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V.S. Naipaul on Political Independence and Tyrannical Oppression: The Paradox of Freedom in *A Bend in the River*

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Abstract

This paper examined V.S. Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River* in a postcolonial perspective. It addressed the complexities of post-colonial freedom and liberation that stunt the socio-cultural, economic and political advancements of the African citizen caught in a web in the newly illusory independent Africa. The study aimed at examining the significance of independence of a nation within the context of liberation from external domination. It also investigated the effects of evils of dictatorial governance in a political organization of a nation. It finally interrogated the role of the African elite in the socio-cultural and economic mutation of the post-independence Africa to achieve effective integration and self-reliance. Being qualitative in its holistic analytical process, the study consisted in book review; it discussed data collected following a post-colonial reading of the novel *A Bend in the River* and related critical materials to the novel, to the writer and to the socio-cultural history of Africa and Congo.

Content analysis techniques helped facilitate the discussion and interpretation of data obtained from the materials. The action of these techniques was reinforced by a postcolonial perspective that borrowed substance from the theory of nationalism developed by [4]. In the end, the study established that the departure of the colonial power gave rise to an oppressive despotic African elitism whose main interest was to amass wealth upon the agony of the common man despite the sacrifices he made to liberate his nation. It was noted that the African post-independence citizen became a prey to his own leader, yet expected to uplift him from the bleak conditions left by colonisation. Ultimately, the study observed that the African liberation from European colonial powers brought nothing to the afflicted common man but an illusory world dominated by terror, the re-appropriation and embezzlements of public wealth and the marginalisation of the *other* that ended in an unprecedented self-destruction.

Keywords: Congo, Zaire, Independence, Totalitarianism, Power Abuse, Mobutu

1. Introduction

1.1 Context of the study

The European domination of Africa for around a century affected the continent in various fields of life. Before colonization, African societies were socially stable. People interacted peacefully, giving assistance one another in a period of distress. The human dignity was a sacred law that traditionally political powers policed to maintain the unity of the communities. Despite the multiple beliefs in culture and deism that characterized pre-colonial societies, social rapports were strictly observed. Many distant vernaculars in a same region were spoken and several divinities were venerated in a serene mutual understanding. Politically, traditional leaders succeeded to maintain unity between peoples. There were few violent conflicts; and if it happened, social dialogue would appease the tensions in a period that was not long enough to bring back solace.

Since the arrival of the white man, however, things started to change into a context of oppressive agenda where the local inhabitants lost progressively freedom and numerous rights to live as citizens in their own land. The climax of local pain occurred when the white man went back home; the local leaders took the lead in political management of the nations. Unspeakable tyrannical oppressions mixed with massive public embezzlements rose immediately and weakened the potential of the newly independent nations to achieve effective self-determination. The acquired political independence fell into abyss. The ascension to power by those immoral leaders brought in the miscarriage of political independence and freedom in almost all African nations. This entanglement opened Pandora's Box in many countries. Outraged by what happened in an unnamed nation that rises to be Congo (Zaire), Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River* is an epitome that portrays the immoral excesses committed by political leaders and the struggle of the ordinary man during the period of post-independence; it exposes the

horrors, scandals and numerous cases of immorality that impeded the socio-cultural and economic development of the continent.

1.2 The problem

Though colonization affected the living conditions of the Africans in many ways, it did not permeate deeply the social relationships that had featured the African societies. Despite some indigenous people who collaborated with the white rule to betray their fellow blacks, this situation happened at a very limited scale. At a large extent, Africans continued to resist together against the hardships of colonial subjugation. The collective resistance continent-wise boosted the claims for accession to independence in many African nations almost in the same period of the 1960s.

In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul questions the asset brought by the political independence to the afflicted peoples of Africa who had endured the pain of Western subjugation. Examining the various bloody conflicts that were slicing many nations shortly after the accession to independence till date due to man's excessive selfishness, the novel exposes the wrongs of political excesses rooted in power monopoly, nepotism, despotism, corruption and public embezzlements. The political exclusion and the socio-cultural marginalization of 'the Other' in various forms and the most appalling re-appropriation of the common good (national wealth) affected deeply the prospect of Africa in all sides of life.

Examining these challenges that result(ed) in endless bloody conflicts and nation's disintegration—Naipaul regrets the loss of independence that had been achieved upon immense sacrifices and reveals the dangers of political selfishness that births social disintegration. This study addressed the complexities of post-colonial freedom and liberation that stunted the socio-cultural, economic and political advancements of the African citizen caught in a web in the newly illusory independent Africa.

