any aspirations, without any support and purpose. This depression made him feel that all the physical things were useless and futile. He could feel that the paintings

and the books and the magazines were of no worth. Now no book of Science and knowledge could inspire him, could do magic and change version of his life. The communication gap which reflected a second rebellion in Metty and Ferdinand who were not interested in knowledge of new things shows the pace of African life. As Ferdinand was a lycee boy, the more he thought, the more confused he became. The narrator feels that in Africa, it was easy for an individual to adjust if he remained primitive and without technical skills. He feels that even if Africa at times became peaceful, the men have to be feared, as one always tried to trap others just as a cat chases a bird. The author depicts Africa in a state of anarchy, with no rules and regulations, where corruption had become a culture. Chinua Achebe-- one of the most famous African author, also characterizes Africa in a similar way. But Naipaul compliments Africa when Salim says that:

I knew that the slave people were in revolt and were being butchered back into submission. But Africa was big. The bush muffled the sound of murder, and the muddy rivers and lakes washed the blood away(p.60).

Naipaul by quoting Ferdinand's example of being educated and having difficulty in adaptation to civilization seems to generalize the statement that the more educated the person was in Africa, the more confused and baffled he was, with his mind full of junk. Just like Francis Bacon-- the father of English Essays, who about 'Reading Books' says that, Some Books need to be tasted, some to be chewed and digested, and some need to be swallowed; in the same way the Narrator says about the Africans that in Africa, some men were to be feared, with some it was necessary to be servile, and some people need to be approached differently as they always set trap for others. Just like Chinua Achebe-- the renowned African writer, Naipaul talks of Corruption which had become the African culture which meant, "Don't harm me, boy, because I can do you greater harm" (p.65). Achebe had beautifully described the masks and the carvings exhibiting the African culture, likewise Naipaul talks of masks and carvings of religious quality without which he feels that the things were dead and with no beauty.

The narrator talks of the chaos and anarchy that prevailed in Africa--of the war around them, of the ambushes on roads, of the villages attacked, of the headmen and the officials being killed. He feels anxious of the crazed and half-starved people against whom the guns were going to be used. The schools were not safe, the students were not safe. The soldiers were retreating showing a situation of lawlessness. But the narrator supports the Africans by saying that even the raggedest of them had their villages and tribes, they could run to their secret worlds if terrible things occurred. The Africans knew how to cope with all worse situations with no regrets in life. Ferdinand and Metty have been shown as the two characters who reflect the second rebellion. Ferdinand sobs saying that he never wanted to be in town and study in lycee. People's fear has been described at several places who deputed many slaves in their place. The Europeans went away but some soldiers came to the village who began to behave badly. The army was reorganised in the capital by the President. But the rebellion was on-- the war was on between the army and the rebels:

The rage of the rebels was like a rage against metal, machinery, wires, everything that was not of the forest and

Africa....the rage of simple men tearing at metal with their hands(91-92). Naipaul then talks of the New Domain where in Africa the things were a bit improving. "After each setback, the civilization of Europe would become a little more secure at the bend in the river; the town would always start up again, and would grow a little more each time. In the peace that we now had the town was not only re-established; it grew"(p.99-100).Naipaul seems to express the plight of Indians in Africa whose condition was no less than ants. Just like ants do complicated things, same way they did complex things, without expecting the rewards. Their efforts may go waste, may smash up, and others would replace them. Though quite painful, had to persist like ants do. The new domain brought new intelligence and new energy and new confidence which came with order and money. It has reflected the change and the development taking place in the town which was at the Bend of the river. The new cities were being built, many new buses and taxis could be seen, new telephone system revolutionised the area. It became the trading centre for the region. Naipaul sarcastically remarks that they owed all progress to the 'Big Man'-- the white man who ruled over Africa. Poaching of ivory, gold and slaves which was the feature of oldest Africa could be seen again. Naipaul shows the transition--the change which could be felt by the people of the bush.

"... in those days. We felt that there was treasure around us, waiting to be picked up. It was the bush that gave us this feeling. During the empty, idle time we had been indifferent to the bush; during the days of the rebellion it had depressed us. Now it excited us--the unused earth, with the promise of the unused(p.109-110).But the isolation and the desolation could be seen in human life as the narrator says that the stillness of the place-- the flat, the shop, the market, the bars, the river, the dugouts, gave him a feeling of stagnation--a place without further human promise. The development was rapid. The copper money was flowing in, the prices were rising symbolising growth and prosperity. The President was creating Modern Africa--a miracle that could 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"(p.116).But to the contrary, the narrator started developing hostility for the place--the bedroom, the foam mattress ,the window panes, the clothes, the shoes, the kitchen, the sitting room. Even he became desolate with everyone. Ferdinand and Metty, too became preoccupied with their anxieties. Like Chinua Achebe, who talked of colonisation of Africa, of Things falling apart, Naipaul also talks of culture causing rift in people. When the narrator enters a building, he feels offended:

...in my dark suit and my university tie,...I was entering a London building, an English building.... For the first time in my life I was filled with a colonial rage....a rage with the people who had allowed themselves to be coralled into a foreign fantasy (169). Later on Salim is caught in a post-imperial chaos when Ferdinand asks him to flee for his life, "It's bad for everybody. That's the terrible thing. It's bad for prosper.... We're all going to hell, and every man knows this is his bones. We're being killed. Nothing has any meaning (p.319). The fiction seems to end on a optimistic note that the steamer moves away from the area of battle--Africa, with no one chasing the saviours.

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