

# Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* as a Jamesonian Third World National Allegory

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V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* charts the picture of decolonization and its aftermath in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Though the place remains anonymous in the novel, the events that the novel refers to, make it obvious to the readers that the novel is set in post-independent Congo. The novel portrays characters from different strata of society struck in the newly decolonized world of Congo. The novel is narrated by Salim, an Indian Muslim shopkeeper, living in a small city. The story revolves around some of the important events in Salim's life projecting his identity crisis and inner conflicts due to the rapid changes that are taking place in his "homeland", Congo. Along with Salim and other characters' lives, the novel deals with the national issues in Congo and shows how the individual lives are affected by the economic and political changes in the country.

Frederic Jameson, an American Marxist Literary Critic and Cultural Theorist coins a term "Third World National Allegory" in his essay named "World Literature in an Age of Multicultural Capitalism". According to Jameson, the "third world" novels are essentially national allegories as they portray an individual's life placing him in a historical moment of national crisis. However, the question may arise, how V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* conforms to Frederic Jameson's idea of "Third World National Allegory". This paper proposes to deal with this question, beginning with a discussion of what Jameson means by "Third World National Allegory", moving onto a discussion of the novel's plot, themes and characters and how they conform to Jameson's concept of National Allegory.

## I

In his essay "World Literature in an Age of Multicultural Capitalism", Frederic Jameson criticized American and European novels because both genres are deliberately becoming too much obsessed with the "inner reality" of their protagonists. Being a Marxist, Jameson prefers a novel that is rooted in the history of a nation and its political struggles. But Jameson observes that American and European novels are losing the political and historical ground, while the "third world" novels are gaining prominence in this arena. Jameson observes that the novels written by "third world" writers combine the individual and the historical aspects. According to Jameson, while American and European novels are focusing upon the "interior reality" of the protagonists marginalizing the "exterior reality", the "third world" writers are combining these two realities by placing the individual within a historical context. Jameson observes that the third world novels are more interesting as they reflect the society, class, antagonism, history and ideology of a nation along with the individual experience.

While defining "National Allegory", Jameson refers to the "third world" novels that deal with the story of one singular person, but reflects the story of a nation, its history, its culture and its people. The protagonist of such a story is struck in an important historical phase. He is caught up in the historical changes that are taking place in his country and his perception of his own self and identity is being reshaped by those changes. According to Frederick Jameson: "All Third World cultural texts are necessarily, . . . allegorical - and this in a very specific way; they are to be read as what I will call national allegories . . . particularly when their forms develop out of essentially Western machineries of representation, such as the novel" (141).

Jameson observes that there is a split between the public and the private in Western Literature, while in "third world" national allegories, these two spheres are interwoven, making these texts historically grounded and politically important. According to Jameson:

[In] Western realist and modernist novel[s], [there] is a radical split between the private and the public, . . . [between] the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes and the economic, and secular political power . . . [on the other hand] [third world narratives] which are seemingly private . . . necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of private individual destiny is always an allegory of embattled situation of the public Third World culture and society. (141- 142)

Though “third world” literature is a story of a private individual and his destiny, its allegorical framework reflects the ideology and politics of a particular historical era that reshape the destiny of the whole nation. Jameson points out, “the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (158). The socio-political and economic contexts are important in such novels as those contexts have “[their] existence and [their] shaping power over . . . individual and collective lives.”

## II

V. S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* portrays the story of a diasporic individual Salim and his existential crisis in post-independent Congo. Though the crisis is shown in a personal level, Salim becomes an allegorical representation of the diasporic people living in Congo. His identity crisis and dilemma reflects the crisis of other immigrants living in Africa due to the socio-political changes in post-independent period. This novel can be considered as Jamesonian “Third World National Allegory” as the novel focuses upon the problems of private life that is deeply rooted in the national crisis, stemming from the nightmare of independence due to the failure of the national leaders. The inter-play of private life and public life and the allegorical representation of the characters categorize this novel as a “Third World National Allegory” in Jamesonian sense.