1.3 Objectives

The fundamental point this study sought to achieve consisted in the exploration of the significance of independence of a nation within the context of liberation from external domination. Additionally, the study aimed at examining the consequences of dictatorship in the political organization of a nation. The last aim investigated the role of the African elite in the socio-cultural and economic mutation of the post-independence Africa to achieve effective integration and self-reliance.

1.4 Literature review

Much of the writing on post-independence Africa portrays the continent as a failure in almost all the sides of human existence. Examining Naipaul's novel, Samir Kuilya (2017) ^[5] notes that *A Bend in the River* expresses "a fundamentally pessimistic view of the newly independent Africa, a view that Naipaul very likely based on developments he saw taking place in the continent's central region." (p.1). The decaying Africa with the loss of its independence has also been bemoaned by Neeta Pandey (2016) ^[10]. The critic observes Naipaul's description of the town how:

...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...men...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 were 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 (sic. p.253).

Such a gloomy landscape traces the image of the post-independence Africa. The expected elite of the time turned into enemies of the house they were called to protect and fructify the benefits of independence. Unfortunately, terror, horror and despair buried the hopes that had been heralded by the rising suns of independence.

Examining the struggle of the protagonist Salim, Joy Chung (2015) ^[2] observes that "what Salim saw was a hopeless world. It was this world that constructed his pessimistic personality. The author conveyed a message that they could not break down the situation: they were controlled by someone else forever" (p.4). As an outsider Salim experiences bitter experiences that first drive him outside the decaying nation. Once he returns back hoping to find solace after some months in London, Salim is appalled by the carnage where people are innocently publicly executed by the big man—the top leader of the nation (Naipaul, p.137). Feeling himself in danger after he has been expropriated, he resolved to leave the country in despair. The hell established by the man on power suggests that the post-independence leadership was hollow, immoral and inadequate to trail a traumatized people that had endured the evils of colonization.

From a historical standpoint, William Vincent (1991) ^[12] argues that "Naipaul leaves no doubt that recent history has been a product of the European construct of civilization. During the colonial period, the Europeans imposed their own sense of history upon Africa, and, by extension, the world" (p.339). The European domination of Africa for around a century affected the continent in various fields of life. Despite the multiple beliefs in culture and deism that characterized pre-colonial societies, social rapports were strictly observed.

1.5 Methodology

This study consisted in qualitative research of a literary critical examination in form of book review of Naipaul's 'African novel' *A Bend in the River*. The data were collected following a post-colonial reading of the work. Data collection extended the scope to the existing critical materials of the novel and books on history of Congo (DRC). The analysis of the collected data applied Content analysis methods and techniques. This theory facilitated the discussion and interpretation of data obtained from the materials. The process of analysis used also the postcolonial theory of nationalism propounded by Gellner (1983) ^[4] to reinforce the action of Content analysis and thereby achieve a comprehensive exploration of the research problem. This helped to understand the dynamics that Naipaul deploys to bemoan the loss of the acquired political independence of the African nations.

2. Data analysis and interpretation

2.1 The great expectations of the world to come

The inception of the novel *A Bend in the River* sets a somber tone that foreshadows a doomed world, “The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it” (p.1). This argument is very powerful; it indicates a committed preoccupation that features the writer’s quest for justice and individual integrity. While the whole story is narrated by the protagonist Salim, this statement alone stands apart, however, away from the narrator’s voice. The statement appears as a guiding principle, a summarizing maxim that escapes the fictional aspect which characterizes every novelistic account. It reveals a universal truth that might guide humans to promote brotherhood, love and selflessness to advance mankind. This universality of the opening statement is also sensed in the developing stages of the plot: the novel is set in an *unnamed town* of an *unnamed country* with an *unnamed president* at the bend of an *unnamed river*. Neither the *bend* nor the *river* or the *territory* where these entities are located have been explicitly named by the writer. The anonymity of the work’s setting details suggests the universality of the tragedy that is slicing Africa—the ubiquity of the calamity endured by the African in the post-independence era. From the beginning, Naipaul hints the reader that the emergence of dictatorial elite dominated all the newly burgeoning nations that would miscarry the hopes brought by the rising sun of independence.

