



## NAIPAUL, POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY POLITICS AND TOTALITARIANISM: ZIZEKIAN RE-READING OF THE NOVEL, *A BEND IN THE RIVER*

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### ABSTRACT

*Based on the fictional evidence in the novel A Bend in the River by V.S. Naipaul, this essay examines how the 'totalitarian symptoms' are sustained within the identity politics in the postcolonial world. This interpretation uses the theoretical insight developed in the Zizekian school of thought on totalitarianism as well as the literary evidence given through the observatory eyes of an inside-outsider, namely the main character Salim in the above novel. It then suggests that 'the Big Man' (presumably Mobutu in Zaire) displays totalitarian potential when he gradually exploits the fragile nationalism and identity politics inspired by the fantasy of the bush, void of the river and the forest in this imaginary African country for his steady ascend to power. He manipulates the 'refined' symbolic background to elevate himself to be an agent-instrument of historical Will, absorbing all the rational content constructed under postcolonial liberalism. The presentation of the totalitarian 'kingship' in his regime is such that its unconditional authority demands nothing but submission to its irrational order that 'externalizes' the social Other; 'the foreigners' and 'the whites'. The totalitarian madness in the Big Man allows all sorts of irrational violence, murders and plunders performed by his political followers who seek some obscene jouissance that is derived through the violation of symbolic Law. Within the above context, through a critical hermeneutic analysis of this novel, this essay concludes that the 'fantasy of the bush' that alienates the social/ethnic Other eventually leads to hysterical rise of totalitarianism that destroys the whole symbolic life in this imaginary African country. The final exodus of the main character Salim indicates that the multi-ethnic composition of the former colonial setting is drastically transforming into something dangerous for traders of foreign origin and is gradually replaced with a monolithic and totalized African hegemony that takes over the life-world in the Bend.*

**KEYWORDS:** V.S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, Totalitarianism, Postcolonial Identity Politics, Slavoj Zizek

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

‘The more you try to change, the more it remains the same’.

Many liberal democratic structures in the postcolonial nations have, in one way or another, fallen into the trap of the totalitarian master. In their social evolution, postcolonial nations have been unable to fully realize the secular and rational social order and still live in between traditional world-order and modern secularism. The dream of independence, once the colonized nations’ imperial masters left them after centuries of exploitations, under new ingenuous masters, has been overshadowed by complete anarchy triggered by economic instability. The present uncertainty and insecurity have unfortunately made them surrender to the call of the totalitarian master who promises the impossible. The true socio-cultural and ethnic divisions within these societies, previously hidden under the imperialistic masters, were dangerously widening to give rise to identity politics and its dictatorial regimes to ‘save us’ from the evils of the westernized modernity. The totalitarian master often suggests those communities to escape from modern evils by returning to the nostalgia of a lost past; probably to a value system prevailed before the arrival of the colonial master. The nostalgia to return to a fantasized past is identified as a ‘postmodern phenomenon’ where people, as part of escapism from the complexities of modern secularism (Habermas, 2007),

look for security in the ideology of the tradition. The tension generated by the collapse of the tradition and the forceful intrusion of modernity have caused them to believe in tradition and retaliate to modernity through the weapons borrowed from a fundamentalist past. The fictional evidence in the novel *A Bend in*

*the River* (2002) displays how the horror of the authoritarianism gradually overtakes the entire life-world of the individuals, disregards even some of the most significant modern values and social relationships, and how they become irrational and blindly obedient subjects to the command of some unseen irrational authority. This tricky ‘shift in the master’ evident in the dictatorial character in the novel, who suddenly moves from modern values to the fantasy of the bush can be identified as a postcolonial symptom that is overwhelmingly prevalent in the developing nations. Instead of true social transition, these political maniacs want the societies to freeze and end in a symbolic death. But the real problematic is that the subjects in these societies endlessly believe in and wait for such rulers whom they think can rescue them.