The story of this novel is set in a particular historical period in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Belgian Congo gained its independence on June 30, 1960 and Patrice Lumumba was chosen as the Prime Minister of Republic of Congo. But the secessionist struggles broke out between South Kasai and Katanga and these struggles gave rise to the political upheaval in Congo, known as "Congo Crisis." Taking advantage of such a crisis, Joseph Mobutu, the chief of staff, Armée Nationale Congolaise (ANC), overthrew Lumumba and became the president in 1965 with the help of Belgium and the United States. Though the President in *A Bend in the River* remains anonymous and known through his title "Big Man", it is obvious from certain events in the novel that "Big Man" refers to General Mobutu and the novel is set in a particular phase of General Mobutu's regime.

In this novel, two stories are interwoven by Naipaul - one is the personal story of Salim and the other is the story of Congo with its post-independent political conflicts and economic disaster. On a personal level, Naipaul deals with the themes of alienation, identity crisis, loss of center and inner conflict of an individual. On the other hand, Naipaul deals with the themes of national importance - loss of history and culture, economic crisis, tribal feuds, political turmoil, division and racial intolerance in Congo. Salim, the protagonist of this novel, is the "focalizer" and we see all the events through his eyes. Salim, during his existential quest for meaning and identity, encounters different characters. There are four sets of characters - Indar, Mahesh, Shobha, Nazruddin, representing the floating diasporic Indians - Zabeth, Metty, Father Huismans, representing the old African civilization and history - Ferdinand and his Lycée friends, representing the "New African Men" - Yvette, Professor Raymond, representing the "Big Man's White Men" (European intellectuals). All these characters allegorically represent the African nation, its people, its immigrants, its history, its culture, its racial conflicts and political upheavals.

Jameson points out, unlike the Western literature, the "third world" literature deals with the story of individuals connected with history of class struggle, and Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* is very sensitive to such issues as

all the characters' lives are "re-shaped" by the socio-political and economic upheavals in Congo. The importance of history in shaping up the individual existence is confirmed immediately at the beginning of 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). The protagonist, Salim, is an Indian Muslim who has never been to India and "inherited" his sense of Indianness from his family. Since birth, he has been paying lip-service to his "inherited" Indianness by mimicking the rituals of "authentic" Indian Muslim families:

[In] our customs and attitudes we were closer to the Hindus of north Western India, from which we had originally come. When we had come no one could tell me. . . . We simply lived; we did what was expected of us, what we had seen the previous generation do. We never asked any; we never recorded. . . . Neither my father, nor grandfather put dates to their stories. Not because they had forgotten or were confused; the past was simply the past. (Naipaul 12)

For Salim, such an "inherited" nationality has no value as all that he knows of his "history and the history of the Indian Ocean, [are derived] from books written by Europeans" (Naipaul 13). He considers Africa as his home as he is living here since his birth. But the racial segregation in post-independent Congo has posed a dilemma for him by marking him as an Indian, though he considers himself to be an African. "Big man", the new President of Congo, runs his "nationalization" (Naipaul 232) mission throughout the country that marks all the migrants as outsiders though they have been living in Africa for generations. After independence, due to such divisions, the comfortable and familiar place, where their ancestors have lived for years, suddenly becomes an unfamiliar and strange place for the migrants. This sudden outsider status drives Salim and other migrants living along the coast into a severe identity crisis. Salim says:

Africa was my home, had been the home of my family for centuries. But we come from the east coast, and that made the difference. The Coast was not truly African. It was an Arab-Indian Persian-Portuguese

place, and we who lived there were really people of the Indian Ocean. True Africa was at our back . . . But we could no longer say that we were Arabians or Indians or Persians; when we compared ourselves with these people, we felt like people of Africa. (Naipaul 12)

Though “little had changed in the manners or minds of men” (Naipaul 14), the external political conflicts turned Salim’s life upside down, and he drifts from place to place detaching himself from his family, relatives and his cultural inheritance. Salim starts his existential quest to recreate an identity and a sense of security for himself. Salim’s psychological trauma becomes apparent when he utters in deep anguish that “[Africa] [is] a prison for me” (Naipaul 21). Salim, being the allegorical representation of diasporic characters, depicts the identity crisis the immigrant people faced in Congo during General Mobutu’s rule. The shift of singular pronoun to plural pronoun signifies the merging of Salim’s individual self with the collective self of the migrants, when Salim utters: “I had to break away. I couldn’t protect anyone; no one could protect me. We couldn’t protect ourselves; we could only in various ways hide from the truth” (Naipaul 22).