2.2 Nothingness

Naipaul has been shocked by the immoral and abusive power that characterized the postcolonial African leaders. Individuals who succeed in power to rule should be endowed with qualities of moral integrity, political responsibility, a committed patriotism and a good will to serve, not to rule the shattered minds that are expecting much to heal the physical and psychological wounds left by colonization. The political scandals that are devastating Africa are attributable to the immorality, the corrupt mindset of the leaders who fail to advocate constructive foundations for a socio-economic and political advancement.

Examining the political unrest that is shaking Uganda, Zaire and the eastern coast of Africa towards the 1980s, the writer believes that society should not be ruled by irrational individuals featured by moral emptiness, a corrupted self and unreasonable brutality. This lack of humaneness converts the pseudo-leaders into “men who become nothing” to serve the nations in the objective to uplift the young bleeding states from the colonial aftermaths. The writer condemns this state of nothingness of the elite that hold positions they do not merit. In his observation, they should “have no place in [the world]” if their presence is to gnaw the socio-economic potential of the nations, to ruin the prospect and stir conflicts in the communities for unavoidable self-destruction.

Set in an unnamed town geographically located at the turn of an unnamed river, *A Bend in the River* discusses extensively the failures of a political leadership of an unnamed nation that is emerging shortly after the accession to independence. A careful reading of the novel indicates that the geographical location of the setting coincides with the then country Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo. A lot of textual indicators reveal the exactness of this nation: the country used to be a Belgian colony and it

uses French as official language; it is located in the Central Africa with a big river identified to be the Congo River; the president of the nation, identified in the story as the “Big Man”, has adopted a new formulaic style to address his people as *Citoyens*, *Citoyennes*. The narrator points out:

“I was mister because I was a foreigner, someone from the far-off coast, and an English-speaker; and I was mister in order to be distinguished from the other resident foreigners, who were *_monsieur_*. That was, of course, before the Big Man came along and made us all *_citoyens_* and *_citoyennes_*. (pp. 5-6)

All these details reveal that the novel is set in the post-independence Zaire under the brutal leadership of Marshal Mobutu who ruled the nation with unspeakable terror characterized by political suppression of the opposite voice. The whole story turns around the bitter experiences of an unfortunate protagonist Indian Muslim Salim caught up in a country outside home. He has left his “half hometown” located in the east coast of Africa, somewhere either Mombasa or Dar es Salaam though Naipaul still remains discreet to reveal explicitly the real town and country Salim is from. He has come to settle in the unnamed country located in the interior of Africa that we have indicated above as Zaire. There, he has bought a shop from Nazruddin—a fellow Indian old man from same hometown in the east coast of Africa. The boy is filled with immense hopes to thrive from the business that he struggles to fortify with diversified commercial items mostly needed by the villagers. Yet he remains skeptical from the terrible first view of the country right from his arrival, “Too many of the places on the way have closed down or are full of blood” (p.4)

Though Salim claims to be from a town located in the east coast of Africa, he is not actually African. Originally, he is Indian by ancestry: his family (great-grand parents) left India for Africa to make trade in the remote time and settled there forever. Salim saw himself born there in the east coast of Africa in a family that was keeping slaves traditionally. He came to know his Indian roots by word from his parents and the elders of the family. Salim reveals, “Africa was my home, had been the home of my family for centuries. But we came from the east Coast... in our customs and attitudes we were closer to the Hindus of northwestern India, from which we had originally come” (p.8). The diasporic nostalgia haunts Salim since the time he was born to live in the eastern African “home” on the Coast of Indian Ocean till the present settlement in the new country at “the bend in the river”, a place that will finally force him to leave for fear of death.

Salim’s new hosting country has now opened a new page in history. It has got independence from Western subjugation (Belgium) and new projects to reconstruct the nation are under way. Several modern buildings mushroom with no clear planning of what they will serve. The new President, known under the sobriquet of the Big Man, has built up the army by enrolling young people to fortify the country’s defense to face the tribal rebellions that are fighting his regime. The rebellions want the Big Man to observe the traditional past and customs that he is subverting in his brutal rule. Rather than engage dialogue and negotiations with the combatants against his power, he calls white mercenaries to fight on his side. Metty, Salim’s servant,

recounts the horror:

The white men came this morning. Some of them went to the barracks and some of them went to the hydro...The first thing they did at the barracks was to shoot Colonel Yenyi. It was what the President asked them to do. He doesn't play, this new President. Colonel Yenyi was running out to meet them. They didn't let him talk. They shot him in front of the women and everybody. And Iyanda, the sergeant...they shot him too, and a few other soldiers as well. (p.47)