Despite its truly revolutionary potential, the postcolonial politics was also influenced by contemporary nationalism (Hardt & Negri, 2000) that believed in *classified difference* such as gender, race, language, age etc. Instead of universal emancipation, identity politics grew on its inherent misidentification called ‘inclusion and exclusion’ (Hall & Paul, 1996), and its fundamental essence was based on *self* that corresponds to some imaginary common origin or shared characteristics. Instead of resuscitating broader political themes of universal significance, such passionate identification of *differences* and restoring historically shared values and hopes have been effective “in the face of confusing insecurity of a modern secular global society” (Zizek, 2011, p. 96). Zizek (2011) terms this prevalent trend as a “pseudo-liberating effect of contemporary nationalism” (p. 96) that is founded on the obscene permissive superego suspended on a moral prohibition that guarantees *surplus of enjoyment* (Zizek,

2002b). The hysterical patriotic nationalists who set the borders and frontiers between 'inside and outside' (Wells, 2014) and whose identity politics are limited to the false ideology of 'perfect final stage of mankind' (Sharpe & Boucher, 2010) are devoid of the universal motives of twentieth century revolutionary politics. They rather *over-identify* with the hysterical demands of a particular identity group and use those grievances to give unrealistic promises across all social classes. It is identical that in the novel, 'the Big Man' gradually gained support from the established institutes including the aristocratic and newly emerged business classes to successfully run a 'reactionary-modernist' regime and was able to manipulate the most developed modern characteristics such as media and technology to reach his target.

The term 'fragility' represents the fact that the existing postcolonial structure becomes helpless when the totalitarian master claims legitimacy to control all the aspects of modern life-world. According to Žižek (2001), the obedience derives from an elementary authoritarian 'wisdom' which convinces us of the fact that the human nature is fundamentally weak and corrupted where correction has to be done by a strong master. It is only such strong figure who can control man's antisocial impulses. But the postmodern totalitarian master goes a bit further than the traditional authoritarian in which the former allows (or permits) its subjects not only to 'obey' his orders but 'enjoy' performing the duty (Žižek, 2001). The transgression is even, in our permissive times, not only appropriated but encouraged (Žižek, 2002a), according to the novel, to kill 'those who could read and write' or do business (Naipaul, 2002). At the same time, unlawful acquisition of businesses

owned by non-locals or any other evil was justified under 'radicalized' nationalism which demarcated insider-outsider dichotomy. The symptom of socio-cultural exclusion based on identity politics of those who do not fall into new categorization as a symptom could never make postcolonial politics universal. The brutal killings also symbolize the returning to tradition; desire to claim that the primitive values of African tribal still applicable to expel the enemy. It also confirms that returning to the fantasy of the bush can bring back the lost harmony of their society. Totalitarian ruler often promotes to look back at the origin of a certain historical and/or discursive past and encourages a nostalgic revisit to the past to justify and legitimize the banality of the present. In the novel, for example, the irrational murders committed against the foreigners is justified through particularized (not universalized) words 'necessary', 'our way', 'radicalized' and 'nationalized'. Such return in a totalitarian regime is based on the Discourse of the Master (Wonyosi, 1981) that promises the 'final perfection for humankind'.

Based on such discursive and ideological element, as observed by Žižek, totalitarian rises from within the fragile coordinates of liberal framework (Žižek, 2011) and this development is examined through the events depicted in the novel. It will also review Žižek's view, "culture itself is nothing but a halt, a break, a respite in the pursuit of barbarity" (Žižek, 2011, p. 6) to contextualize the banality of violence against 'foreigners' in the novel. To apply the theoretical insights abovementioned, the novel *A Bend in the River* appears to provide rich empirical and ethnographic evidence as micro-political examples in an African context. The rise of authoritarianism from a traditional aboriginal context, the gradual collapse of bourgeois

democratic values, subject's unquestioning obedience to the irrational call and the superego enjoyment of the new totalitarian master, terrorized political subjects and the deteriorating institutionalized liberalism are all exemplarily illustrated in the novel. This example creatively developed by V.S. Naipaul gives a universal model for any postcolonial country which can 'produce' imaginary enemies under conspiracy theory; secretly plotting against the indigenous to 'steal' their enjoyment. This situation sadly generated an unhealthy socio-political environment for the *Others* to make a major human exodus.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Selected evidence in the novel *A Bend in the River* by Naipaul will be interpreted with the use of theoretical discourse developed by Zizek Studies. The analysis experiments how Zizekian tools can be used to interpret postcolonial literary texts in exemplifying the symptomatic rise of totalitarianism. By taking some contextualized dialogues and events in the novel this interpretation will review how the political totalitarianism is grounded in a phallogocentric metaphysical closure to encompass all the aspects in the life-world to legitimize its rise and existence, free from any ethical and ontological edifice. The Zizekian toolbox will testify how the postcolonial politics and literature must go one step further to deviate itself from identity politics (Eagleton, 1997; Jameson, 1986) and embrace the universal emancipatory discourse in order to prevent 'the ignorance' that sustains the potential for such symptom.