Not only Salim, but also the other Indian characters face the same existential crisis regarding their identity. Indar, an Indian young man living in Congo, leaves his ancestral home in search of a promising prospect in the West. He wants to “trample his past” (Naipaul 157) and look forward to a bright future, denying his identity of being an Indian or an African. But he returns to Congo as a complete failure as he is marked as “a man of two worlds . . . [Africa and India]” (Naipaul 168) by the European employers as he is supposed to have “divided loyalties” (Naipaul 171) that makes him unfit for the job of a diplomat. The historical tide of migration, colonization, independence and racial segregation has changed Indar’s life and he confides in Salim that it is not possible to deny history as it is ever-present in the life of an individual.

All these diasporic characters are suffering from insecurity and perpetual homelessness, as Big Man’s “nationalization” (Naipaul 232) has

marked them as outsiders who can no longer consider Africa as their home. Indar ironically comments, "I carry the world within me" (Naipaul 175), signifying the perpetual homelessness of diasporic people like him and Salim. Nazruddin, another Indian character, is always on the move from one place to another in search of a "home". At first he leaves the coastal town and moves to Uganda, then to London and finally to America. Salim contemplates: "Home was hardly a place [we] could return to. Home was something in [our] head. It was something [we] had lost (Naipaul 124) . . . [we] [were] uprooted, [we] had no family, no flag, no fetish" (Naipaul 63).

Big Man's "nationalization" campaign includes not only the mission of uprooting the migrants from African territory, but also the mission of producing the "New African Men". Ferdinand and other Lycée boys represent the "New African Men". Salim comments: "Ferdinand and his friends . . . were young men . . . [who] would soon become administrative cadets in the capital, serving the President [Big Man]. . . . in the Domain they were in the presence of foreigners who had a high idea of the new Africa" (Naipaul 138-139). These promising African young people are trained by the government so that they can lead the future Africa. But ironically, the ways of life that these young people are trained have nothing to do with "real" Africa and its history. These young people are taught to mimic the European ways of life. The young people become African only by skin color and European by taste, attitude and education. Salim observes, "against the white trousers [their] skin was black" (Naipaul 42). Ferdinand is the allegorical representation of Naipaul's "mimic man" who is supposed to lead the future Africa, ironically knowing nothing about the "real" Africa. Salim laments: "Ferdinand does not know past history" (Naipaul 187) and the Africa that Ferdinand knows is the "Africa of words and ideas" (Naipaul 144). Ferdinand is the symbol of ever-changing post-colonial identity. He possesses a superficial idea of his local tradition and history that makes him directionless and confused. Salim comments, "the thought of Lycée full of Ferdinands made me nervous" (Naipaul 55).

While the Indian characters and Lycée boys represent the people in transitional Africa, Zabeth, Metty and Father Huismans represent the “primitive” African which is omnipresent behind the bush on the other side of the river. Naipaul juxtaposes the “New African Man” with the authentic “real” Africans to bring out the hybridity and ambivalence of the identity of the “New African Men”, whose sense of Africanness is formed inside the posh world of the Domain under the “wise guidance” of Europeans. Salim observes, “Zabeth lived a purely African life; for her only Africa was real.” (Naipaul 41). Father Huismans, though a European, is in constant search for authentic African masks, because he wants to retain the cultural history and inheritance that is losing its place in the lives of young Africans trained in European culture. Salim, comments on Huismans’s effort for preserving the last relics of the “real” Africa that is constantly receding:

And to Father Huismans colonial relics were as precious as the things of Africa. True Africa he saw as dying or about to die. That was why it was so necessary, while that Africa still lived, to understand and collect and preserve its things. . . . Father Huismans sees himself at the end of it all, the last, lucky witness. (Naipaul 72-73)

All the characters’ personal lives are re-constructed by the ongoing tribal conflicts, disorganization, anxiety and unrest, due to the oblivious and selfish measures taken by the national leader and his intellectuals – the “national bourgeoisie”. According to Jameson, the “third world national allegory” criticizes the “national bourgeoisie” who is responsible for the failure of national independence. The “national bourgeoisie” or “national middle class” refers to a group of native intellectuals, businessmen and political leaders, who replace the previous colonial rulers after decolonization and become the “neo-colonizers” in their pursuit of money and power. In his essay “the Pitfalls of National Consciousness”, Frantz Fanon defines the nature of this national middle class:

The national middle class that takes over the power at the end of the colonial regime is an underdeveloped middle class. It has practically no economic power, and in any case, it is in no way, commensurate with

the bourgeoisie of the mother country which it hopes to replace. . . . In its narcissism, the national middle class is easily convinced that it can advantageously replace the middle class of the mother country. (1578)

Their main focus is not the welfare of the newly decolonized country and its people, but they try to replace those European colonial rulers and become even more dangerous in their pursuit of power and profit.

