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Theme of Freedom in selected Novels of V. S. Naipaul

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Abstract: *An important and recurrent theme of V.S. Naipaul books is freedom. The paradox lies in the fact that with the approaching freedom comes the knowledge of non-existence. In A Bend in the River Naipaul treats a violated and colonial society with understanding and detachment. The writer depicts a society of third world countries which is marked by a shared experience, a past threatened by a dark age of colonialism and by a movement for freedom.*

Key Words: Democracy, freedom, independence, tyranny, illusion, circumstances, colonialism, understanding.

Naipaul's fictional world is located in the inter-play of realistic external situations and personal lives. He writes about democracy, freedom and independence in an ironic mould. His people live in the 'free state,' trying to escape from tyranny; they expose themselves to a situation more insidious than the tyranny. In this context, freedom becomes a progressive illusion. Naipaul presents his view of history as a complex interaction between the individual and circumstances, the collective slave and the separate individual, the exploiter and the exploited, and slavery and colonialism. Many commonwealth writers depict the individual caught in the chaos created by heterogeneous blends of motives and ideologies. Man faced with a number of directions, has to exist at many planes of being. When an attitude in these activities is synthesised, it leads to freedom. Freedom lies in living consciousness to the essence of life; such a freedom cannot be imposed, it can be realised. In this freedom one frees oneself from the catastrophic idolatry, and blindness to his historical and philosophical concepts, and the misconceptions which bind a person to a false future or a statuesque present. Naipaul seems to believe that the redemptive action of free man is possible out of the disturbance and unrest. He has become a controversial figure for writing about the half-made societies of the post-colonial world.

The world of Naipaul is restricted and second-hand, being a colonial world. He shows pronounced distrust of conceptual abstractions and points to the corruption of consciousness. In *A Bend in the River* he deals with the themes of slavery, violence and independence. In this novel he questions many assumptions of the world: the racial and political tensions, the disorder and disorganisation of the society, the corruption of the colonised and the coloniser, and above all, the alienation of man leading to his disorientation. Naipaul reveals the reality of a newly independent African state. There is a group of people who occupy a small town at the bend in the river. These are a few Belgians, come Greeks, Italians, and Indians living a "stripped, Robinson Crusoe kind of existence". In "Columbus and Crusoe", he writes about the greed of man which takes him to the unknown lands. He writes about Columbus who is the symbol of these expatriates: "It is the banality of the man. He was looking less for America or Asia than for gold; and the banality of expectation matches a continuing banality of perception." Naipaul emphasises the social necessity of history for the rootless immigrants. The novel *A Bend in the River* draws on an article of Naipaul "A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism in Africa." The Return of Eva Peron contains the gloomy details on Argentina and Zaire. Though in *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul lets the town, the river, the country and its President remain unnamed, it is obvious that he gives fictional treatment to Zaire, a part of the Congo and to the specific period of Mobutu's power, roughly from the mid-1960s to mid-1970s. In the novel, the unnamed town at the bend in the river has seen the internecine wars of independence. The independence and freedom in Naipaul are always associated with the killings, decay and chaos. He writes about it ironically: "Some papers spoke of the end of feudalism and the dawn of a new age. But what had happened was not new. People who had grown feeble had been physically destroyed. That, in Africa, was not new; it was the oldest law of the land."

In *A Bend in the River* Naipaul portrays the ordeals and absurdities of living in the new Third-World countries. In this novel, he is concerned with the depiction of what happens in those unfortunate countries that have just freed themselves from colonial rule but unable to reach the uncertain blessings of modernity. *A Bend in the River*, like *The Mimic Men*, is a novel that disturbs the reader through its reflections on the precariousness of the very idea of civilization and the intellectual biases and political preconceptions.

Salim in *A Bend in the River* is the well-defined hero of the novel. He weighs and assesses his various worlds. Yet his voice as narrator is finally sympathetic and reductive. He is one of them. The adventurous son of a business and slave-owning family of considerable importance and antiquity on the east coast, he finally admits to Metty, his slave-servant, that he is



scarcely able to take care of himself. His humiliations resolve themselves into a philosophical understanding of men :

The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.

Naipaul shows that in a democratic world which stresses respect for the individual, survival is possible only in power groups. The individual not supported by power is always the hunted. The elements of choice and freedom, which gave dignity to existentialist thought, in today's political set-up, are no more the inherent right of an individual but of the man in power.

In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul, through the omniscient, impersonal narrator, creates the personal, individualistic, self-aware, self-centred world of the characters, aware of an external world from which they are detached and free-floating, form a community of the fearful and the lost. They communicate with others only in so far as they understand the 'other' in terms of themselves, forming a single gigantic world personality. The distinction between the role of the protagonist and the other characters in the novel serves the artistic purpose of verisimilitude and authenticity. Thematically he merges into the quality of the life of the island and the town. The realities of the nameless island and the unnamed town, as free-floating and dislocated as their inhabitants, are perceived to be as static, alienated and egotistical as the literal world of ritual and tradition or that confined by materialistic goals as embodied by the East coast life of Africa and the Ridge Community of the island respectively. Naipaul defines the motivation behind these realities as 'self-cherishing' or 'self-regard' : the understanding of the self and the other in terms of power, possession and superiority rather than equality. The world of political and societal reality, as a thing in itself, does not exist. It is real and meaningful only in so far as it impinges on the experiential awareness of the character and forms the stuff of his existence. Objective reality, mingled with the past and present, with aspiration and fantasy, is distorted and made bizarre. At least the material world (money and automatic living) provides a foothold for survival for people who have exhausted their resources and know their limits. For Salim the decisive car rides are between his shop and flat and the residences of the various people with whom, out of his needs, he establishes ties, particularly with Y vette at the Domain. Freedom is in conflict with security and the novels end on a low note:

Life in our town was arbitrary enough. Y.vette seeing me as settled, with everything waiting for me somewhere, had seen her own life as fluid. She felt she wasn't prepared as the rest of us; she had to look out for herself. That was now we all felt, though : We saw our own lives as fluid, we saw the other man or person as solid. But in the town, where all was arbitrary and the law was that it was, all our lives were fluid. We none of us had certainties of any kind. Without always knowing what we were doing we were constantly adjusting to the arbitrariness by which we were surrounded. In the end we couldn't say where we stood.

We stood for ourselves. We all had to survive. But because we felt our lives to be fluid we all felt isolated, and we no longer felt accountable to anyone or anything. That was what had happened to Mahesh. 'It isn't that there's no right and wrong here. There's no right! That was what had happened to me. It was the opposite of the life of our family and community on the coast. That life was full of rules. Too many rules; it was a pre-packed kind of life. Here I had stripped myself of all the rules. During the rebellion-such a long time ago-I had also discovered that I had stripped myself of the support the rules gave. To think of it like that was to feel myself floating and lost. And I preferred not to think about it-it was too much like the panic you could at anytime make yourself feel if you thought hard enough about the physical position of the town in the continent, and your own place in that town.

The old natives of Africa do not like this kind of rule. They feel that their freedom has been snatched from them Naipaul feels skeptical about this freedom and the modernisation of Africa. The natives had to pay their price for their freedom. He writes of Mettry : "Freedom had its price. Once he had the slave's security. Here he had gained an idea of himself as a man to be measured against other men." Naipaul draws our attention to the acres of shacks with mounds of garbage near the modern buildings of the domain. The socialism of the President is just a mask for the personal dictatorship. Discipline for him means absolute loyalty to him. On one side he is trying to Westernise his country, on the other he encourages the cult figure of the African chief. Naipaul hints at the corruption and bribery which are the results of President's policies. He seems to support the white colonial belief that the natives cannot be trusted to govern themselves.

We have earlier discussed that Raymond has tried to modernize the state, without comprehension of its needs and its potential, with imported ideas, conducting research and writing books on the tribes. He has no love for the land. Y.vette, his wife, is more affected by the rebuff she receives from her husband and the Big Man, more involved in her affair with Salim for release from tension and boredom in life, more concerned with her husband's future and his present position than in getting to know the land in which she lives. She feels an outsider in the new African society, and all her attempts are in quest



for freedom.

Zabeth and Ferdinand represent old Africa. They live in the bush in the deep forest. The bush symbolises the old primitive world and their old culture. They define themselves in relation to their old world. The bush is a cover from the violence of new culture and gives them traditional security. Prof. Raymond tells Indar and Salim :

"It takes an African to rule Africa-the colonial powers never truly understand that. However, much the rest of us study Africa-however deep our sympathy, we will remain outsiders." Prof Raymond's statement is true. The disorganized and disordered society of the town at the bend in the river does not provide much chance of any kind of fulfilment. Y vette, Raymond, Mahesh, Indar, Zabeth, Ferdinand and Salim are all outsiders floating and lost without any identity of their own.

Salim is the victim of society. We see him struggling to free himself from the grip of a meaningless society which subsists on archaic ideas through which contemporary existence continues to be viewed and lived, removed from present reality and an assumed past. Like the hunter he struggles through the jungle of the historical past, travelling backwards in time reversing the route the slaves took from the centre to the coast of Africa. Simultaneously in his ancestor's otherwise gory history of slave trade he discovers the sources of adventure, power and romance. He journeys through these imaginatively elevating regions in his stay in the town which remains unreal because unknown by him and with which he develops no real sympathy. It is this failure of sympathy with the land the present which, as the antagonist and the more powerful of the two, strips him own hollowness and vulnerability, dependent on others for his survival. His life he owes to Ferdinand. His bruised and battered dignity is entrusted to Nazruddin and Kareisha to be restored.

He suggests the possibility that human beings may truly meet only where there exists a common world. The recent ruins seem like the relics of a long dead civilisation to Naipaul's protagonist. These are like Father Huisaman's mask, they carry recent date, though they could be 1000 years old. These unsettle Salim's time sense.

He makes tenuous links with the past that will illuminate the dark present. Lilian Feder in his recent book Naipaul's Truth has rightly concluded, "This is not, as it has often been judged, a pessimistic novel. There is tragic optimism in this individual struggle to create a self-pitted against continents whose past and present history calculated to negate it." Thus, freedom in Naipaul's novel is associated with insecurity, violence and revolution.

Other characters in the novel have learned the art of survival because for them there is no safe place, where they can escape from the Big Man's new state. But for Salim, the foreigner, there is the down-river steamer which becomes his means of escape, his means of freedom : It is more than a passenger steamer. It is a travelling market; it is all that many of the people who live along the river know of the outside world.

On this steamer, he wants to carry on a little life in a place of no account. In his flight at the end of the novel he is totally alone, his business, his house, his money, his friends, his servant, all of no account.

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