## **3. RESULTS**

The novel *A Bend in the River* displays the rise of totalitarian symptom from the very

postcolonial liberal framework. The fragile existential nature of the postcolonial subjects and the lack of patriarchal order could not prevent the rise of totalitarian politics that exploits the nationalistic power-play in this imaginary African context. Naipaul successfully capitalizes on the character 'The Big Man' who rapidly rises to power by manipulating the psychological insecurity and anti-modern tendencies of this transitional postcolonial state. As displayed by Naipaul's de-territorialized perspective that is 'extimately' intimate to his Eurocentric gaze, the ultimate destiny of identity politics leads to totalitarianism undermining all the universal emancipatory hopes in the twentieth century.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### **a. Contextualizing *A Bend in the River*, Postcolonial Politics and Naipaul:**

The novel *A Bend in the River*, first published in 1979, is considered to be 'one of greatest novels about the process of "becoming" (as opposed to "being") a nation, especially after the colonizing powers have departed' (Lowe, 2011) from their crown colonies. At the same time, the above 'becoming' is narrated by the author whose inner concerns are most touchingly revealed in this novel. Naipaul has 'brilliantly reimagined', according to the Guardian book review (MacCrum, 2015), the fictional landscape that conjures 'a hellish vision of the developing world's endemic dislocation'. It further says that in the novel Naipaul echoes the memories of a journey that he made to Kinshasa in 1975. However, the true context of history of this Central African country that inspired Naipaul to write this novel remains unnamed. But as a familiar fictional feature for Naipaul, structurally speaking, the central character moves from periphery to the centre metaphorically

signifying the organic historical flow of postcolonial history in which the subjects always unconsciously dream to be under the surveillance gaze of the master as a pre-condition of their existence. It is within this flow that Naipaul observes the archeology of the destiny of a postcolonial nation. However, his main character Salim, 'a man without a side', is the first-person, and central focal point through which the author positions himself to reveal the chaotic and degrading human condition in this geo-spatial territory that experienced the rise of yet another post-independent archetypical African dictator. Against the known historical tide from periphery to centre, paradoxically, Salim travels backwards. Through his ancestral roots of slave trading (Naipaul, 2002) Salim walks back into the bush. The deeper into the jungle Naipaul drives more illiterate, chaotic and violent Africa becomes. But he just drives through "bush and more bush" (Naipaul, 2002, p.3) to eagerly embrace his "new life" (Naipaul, 2002, p. 4). Naipaul uses the same slave metaphor to describe his own revisit to Africa. He says, "Like the slave far from home, I became anxious only to arrive. The greater the discouragement of the journey, the keener I was to press on and embrace my new life" (Naipaul, 2002, p. 4). However, reviewing Naipaul's backward journey into the African bush, Richard Kelly (1989) notices that "he [Naipaul] has exposed the terrifying fragility of life that lies behind the false ideas and seductive dreams of a more perfect home in the past, a safe house in the wood" (Kelly, 1989, p. 1). As a prelude to the novel *A Bend in the River* Naipaul writes an essay titled 'A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa' in 1975 to the *New York Review of Books* (cited in Kelly, 1989, p. 132). In the novel, Naipaul (2002)

cleverly penetrates the rhetoric and propaganda architecture of Mobutu's government in Zaire to expose his "self-aggrandizement, greed, and terror" (p. 132) engendered by personal obsession. Mobutu worked for the Congolese National Army and became a general. He seized power in 1965. Then he changed his name from Joseph Mobutu to Mobutu Sese Seko which sounded more African than the former. He ruled (or rather owned) Zaire as a medieval king who is more or less similar to an African chieftaincy primarily representing the tribal sexual virility (Naipaul, 1989, p. 133) and irrational authority. Mobutu's rise to power proves one significant failure in the postcolonial world; its inability to free from the past. As Kelly (1989) mentions, "Despite the attempts of the Europeans to civilize Africa and despite African nationalists following in the footsteps of European corruption, 'Everyone feels the great bush at his back. And the bush remains the bush, with its own logical life' " (p. 134).