This tragic scene lets the reader contemplate the picture of the new budding Africa. The narrator Metty here indicates that the new President “doesn’t play”. He is not even afraid to kill his close collaborators if ever, while asleep, he happens to dream of any of his subordinates plotting against him. Colonel Nyeyi is a senior officer close to the President. Yet the tyrannical Big Man does not feel pity to kill him as he suspects the Colonel to be in contact with the rebels that are fighting him. Without having any evidence of a plotting scheme against him, he assassinates Nyeyi through the mercenaries he has brought in the country. Naipaul indicates how dictatorial the regimes of the post-independence Africa ignored the voice of the people by resorting to violence to silence or suppress them.

2.3 A Zairian-Congolese novel and an African satire

Gellner claims that nationalism shall be understood as “primarily a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” to hold separate parts tight (p.37). Nationalism seeks to restore this congruency where it has gone loose. The paradoxically political independence casts shadows to the dawn that had risen by the time the white man went back. Do the political and the national meet in Naipaul’s *A Bend* to create a peaceful state suggested by Gellner?

Readers of the novel *A Bend in the River* converge on the idea that the novel discusses the political turmoil that was occurring in Congo during Mobutu’s regime. Idris Nazua (2004) ^[9] indicates that the novel “portrays the story of a diasporic individual Salim and his existential crisis in post-independent Congo...an allegorical representation of the diasporic people living in Congo (p.171). Angela Stănescu (2008) ^[11] reinforces this Congolese (or rather Zairian) setting. The critic notes that Naipaul “relocates further inland in a newly independent central African state resembling the Zaire under the autocratic social regime of Mobutu” (p.1).

There are many passages in the novel that implicitly show that Naipaul’s work actually discusses the post-independent Congo during President Mobutu’s brutal regime though the literal setting remains unnamed. In 1977, Katanga rebels who had fled to Angola when they were defeated in the post-independence secession war invaded Zaire. They had got support from UNITA¹ as retaliation against Mobutu’s support of MLA² rebels. To back Mobutu’s regime, France airlifted 15,000 troops from Morocco to reinforce Zairian loyal troops. These soldiers succeeded to defeat quickly the rebels ending the war that has historically been described as Shaba I. In 1978, the rebels attacked Shaba again in excessive high number of combatants to outgo the country’s forces. As the rebels’ front was so solid to repel, France and Belgium deployed a lot of militaries to support the Zairian

loyal forces. These countries benefited the US logistical support in the coordination of war to bar the road of progress to the rebels (Braeckman, *et al.*1990, p.67) ^[1].

Naipaul has fictionalized this Americano-European military support that backed Mobutu through the white mercenaries that the Big Man has invited to repel the tribal rebels who have launched war against him to claim back the observation of traditional values and customs. The death of Colonel Nyeyi and Sergeant Iyanda in Chapter Five massacred by the white mercenaries enact the executions of Colonel Bangala and Major Efomi who were accused by President Mobutu of plotting a coup against him.

To impose definitively his power, the National Radio Station has the obligation to relay the Big Man’s speeches that the citizens must listen to at least three times a day. This is a strategy that is applied by dictators to lull the oppressed. This brainwashing method rests on the absurd messages that the Big Man regularly sends to his people that he addresses as *citoyens-Citoyennes*; he explains how important and powerful the country is—now that it is independent, how it has got rid of the European colonizer and how important it is “delightfully managed” by its local children to attain full *citoyenneté*—“citizenship”. He does not mention any sign of the oppressive threat that he daily inflicts on his people. He only keeps narrating the fallacious intentions of freedom and development achieved but conceals the horrible selective assassinations, the numerous scandals of public embezzlements, the abusive imprisonments and the tricked public executions he inflicts on those who oppose his cruel administration.