In *A Bend in the River*, Mahesh represents the “national bourgeoisie” business class for whom making profit is the chief concern. While “Big Man” is trying to “de-Westernize” his country by uprooting the Colonial monuments, Mahesh is implanting “Big Burger”, a Western food chain franchise for making profits. He willingly gives up to the lure of profit, provided by the Europeans to the national business middle class, so that the Europeans can continue their economic colonization even after the decolonization. To make money, people like Mahesh, knowingly gobbles up the “poisoned sweets” (Naipaul 106) from Europeans as making personal profit is more important for them. “Mahesh was looking for the wonderful imported thing which he would own exclusively, the simple thing which would provide a short cut to power and money” (Naipaul 105).

Like Mahesh, “Everybody is only talking about money [in Africa].” (Naipaul 25). There is no trace of idealism or no concern for removing the plights of poverty-stricken and uneducated people in African villages. The corruption and economic crisis that follow after independence are the outcome of the selfish pursuits of this business class. Fanon observes:

The psychology of the national bourgeoisie is that of the business man, is that of a captain of industry and it is only too true that the greed of the settlers and the systems of embargoes set up by colonialism have hardly left them another choice. . . . [with the national bourgeoisie comes] the decline of morals, the installing of corruption within the country, economic regression, and the immediate disaster of an anti-democratic regime depending on force and intimidation. (1579 - 1586)

While Mahesh represents the greedy business class, the President “Big Man” allegorically represents the “national bourgeoisie” politician or bourgeois dictator. According to Frantz Fanon, the main aim of such an autocrat is not the welfare of the country, but to replace the white colonial rulers. As a result, when such a ruler comes to power, he behaves like his European predecessors. Salim sees no future for Africa under Big Man’s rule: “I saw a disordered future for the country. No one was going to be secure here; no man of the country was to be envied” (118). Again, Big Man is dividing the whole Africa into bits and pieces while he should promote solidarity and unity among his people. He has separated the village culture and city culture. On the one hand, he is promoting the ancient tribal culture in village. On the other hand, he is building up domain in the city where the traditional African culture is thrown away in favor of European culture. There is no effort on Big Man’s part to strike a balance between the past and the present, the old and the new, the traditional and the modern:

[Domain] was the Big Man’s doing . . . Everything the President did had a reason. As a ruler in what was potentially hostile territory, he was creating an area where he and his flag were supreme. As an African, he was building a new town on the site of what had been a rich European suburb . . . he was creating modern Africa. He was creating a miracle that would astound the rest of the world. He was bypassing real Africa, the difficult Africa of bush and villages, and creating something that would match anything that existed in [European] countries. (Naipaul 115-116)

Big Man does not allow anyone to surpass him. “It was the method of the new President, he gave his men power and authority, but never allowed them to settle in anywhere and become local kings” (Naipaul 109). As he himself usurped the political power, he is in constant fear that others may overthrow him. So, in his effort of keeping his rule going on, he behaves like the European colonial ruler and implements the same “divide and rule policy” while the post-independent political situation requires solidarity among the tribes and migrants. Due to his “nationalization” campaign, the

Indian, Greek, Portuguese, Arab migrants lose their home in Africa and are led to disintegration and chaos. The fear of losing his supreme authority has led him to carry on a mindless bloody war between the tribes. He throws away his intellectuals and administrators once “[he decides] he [doesn’t] need them” (Naipaul 220). Zabeth is in constant fear that Big Man may kill her son Ferdinand once he is done with Ferdinand. He is omnipresent everywhere either in the form of poster, photograph or bank notes. Salim observes: “Everywhere the President’s photograph looked down us (Naipaul 139) . . . seeing the President’s photograph everywhere had already made me feel that, whether African or not, we had all become his people” (Naipaul 216). Such a narcissistic and selfish national autocrat cannot lead a nation towards its prosperity, and at the end of the day the European idea that Africa cannot rule itself is proved.