Mobutu as 'great African nihilist' wanted to *recreate the pure logical world of the bush* by refusing to borrow a conscience, a soul or a language (Kelly, 1989). As portrayed in 'the Big Man' in the novel, an anonymous African dictator, Naipaul depicts how Mobutu makes the mass to worship him, fear him, and go along with his fantasy. With this superb political observation, what makes Naipaul different from other postcolonial contemporaries qualifying him to the most appropriate to investigate the implication of tradition in postcolonial identity politics is his perspective and how he geographically locates himself in the whole picture. In the novel *A Bend in the River* Naipaul maintains an *insider-outsider* perspective where he places himself as an 'outsider' who is in a more privileged position to observe the inside than

the insiders (Lindbeck & Snower, 2001). Though Naipaul is geographically distant from the postcolonial reality, he constantly maintains an imaginary over-proximity with what he departed from. This paradox is identified by Zizek as 'extimacy' (Myers, 2003) where 'the externalized content' (the postcolonial reality) keeps coming back to Naipaul as an intimate inner essence. In this strategy, he maintains a Zizekian objective detachment towards the world in which he lives since one cannot properly "see the world if you are part of it" (Myers, 2003, p. 12). He favors the rational secular impulses of the modern colonization project while objectively suspecting the catastrophic elements that can rise from it. He bravely exposes the imperialistic motives of the colonial masters in a very dialectical manner which reminds us of a very popular statement once made by Walter Benjamin (1969), "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (p. 256). Naipaul (2002) examines the dialectic of colonization as follows.

"But the Europeans could do one thing and say something quite different; and they could act in this way because they had an idea of what they owed to their civilization. It was their great advantage over us. The Europeans wanted gold and slaves, like everybody else; but at the same time they wanted statues put up to themselves as people who had done good things for the slaves. Being an intelligent and energetic people, and at the peak of their powers, they could express both sides of their civilization; and they got both the slaves and statues" (p. 19).

From the chaotic tribal and frenzied nationalistic background, towards the end of the novel, the democratic edifice of the novel slowly collapses into the call of totalitarian

master. The sustaining ideological fantasy always demanded a 'patriarchal father figure' who can restore Law and order while secretly giving permission (*permitted enjoyment*) to violate it (Myers, 2003). This situation is termed as 'enjoying Law' where obscene permissiveness is granted which gives surplus enjoyment (Dean, 2006). In so doing a totalitarian leader not only wants others to follow him but makes others to actively love him (Zizek, 2001). The totalitarian master is enlarged and presented as the bearer of a 'second body' which carries the sublime object of ideology. The subjects are convinced that there is always more than himself, for example, he is made of some 'special stuff' derived from some origin which gives him a special right to rule. As Sharpe and Boucher (2010) note, "such ruler uses his sublime-ideological mandate in this discourse as an accorded special, even sublime authority" (p. 92). In case of 'the Big Man', the President of Naipaul's novel, his portrait was presented to people as someone *bigger* than the others. The novel says, "With local people the President was always presented as a towering figure" (Naipaul, 2002, p. 262). He is elevated to become "more than himself" where others are made to believe that they are "so small you can scarcely see them" (p. 262). His image that is politically displayed everywhere is "bigger than everybody else's every day" (p. 262). The essence which elevated him to be more than himself gives him the legitimacy to control everything.

Subsequently, the novel proceeds to evidence how irrationally the process of nationalization coiled and back by the President himself gained momentum, as observed by an ordinary country man, Metty. "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” (Naipaul, 2002, p. 299). Under radicalization, Salim who was the proprietor of his own business became the manager. When Salim lost his business, out of alienation, he turned to earn quick money through illegal means in order to get out of this country- according to the author; honourable people became first-time law breakers. One result of the radicalization is to convert people to break the law for survival or to face irrationality through irrationality itself. When people become transgressive, violating law, then only the totalitarian ruler can function as a benevolent master who forgives your sins, asks for you to carry on with your immorality and then ask for obedience (while demanding more authority to control your immoral superego). This is a totalitarian trap which postmodern liberal structure could so far not evade.