In addition to the overgrowing poverty that is striking the nation, the Big Man’s cruelty catalyzes the hellish conditions the country is traversing. Ferdinand, now Commissioner, informs Salim that the Big Man is visiting the town ‘at the bend of a river’ to supervise personally an execution of one of his workers. Commissioner Ferdinand—though being the first officer in the town in charge of security matters—does not know the individual who is going to be executed; only does the Big Man know. Everyone is filled with fear that they can be the victim to be sent to the gallows. Ferdinand warns the dispossessed Salim to take care:

You mustn't think it's bad just for you. It's bad for everybody. That's the terrible thing. It's bad for Prosper, bad for the man they gave your shop to, bad for everybody. Nobody's going anywhere. We're all going to hell, and every man knows this in his bones. We're being killed. Nothing has any meaning. That is why everyone is so frantic. Everyone wants to make his money and run away. But where? That is what is driving people mad...Everything that was given to me was given to me to destroy me. I began to think I wanted to be a child again...The bush runs itself. But there is no place to go to. I've been on tour in the villages. It's a nightmare. (pp.164-165)

The political line of the man on power sows chaos; fire, brutality and skepticism hover on the community he is supposed to protect. He kills anyone he hates or suspects any time he wants for no reason. The future of the nation is uncertain. People “are being killed”; and what angers the community is that they do not find the possibility to get out of the hell.

Before Naipaul drafted the novel in the 1970s, he first visited Zaire and Uganda. He spent quite months in each nation observing how these newly independent nations were managing the opportunities offered by independence. He was horrified by the massive violations of human rights perpetrated by people on power. He personally witnessed the political exactions by the tyrannical presidents Mobutu of Zaire and Idi Amin of Uganda and the social instability that both nationals and expatriates faced in those countries at the hand of the two despots. Naipaul questions whether the African has really accessed to independence or if it is a new form of colonization that rose after the departure of the European. What is more poignant and psychologically affecting is that such oppression is perpetrated by individuals of same color with whom these downtrodden citizens endured same pain during white domination. This “local colonization” or “black colonization” or even “home subjugation” is more oppressive, crueler and bloodier than the earlier white domination to the point that bloodbath and public embezzlements lay in the grave the burgeoning hopes of development in almost all the African nations. Such a situation had not occurred during the white man’s rule.

As a case in point, in 1966, only one year after the usurpation of the throne, President Mobutu arrested four ministers of his government; they were accused of plotting a coup against him. Among the accused was Prime Minister Evariste Kimba. Later, they were publicly executed in a stadium before a public of around fifty thousand people. President Mobutu had come in person to supervise the execution of his victims. Naipaul, in his novel *A Bend in the River*, again fictionalizes the assassination of the innocent ministers and other unidentified cases through the civil servant who is to be executed publicly while the Big Man is physically present at the event. It is important to remember that Naipaul’s victim in the novel does not get justice. He has been suspected by the man on the top who decides to terminate the victim’s days without any case in court of justice that would have established his guilt. This situation clearly emphasizes that the absence of justice restores anarchy that sacks the foundations of the young nation.

There is a problem of power separation in the post-independence era. How can the one who accuses become the same to judge and pronounce the verdict of a court case? How can a person be condemned, for whatever crime it might be, without court trial and a set of accusations on their charges? This lack of coherence traces the unjust, absolute and dictatorial nature of the immorality of the political leaders who “mounted” to power in the early years of independence and the following decades. In these post-independence banana republics, justice and reason have become a property of the man on power. The *Other* has no right to live, has nothing to claim or no idea to advance; he is only recommended to observe the orders dictated to him. A society that observes no law is condemned to disappearance. The totalitarianism that has been instituted by power corrodes the human dignity of the citizen who is thirsty to live a change after many years of colonial suppression.

We have already mentioned that the president of the nation—identified in the novel as the Big Man, the river which constitutes the cornerstone of the setting, the town and the country where incidents occur remain unnamed from the onset of the story to the end. This total anonymity in setting redirects to the omnipresence of the same horrors

through Africa. The sole aim leaders were (and still are) filled with was (is) to amass wealth and live opulently at the cost of the ordinary citizen starving and dying unacknowledged despite the price they paid to drive back the white man. Such wrong and corrupt mindset of the African elite in the past and even today is found in many—if not all—the African leaders who were called on to uplift the bleeding Africa rather than inter it in a bottomless grave pitilessly. Marshal Mobutu with the terror he established in Congo (Zaire) and his counterpart Field Marshal Idi Amin Dada with the cruelty he institutionalized and promoted during his reign over Uganda can be understood within this perspective.

Naipaul creates an unstable wandering protagonist Salim who leaves one society (country) after another seeking for solace that he cannot find anywhere from the Eastern Africa to the interior of the continent. From his hometown in the east Coast at Indian Ocean to the Central Africa where he decides to settle definitely, he has traversed many nations. But not even one is capable to accommodate him peacefully even his motherland; everywhere he passes through is chaotic: people are killed by those who might protect them. Naipaul indicates that the plague which is gnawing Africa becomes contagious and affects the whole continent.