Big man’s final step, his “radicalization” process drives Salim into utter nothingness, as Salim’s last resort, his business, is being ceased by the government and given to an African. Metty informs Salim: “You don’t have anything. They take away your shop. They give it to Citizen Theotime. The President made a speech a fortnight back. He said he was radicalizing and taking away everything from everybody. [From] all foreigners. . . . You don’t have anything, I don’t have anything” (Naipaul 299). As Salim is not a “real” African, he has no place in Africa. The exterior reality of Africa has insidiously intruded into Salim’s interior reality, leaving him hopeless and homeless. Salim discovers that “the free-for-all of independence has come to an end” (Naipaul 87). Before Salim plunges into nihilism, he reflects: “I was waiting for some illumination to come to me. To guide me to the good place and the ‘life’ I was still waiting for . . . But I knew that it wasn’t like that, really, I knew that for us the world was no longer as safe as that” (Naipaul 110).

Fanon observes that after decolonization, people think that the problems will be solved as the colonizers went away. But the colonizers are replaced by the national bourgeoisie. Nationalist consciousness is trapped and the

ideals of independence lay by the wayside. Veena Singh, in her essay "Paradox of Freedom in *A Bend in the River*" observes:

Freedom lies in living consciousness to the essence of life; such a freedom cannot be imposed, it can be realized. In this freedom one frees oneself from the catastrophic idolatry, and blindness to his historical and philosophical concepts, and misconceptions which bind a person to a false future or a statuesque present . . . [but in this novel due to] corruption of consciousness . . . [the freedom is paradoxical] . . . The paradox lies in the fact that with approaching freedom comes the knowledge of non-existence [not illumination]. (123 - 124)

We note the failure of the African nation in achieving such an illuminating freedom because of the "intellectual laziness of the national middle class [and the national ruler] (Fanon 1578). Though the Europeans have left Africa geographically, they are omnipresent in Africa in the form of military help, educationists, economists etc. Big Man needs the help of the European intellectuals and their European conception of Africa for educating the young Africans. Ironically, the source of Big Man's power is his "white men" and he is solely depended upon the white men for continuing his power and rule in Africa. He usurped the power with the help of the Western Power. He needs Western Army for controlling the local tribal feuds and maintaining peace in Africa. The local market is also controlled by the Europeans. Mahesh remarks, "[Europeans have] done their market research and they have decided to make a big push in Africa" (Naipaul 112).

In all spheres, Europeans reign supreme though, from an outer surface, Congo is a "free-state". According to Fanon, the national bourgeoisie is "numerically, intellectually and economically weak . . . [so] the bourgeois caste draws its strength after independence chiefly from agreements reached with the former colonial power" (1586). Such an independence, that can only lead a nation and its long-awaited freedom into violence and chaos, is paradoxical. Naipaul is projecting this nightmare of independence through the disintegration of his protagonist Salim. Haider Eid, in his essay

“Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* and Neo-colonialism as a Comparative Context” comments, “what remains in Naipaul’s Africa is only greedy, consumptive desire, and backward cultural identities. What Naipaul offers us is 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.”

### III

In short, V. S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* is a post-mortem of post-independent Africa and the failure of its independence due to its unpatriotic national leaders. Though the references to various historical events make the geographical location of the novel obvious to the readers, Naipaul has deliberately kept the place and the national leader anonymous, to comment on the wider national crisis in the whole Africa. Naipaul’s allegorical design makes this novel an important document depicting the reasons behind the failure of independence in Africa, and the disintegration and decay that follow after decolonization. To achieve this end, Naipaul creates a fictional world placing the individual characters in a specific historical phase. His protagonist, Salim and other characters become the “microcosmic” representation of the social, political, economic and cultural state of African nation during the wake of decolonization in Africa.

Naipaul, in his *A Bend in the River* depicts how the failure of the national leader throws the individuals living in the country into an identity crisis. In this novel, through the disintegration of the central character Salim, Naipaul attempts to “explore [the] postcolonial responsibility” (Brennan 63) of a national leader, whose unjust and whimsical selfish attitude can lead his people and country into “the heart of darkness.” Frederic Jameson suggests that after decolonization, the “third world” writer’s responsibility is to point out the reasons behind the failure of independence through “the formal literary manifestation of [the] political problem.” Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* as a Jamesonian “third world national allegory” mirrors the picture of national crisis in the decolonized states in Africa and points out

the need for re-shaping the ideology of the national leaders and intellectuals for leading Africa and its people towards prosperity.

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