When people pay homage through brutal carnage, it is part of the jouissance of the act. The killing is done without any regret for another cause; not only just to make the President happy but to ‘excite’ him so as to get excited in return. Naipaul witnesses how this perversion continues, “Through people’s courts they were going to do the killing better this time and ‘everybody will have to dip their hands in the blood’ ”(Naipaul, 2002, p.322). Further, “it is going to be terrible when the President comes...He must know they’re preparing something for him here” (pp.322-323).

The price people have to pay to a totalitarian master is infinite in terms of symbolic exchange. The price also includes the royal blood that gives the necessary justification for such regime to be ‘unique’ amongst the

ordinary or elevate above the ordinary. This feature can clearly be found in above mentioned Emperor Boky (Bokassa-Emperor-for-Life in Central African Republic) as portrayed in the African Play Opera Wonyosi in which ruler carries ‘the blood of the Kings’ and ‘not ordinary’ (Soyinka, 1981). The fake revolution, egalitarianism and nation building of Boky (Clingham, 1998) are all part of the ritualistic play that is ‘staged’ for the public to believe. Zizek terms this as an institutional ritual where everyone is made to believe in it. It is not compulsory for people to believe in it, they can pretend to practice the rituals of believing nevertheless, “Traditional authority was based on what we could call the mystique of the institution. Authority based on its charismatic power on symbolic ritual, on the form of the Institution as such...” (Zizek, 2002b, p. 249).

Returning to organic brutality of their tribal-primitive existence is ideologically sustained by the institutional ritual of believing in the ‘uniqueness’ and the perverse ‘benevolence’ of the totalitarian master who ‘allows’ the people to unleash their obscene fantasies.

The liberal-bourgeois principle of rational authority is transformed to irrational and unconditional authority in the post-liberal totalitarian context. In other words, bureaucratic knowledge in the previous system becomes ‘madness’ which operates ‘by itself’ without referring to a decentered point (Zizek, 2005) to symbolically justify its authority. As a result, such authority may not tolerate universal agencies which stand for justice, human rights or freedom of expression etc. or any other bodies which pass judgments about Law and Order. It would easily find an externalized ‘enemy’ or ‘traitor’ who conspires to ‘steal’ the essence of the nation (which it derives mostly from a nostalgic

history). The gradual isolation, change in language policy, re-structuring the colonial education and governance (so called radicalization), policies to return to tradition and intolerance in criticism by external bodies are symptomatic political developments in such a context. The character Salim, as a trader who travels into the interior African setting gradually experiences the stages of above developments. The changes in the indigenous African characters such as Metty or Ferdinand in the wake of authoritarianism under nationalistic banner can be understood as 'unconscious obedience to the irrational call of the Master' (that of the Big Man falsely represented as the big Other; the Law); an element that is inherent in every human being. The discussion in this paper focuses on how the subjective macho- sadistic drive within us is successfully utilized by the Master under such context.

Though it is a dangerous paradox, the reason for man's return to historicity, which is always a narration of the victor who "legitimizes his victory by presenting the previous development as the linear continuum leading to his own triumph" (Zizek, 2008, p. 93), is to relieve himself from the anxiety and tension generated by encountering secularism. History (or in other words 'tradition') will comfort man in transition with its interpretive potential that guarantees its subjects on continuity and identity (Habermas, 1975). Tradition has a double function here; it can analytically dissolve the validity claims that cannot be 'discursively redeemed; and it can be 'living' in a nature-like manner to shape our consciousness. According to Zizek (2008),

The postmodern anhistorical stasis, on the other hand, is torn between repetition qua suspension of movement by means of which we "synchronize" our menaced position with

that of our predecessors, and between repetition qua aced position with that of our predecessors, and between repetition qua nostalgia, the proper object of which is not image of the past but rather the very gaze enraptured by the image-nostalgia always relies on such a reflective turn (p.93).