The protagonist Salim eventually fails to accommodate with this hollow community. He finally has to leave the country just to save his life. However, a question rises here: Where does he go? Commissioner Ferdinand who opens him a narrow gate to escape reveals him that “We’re all going to hell” and “Nothing has any meaning”. Salim already knows that. He is even sure that the destination he is heading to is uncertain; but he has to leave. The decaying independent Africa from infancy informs that its prospect and potential will end up in failure.

Technically, Naipaul shapes the character of the Big Man in an individual typified by high capacity of destructive subtlety. He cuts down his own institutions in a way to crush potential rivals that he suspects may act against his will. The Big Man has unilaterally called white mercenaries to curb the military capacity of the national army and then succeed to suppress soldiers he does not have confidence in. In the novel, Colonel Nyeyi is an army officer that the Big Man promoted himself for the defence of the nation. But he does not hesitate to murder him along with other soldiers. He uses the white mercenaries to purge his own army.

This lack of confidence in the national institutions creates a void that projects the nation’s destiny into an abyss that buries the socio-economic potential to move ahead. The whole country’s new elite have become paranoid. They are skeptical and have developed a schizophrenic feeling that has transformed some of them into veritable puppets to conform to the dictates of the Big Man. They have been “robotized and mechanized” into instruments whose capacity has been dwindled to meet the will of the commander-in-chief. This mechanization of people has birthed a generation of individuals with little feeling of patriotism to advocate for the prime of the nation. Raymond is an archetype of this antithetical elite. Though he is not a national citizen by birth, he has been attributed the status of *citoyen national* (national citizen) by the ‘mighty’ ruler. Raymond is very fearful since he was a bit quarantined by his master. He has become a docile dove, a malleable instrument that the Big Man utilizes in whatever way he decides. He has to prepare and adapt the President’s

speeches to the will of the Big Man. Whether the president's declarations to the public are important or not, Raymond has to craft them to the chief's choice to satisfy his drives. The courtier Raymond knows that "there's no right and wrong here" (p. 156) in the realm governed by heartless people; yet as a loyal servant, he must tie the laces of his master's shoes. This lack of rationality in the administration of the country's affairs reiterates Mahesh's observation that "there's no right" (p.156) to undertake a project for development.

2.4 Nationalizing and 'Radicalizing' the country's destiny

The ending chapters of Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River* present the new political vision that the Big Man advocates. He wants to restructure the political organization of the country. He announces the nationalization of all companies and businesses owned by foreign nationals. This politics of dispossession transfers the once owned businesses and companies by expatriates to the locals that the Big Man calls *state trustees*. Naipaul describes this course of events as politics of "radicalisation". In the novel, Metty confides to his chief Salim now back in the town at the bend of a river after his vacation in London:

I suppose you know why you come back, _patron_...Because you have nothing to come back to. You don't know? Nobody told you in London? You don't read the papers? You don't have anything. They take away your shop. They give it to Citizen Théotime. The President made a speech a fortnight back. He said he was radicalizing and taking away everything from everybody. All foreigners. The next day they put a padlock on the door. And a few other doors as well. You didn't read that in London? You don't have anything; I don't have anything. I don't know why you come back. (p.154)

Salim, in a state of grief and devastating delirium, meditates after the painful revelations by his servant Metty:

Radicalization: two days before, in the capital, I had seen the word in a newspaper headline, but I hadn't paid attention. I had thought of it as just another word; we had so many. Now I understood that radicalization was the big new event. And it was as Metty had said. The President had sprung another of his surprises, and this surprise concerned us. I--and others like me--had been nationalized. Our businesses had ceased to be ours, by decree, and were being given out by the President to new owners ... Nationalization: it had been a word. It was shocking to face it in this concrete way. (p.154)

The Big Man has "radicalized" the nation and wants to expel foreigners on the grounds that their activities subvert the programs of the government. He has developed hatred toward the foreigners and is even instilling this hate into his people in a way to convince them that their enemies are foreigners while he himself is the great monster—a vampire to defeat and get rid of. This cunning tactic seeks to obtain confidence and credibility he has lost from his people. He'd like to cast his own wrongs on the back of the Other in order to reconquer the world he has destroyed himself. Naipaul's protagonist, the Indian Salim, is the first to endure the

consequences of the president's decree. In accordance with the new politics of radicalization, his shop is totally transferred to the local Théotime while Salim—the owner—is in London. Once back, he learns from his servant Metty that he has been divested; the shop no longer belongs to him though it was his. Simply by clemency of the new owner, Salim is offered the position of manager of the business. He has to give daily report to Théotime—a situation that angers Salim. How can one be converted into a servant of someone else in a business that he got upon sweat? What breaks the camel's back, Théotime wants Salim:

... to acknowledge him as the boss. At the same time, he wanted me to make allowances for him as an uneducated man and an African. He wanted both my respect and my tolerance, even my compassion. He wanted me, almost, to act out my subordinate role as a favor to him. (p.157)

Salim accepts reluctantly the position of Théotime's manager as he has no choice to make. He believes that to oppose or deny the person of Théotime would bring him worries as he would be considered opponent of the President's decree; this would bring him execution. How can Salim accept to be paid a salary by Théotime, to become an assistant of person in a business that was entirely his? Of course, he cannot reveal the grief that is freezing his heart, "I became Théotime's manager. He seemed relieved and happy, and agreed to the salary I suggested for myself" [4, p.156]. Salim decides to cooperate despite an interior disagreement that is tormenting him.

2.5 Decreeing and the danger of power abuse

It has become commonplace that in totalitarian regimes, rulers oppress the commons by issuing ordinances and decrees that come to break the already agonized people. A decree is a personal decision that affects a category of targeted individuals or a whole nation by a simple will of the ruler. This ruler generally feels no concern to poll the general implications that his decision may trigger. Oppressive laws and decrees, *freedomcide* decisions are voted and enacted in nations where autocracy has established kingdom. Naipaul indicates how irrational leaders of the post-independence Africa buried the destiny of the peoples they were supposed to advance. Immoral laws were (and still are) established to facilitate the power owner to implement totalitarian policies that enable him to establish his authority and dominate the nation. Just a-one page law-which may be either a decree, an ordinance or whatever decision-is issued to enslave a whole nation; just one man's will to suppress the hopes and lives of a whole society upon the folly of grandeur—a wrong and mad self-assessment of superiority.

Naipaul is shocked that this practice of power abuse is still worsening the living conditions of the alleged independent African nations two decades after independence. Salim comes to learn that he has been disowned by a simple decree issued by the Big Man who is not even based in the town at the bend of a river but seated in his throne some miles away in the capital. Salim's "business ceased to be [his]" by a '*libertycide*' decree to repress the foreign nationals that the Big Man believes are enemies of his power. In doing so, he silences the public voice. But the results are disastrous. Anyway, the new politics of radicalization advocated by the

Big Man shakes the social relations that had characterized the commons—nationals and expatriates—for many decades.

So far, we have indicated that the novel portrays the nightmare of the post-independence Congo during Mobutu's long despotic reign though no physical locale is explicitly mentioned. A lot of details in the story attest this Congolese-Zairian setting. In the 1970s, Mobutu initiated the politics of nationalization of foreign firms. He expelled European economic operators out of the country as he accused them of political meddling into the nation's management. In many cases, the nationalized firms were given to the president's relatives or close associates from whom he could obtain paybacks. But the mismanagement by the new owners characterized by extravagance, corruption and theft of the firms' assets ruined the economic potential of those companies. This politics of nationalization ruined the national economy and precipitated the country's revenues into the dark—compelling Mobutu to recall again foreign investors to come back.

The politics of radicalization that Naipaul traces in the novel is a fictional account of the failed politics of nationalization that dictator Mobutu had initiated in the 1970s. Salim who becomes victim of the demands of this politics is a microcosmic representation of the Belgians and French and other non-Zairians who were absolutely disowned and forced to leave the country after their businesses were passed to the locals. This politics of expropriation affected also the Indians and other businessmen in Uganda when President Idi Amin—the then named 'the butcher of Uganda'—expelled foreigners almost in the same period with his Zairian counterpart. Naipaul models the character of the wandering Nazruddin who is forced to leave first Congo, then Uganda because of political persecution to relocate to Canada and finally to London in a way to represent the restlessness and the unspeakable oppression that was inflicted on the expatriates and in some cases to locals as well.

3. Research outcomes

The basic analysis of the study came up with the realization that oppressive rulers attribute their own meaning to the concept of *independence*. For them, the white man's back return which gave space to the locals to manage the country's affairs meant absolutely independence. To succeed the establishment of the illusory independence, oppressive laws and *freedomicide* decisions were/are voted and enacted in nations where autocracy has gained ground. Naipaul indicates how irrational leaders of the post-independence Africa buried the destiny of the peoples they were supposed to advance. Immoral laws are still established to facilitate the power owner to implement totalitarian policies that enable him to establish his authority and subjugate the nation.

It was also noted that the departure of the colonial power gave rise to an oppressive despotic African elite whose main interest was to amass wealth upon the agony of the common man despite the sacrifices he made to liberate his nation from colonial domination. The analysis remarked that the African post-independence citizen became a prey to his own leader, yet expected to uplift him from the bleak conditions left by colonisation.

Ultimately, the study observed that the African liberation from European colonial powers brought nothing to the

common man but a world dominated by terror, the re-appropriation and embezzlements of public wealth and the marginalisation of the *other* that ended in an unprecedented self-destruction.

4. Conclusion

Naipaul has been interpreted differently by readers and critics of his art. This is common in arts as the theoretical perspective of the reader is the main tool to assign a literary orientation to any work of art. There are many voices that acclaim positively the taste of his writings which reflect a universal interest in the world challenges. First it is important to mention that Naipaul is among the few writers who devote to take an interest in the world view to examine the acute issues that are threatening humanity in all its four corners. From the Trinidadian vista that captures the sweat faced by his siblings at home, Naipaul moves to India to examine what remains of his ancestors in a way to understand the mechanism of social and cultural mutations of human existence through time.

In addition to this home and ancestral view, Naipaul takes a course of action in the assessment of other societies: he has authored important works on Africa including this novel under discussion *A Bend in the River*; he has also written an important article on Mobutu and the Congo, "A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa" (1975) and a historically philosophical essay, *A Congo Diary* (1980)^[7]. This world view has made him an international writer and thinker with unlimited capacities to expose human wickedness and its vile consequences on society and environment across the globe.

However, his oeuvre has been received with various tones. Naipaul has been interpreted by some critics as a neo-colonialist writer characterized by a hegemonic Western ideology of cultural superiority over the Third World societies. Haidar Eid, for instance, argues that "Naipaul's Africa is only greedy, consumptive desire, and backward cultural identities...a condemned, fragmented society that lacks creative potential, a black society that cannot govern itself: a society that should be governed by an external power" (p.2). With profound respects to Eid's opinion, Naipaul's reflections on Africa and other Third world societies are not rooted into racial or cultural dynamics as the critic argues. Every committed writer has the obligation to be faithful to the facts that feed his inspiration to pen down appropriately his observations. Naipaul exposes the human follies with an open objectivity; he hardly conceals a minute detail that can perturb human existence. His works are full of realism that puts into accusation those who would like to escape the painful revelations of a bitter reality of man's cruelty against his counterpart—a crime that he seeks to expose and condemn the perpetrators.

Significantly, Naipaul's art is multidimensional. It treats various aspects of human existence. The writer has little interest in the treatment of Romantic issues like happiness, beauty, love, nature, landscape to please his audience. He rather grapples with issues that depict human struggle against the destructive forces of humanity. That is why filth, darkness, gloom and despair abound his novels. *A Bend in the River* is part of this social dejection. This novel rises as a token of the post-independence corrupt African elite and the following generations that succeeded to power with a single mission to enslave, destroy and bury Africa rather than advance it. The abominable crimes committed by the

African elite and intelligentsia on power suggest that the acquired independence upon great sacrifice in many nations was lost. This is what Naipaul bemoans since the opening of the novel when he states that “The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it” (p.1).

The novel questions also the duality of human nature to understand whether human beings are created to ruin themselves or to advance mankind to achieve success. At microcosmic level, the novel sets an evaluation of two decades of Independence of Congo (Zaire); at macrocosmic examination, it is an assessment of Africa in whole. The work informs the reader that there is still a large building site to achieve a free and integrative Africa that would put human dignity, with all its various aspects, at the center of human existence. *A Bend in the River* is unquestionably an African novel and stands as an epitome to understand Africa in her socio-cultural, historical, economic and political past and present.

End notes

-**UNITA**¹: A French acronym for “Union Nationale pour l’Indépendance Totale de l’Angola”. It was a political movement in Angola that launched war against the government since the accession of the nation to political independence to claim political recognition in the nation’s management.

-**MLA**²: A French acronym for « Mouvement pour la Libération de l’Angola ». It is a political party that fought for political independence of Angola.

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