He further notices that what is fascinating about the gaze is that it is still "able to immerse itself 'naively' in the etheric image of the lost past" (p.93). It is the nostalgia which demands the subjects in traditional societies to travel backwards and find comfort. At the same time, there is also a drive to 'repeat' the events and conditions in past once more (for an example, recreating the days of a particular King or Queen). But such a revisit is completely challenged by the values promoted by consumerism. A common value such as 'simplicity' that a community derives from a particular history is always negated by the constant demand by the Capitalist market to consume more, buy new goods, change old life style and be part of the global culture etc.

The empirical evidence in the selected works by V.S. Naipaul displays how the horror of authoritarianism and fundamental tendencies gradually overtake the life-world of individuals, disregard indeed some most intimate relationships and how individuals become obedient subjects to the command of unseen irrational authority. Traditional societies are the most tragic subjects of this irrational subjugation because of their inherent fragility in rationalization of the unconscious demand to 'obey'. This situation can be identified as a global symptom of developing nations in the transitional context from tradition to modernity after prolonged colonial rule, where communities are not fully absorbed by the cognitive preparation towards civilization and secularism. The pedagogical



institutes that should undertake this 'preparation' were either not organically made to accomplish such a task (they simply wanted to produce 'low skilled workers' to run the colonial administrative machine) or could not complete its mission due to the abrupt termination (the White Master's withdrawal from subject countries). The works of Naipaul stand as strong ethnographic texts to illustrate this symptomatic and tragic development which envelops most Middle Eastern countries, a significant amount of African blocks, Latin African nations and, arguably, the entire South Asian contexts (including some parts of South East Asia). Hence, this research is devoted to illuminate the literary evidence in the works by Naipaul as strong post-independent evidence of inherent vulnerabilities of traditional societies in the wake of their transition to modernity.

#### **b. A Bend in the River and the Rise of Totalitarianism:**

For many critics, *A Bend in the River* can be considered as one of the best novels written by Naipaul. It is a novel that not only places its ontology in the geo-spatiality between modernity and primitivity but exposes Naipaul's "creative tension between an urge to depart from his roots and an urge to return to them" (Park, 1996, p.177). Set in a post-colonial African context in Zaire, Naipaul fictionally deals with Mobutu, the then President who is transformed to be the new King in the country. Moving away from the liberalist democratic frame he elevates himself to be very influential and omnipresent among the ordinary by self-propagating his image. For example, putting his photographs everywhere in the city (Feder, 2001) the Big Man wants to appear 'grander' than his European counterparts. Though he often highlights a bright future and dignity for Zaire

the superficiality of his speech seems contradictory and hypocritical (Eid, 2000). The contradiction between discursive politics (the place of utterance) and practice (difference) is understood as a common symptom in postcolonial politics, but the very 'gap' between these two is the strategic space of the totalitarian master in which he denies universal emancipatory politics. Though the totalitarian master promises 'difference' by trying to introduce 'more difference than difference' he makes sure that the existing situation remains the same. Hence *The Big Man* justifies the reactionary insurrection and popular nationalism that aim at the ethnic other in the name of 'change' and 'difference' (the new Africa), but this very localized gesture destroys the universal revolutionary potential of their struggle. The ethnic politics that theorizes expulsion of all the foreigners does not bring any justice for the disadvantaged mass but rather leads the whole effort to the cold water of isolationism.

In this frozen political atmosphere, the intellectuals also play a negative role in the face of this deadly rise of authoritarian political syndrome. The elites in the Domain display their negligence when they are not serious enough about the way the Big Man develops his political cult within the nationalistic slogans. While socializing with their own members, the learned elites simply ignore the well designed fantasy political project launched by the Big Man.

As the initial gesture towards the rise of totalitarianism (Arendt, 1976; Zizek, 2002a), it is intellectual negligence that modern history has experienced on many occasions. According to Wijesinha (1998), "The tragedy, as Naipaul shows in his account of the domain, and of the intellectuals who write papers in support of the Big Man's historical

extravagances, is that those who ought to see it as a duty to prick the bubble instead join together in inflating it further. And this is not as a result of fear, which would be understandable if regrettable, but springs from the need for comfort and the hope of reward. The consequence is that the monster grows too large to be readily controlled, and when the country begins to crack up no easy solution is available” (1998, p.35). The role of intelligentsia in the face of anti-democratic gestures by dictatorial regimes is the key eye-opener in *A Bend in the River*. Therefore, in line with totalitarian examples in the world, Naipaul offers a very strong universal fictional background as to how negligence leads to total destruction.

Salim, the protagonist of the novel whose perspective is through which the novel is written, has been almost a father to Ferdinand. Ferdinand’s mother is a tradeswoman coming from distanced tribal land who does not want her child to live in the world she was born to. According to the descriptions by the novelist, the origin of the Ferdinands belongs to one of those entities discarded by the modern project. He, therefore, has to travel from the ‘unknown world’ to the known since he belongs “to many islands of nature and tradition survived in modernity” (Sharpe & Boucher, 2010, p.142). As the novel poetically illustrates, they want to go away from the timeless pathways from the River. Though modernity and secularism were global developments, still there were sections that did not experience the surprising societal changes it brought forwards. Even the changes that occurred during colonialism could only partially influence the traditional social order and the biases in tradition, in such entities, mostly remained intact or unchanged. Their life style, beliefs, ideologies and superstitions continued from the pre-modern to the modern.

Those who were not fully cognitively integrated to the modern rational world nostalgically desire to travel backwards to the psychological comfort of the past escaping from the complexities of modernity. The totalitarian masters promptly promise to ‘materialize’ such fantasies for them.

The depiction of woman in a community mirrors the primordial psychology of that community. The description below about Zabeth, Ferdinand’s mother, is an examples as to how she survives by hiding her beauty as a woman in a business career where she has to travel a long distance. Rather than feeling free in her existence, she reverts to a ‘pre-modern’ (primitive) method to become ‘unattractive’ among men so that “no one molested her” (Naipaul, 2002, p. 10). In the same text Naipaul (2002) describes this as follows,

“There was something else about Zabeth. She had a special smell. It was strong and unpleasant, and at first I thought-because she came from a fishing village- that it was an old and deep smell of fish. Then I thought it had to do with her restricted village diet. But the people of Zabeth’s tribe whom I met didn’t smell like Zabeth. Africans noticed her smell. If they came into the shop when Zabeth was there they wrinkled their noses and sometimes they went away” (p.10).

Her act of ‘distancing’ or alienating herself from primitive patriarchal society, as far as her existence is concerned, is self-degrading and ideological. In this manner, she could fit into the existing status quo while not being a part of it. The above self-negation is reflected in Metty’s claims: “Zabeth’s smell was strong enough to keep mosquitoes away” (Naipaul, 2002, p.11). Though she naturally possesses a fleshy body that can attract men in this continent, she (may be unwillingly) denies to

be the object-desire of man while carrying on her tradeswoman role with the patriarchal order. Further, the novel also describes the tribal background from which both Zabeth and Ferdinand emerge to the current postcolonial world. Her disguised and degraded (fake) personality does not stop her son going to the 'world' beyond the tribal boundaries. Hence Zabeth's inner motive is to mobilize beyond the traditional order to embrace modernity. It is this paradoxical position between the uncertainty, insecurity, and the anxious 'ideological distance' towards her present existence and the sustaining fantasy towards modernity that could be exploited by the totalitarian master.

The truth behind her disguised being is to transform her child to be more 'human' and 'civilized' or, in other words, "something better for her son" (Naipaul, 2002, p.41). She entered Ferdinand to a school in the city and boarded him in Salim's place because she thought Salim being a foreigner and "English speaking as well, someone from whom Ferdinand could learn manners and the ways of the outside world" (p.41). Her desire indicates that she wanted her son to be with someone who is 'civilized' or at least knows how to be civilized. Zabeth wants her son to move away from the hard 'African life'.

It seemed to me natural that someone like Zabeth, living such a hard life, should want something better for her son. This better life lay outside the timeless ways of village and river. It lay in education and the acquiring of new skills; and for Zabeth, as for many Africans of her generation, education was something only foreigners could give (Naipaul, 2002).

Zabeth was aware of the civilizing potential within education in transforming individuals

into civilized beings, rupture from nature. The civilizing potential in education is illustrated where societies transform into advanced stages through higher cognitive levels achieved via education, which is always acquired with the help of an external agency (foreigner). Though she has seen more stylish people than Salim in the town, she senses 'the difference' in Salim as a person who can transmit the basic values in modern way of life to her son.

The tragic nature of local politics is that 'the outsider' who can transform the inner nature of Africans could not survive in this magical land. A Bend in the River shows that the rise of ethnocentric 'nationalization' across Africa was meant to take up every property that belonged to foreigners of non-African origin, a category Salim belongs to. It is done without properly investigating into the cost and benefit of such take over. Perhaps the traders are historically viewed skeptically and the conspiracy theories can easily work with them. What this process finally meant was under new political re-structuralization, every aspect of the life-world was influenced by the new 'unquestionable authority' which is the "hidden truth of the discourse of the pre-modern masters" (Sharpe & Boucher, 2010, p.92). Finally, from the perspective of the victim, the functioning of the totalitarian symptom is displayed at its best when Salim's business was taken over by Theotime under the new system. "It was strange. He wanted me to acknowledge him as his boss. At the same time, he wanted me to take allowances for him as an uneducated man and an African. He wanted both my respect and my tolerance, even my compassion" (Naipaul, 2002, p.308). Salim was mentally 'tortured' by the fact that he is 'supposed' to be there physically and witness the downfall of his own business

through the (mis)-management of an uneducated local. He is made to be present in a place which is 'actually' not his and is expected to be 'remorseful' to something that is alienated to him. The true nature of totalitarianism is that people need to pretend to believe in the rotten system in power even though they don't really need to relate it. One has to act as if he or she does not recognize the true evil in the political body.

Another feature of fundamentalist totalitarianism is the anti-educational motive which bans critical thinking and inquiry (Hapugoda 2015). This aspect is largely evident again in *A Bend in the River* which reiterates, "They are going to kill everybody who can read and write, everybody who ever puts on a jacket and tie" (Naipaul, 2002, p.322). Apart from the anti-Imperial resistance towards colonial education, there is an obvious element of returning to the pre-modern social primitivism where, instead of rational enlightenment, mystification of the life-world becomes a practice. In eliminating the outsiders or *ethnic others* the political followers are granted a sadistic permission to violate all universal laws about humanity and deploy banal evil upon the externalized other. The novel clearly evidences that people outside Naipaul's (2002) small circle in the Domain were not fully human who knows the "worth of the other man" (p. 136). People from other tribes are slaughtered like 'animals' according to pre-modern tribal beliefs which now go hand in hand with nationalistic slogan and anti-Imperialistic sentiments. "They haven't done anything to you in jail. That's only because it hasn't occurred to them" (2002, p.319). The above statement reveals that Salim's life entirely depends on how the locals 'feel' about him but not as a result of whether he is judged on any transparent legal

grounds. Irrespective of being a foreigner or an indigenous person, one's actions must be judged by a neutral party with reasonable evidence. In this light of death of reason (reason being something which should be inculcated through education), the symbolic entity or the modern social order in the post-colonial world has seriously been damaged by the 'irrational call of the primordial master'.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Naipaul has once said, "To arrive at this sense of a country trapped and static, eternally vulnerable, is to begin to have something of the African sense of the void. It is to begin to fall, in the African way, into the dream of a past-the vacancy of river and the forest" (cited in Kelly, 1989, p.135). So, the major turning point in this African community towards totalitarian symptom is marked by its initial gesture to fall into the dream of the past. From that nightmare they wake up to a violent present. Apparently the 'void' is never filled by the primordial master's cunning resuscitation of irrational fantasy of the past. This return is always a dangerous political symptom. The novel *A Bend in the River* evidences the symptomatic rise of totalitarian master from within the fragile postcolonial political structure and proves that returning is not at all a logical solution. Exploiting the existing insecurity and uncertainty towards secular modernity as well as the identity politics of the postcolonial nations, the totalitarian master ideologically promises a 'short circuit' to evade the present chaos and inconsistency of those nations. The above political reality is successfully and symptomatically portrayed in Naipaul's novel, a feature which makes the novel a strong empirical reflection for the failed project of decolonization.

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