

Negotiating Cultural Conflicts and Diasporic Identity in *A Bend in the River*

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Abstract:

Migratory practices lead to a change in the social-cultural construct of a geographical space. Due to the increase in global movement of people, most countries have diasporas spread across the world, and they also host diasporas from other countries. This has influenced the process of cultural exchange and interaction. However, in such a scenario, though assimilation can take place, cultural clashes and conflicts are inevitable. To contextualise this phenomenon, the present article seeks to evaluate the novel *A Bend in the River*. The paper argues that diasporic belonging in post-colonial Africa in the novel is unstable, as it is influenced by coercion, power and tension. By foregrounding the precarious lives of diasporic subjects in foreign lands, the article examines how history and power influence cultural coexistence and harmony. Further, the paper interrogates the lived realities of inhabiting an 'other' land and the potential for coexistence and fraternity beyond the boundaries of ethnicity, racism, and discrimination.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Ethnicity, Homeland, Coexistence.

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Introduction

Post-colonial societies are those societies that have emerged after the end of colonial rule. These societies gained independence in the twentieth century, but they are continuously shaped by colonialism, particularly in areas of culture, economy, and language. Due to the colonial rule, many people migrated to these societies before the countries gained independence. One of the key features of such societies is the presence of multiple cultures inhabiting the same space. Peaceful coexistence and harmony should be practised in such a scenario, but this results in struggle over issues of identity, language, and power.

Literature plays a crucial role in representing these lived realities, and V.S. Naipaul's novels are extremely helpful in delineating the condition of these people. Set in different locales, amidst vivid cultural and social backgrounds, his novels, insinuate the need to look at the concepts of space, culture, and identity from a flexible and non-conformist perspective for peaceful cohabitation. *A Bend in the River* is one such novel that depicts real-life problems faced by the settler migrants, regardless of their contribution to the economy of their host land. Sheldon G Weeks writes, "Naipaul has captured what it means for a small group of people to live in a neo-colonial backwater caught up in rebellion, corruption, 'development' and change" (64). Naipaul has given a structure to this novel by dividing it into four sections, namely, The Second Rebellion, The New Domain, The Big Man, and, Battle. The narrator is Salim, and he talks about other characters and events occur in the novel. Notably, the novel begins with rebellion and ends with battle. However, the battle is not just physical but a mental battle too. In this novel, Naipaul has explored the psychology of characters who have to face upheavals resulting from authoritarian rule and unchecked power. By looking at the kind of words chosen

by the novelist in the title of these sections, one can easily sense the tense and unpleasant atmosphere of the novel. The novel opens with tension which continues throughout the novel.

The novel has been set chiefly in a small unnamed corner of Africa- a third-world country, populated by people belonging to various cultures and ethnicities such as Indians, Greeks, and Belgians. It opens with Salim moving to this unnamed corner and starting his business, but before his arrival, the town, which has gained independence from colonial forces, is destroyed. The independence brings death, violence, and destruction and a new ruler, Big Man, the President and his vision of New Africa and the problems that settlers/ foreigners face. The novel is woven around the dichotomies of East and West, subjugation and subservience, acculturation and rejection, moving and settling. It reeks of chaos and violence at many places, which makes it somewhat depressing in tone. Chaos and violence are one of the problems, as it results in “frequent recurrence of uprisings and utter disruption of law and order which require use of armed force and violence to reestablish control” (Dulai 306).

Diasporic Identity:

Rebecca Davies defines diaspora as a structural and subjective condition shaped by historical, social and economic processes at the structural level and negotiating changes at the subjective level (61). I shall discuss the subjective condition here. As a community, diasporas are continually acquiring and reshaping their identities. They form new communities, maintain their cultural practices and rituals, remember their homelands and participate in economic and social activities in their host lands too. In this process, their cultural identity continues to change. Stuart Hall rejects the idea of identity as a finished product. Identity is variable by nature and is continuously shaped by historical experiences, social experiences and memory. He argues,

“Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222). Homi K. Bhabha holds that identity is dynamic and the borders operate as an in-between space where identities can evolve and get reshaped (2). Pramod K. Nayar thinks of Bhabha’s reflection on identity as a “process of negotiation” (201). In the novel *A Bend in the River*, the negotiation of identity can be clearly seen. Salim, the protagonist, belongs to a community of Muslims who inhabit the Eastern coast, which is populated by Indians, Portuguese, Arabs, and Persians. Although his family have been in Africa for so many generations, they have retained their separate ethnic identity. However, Salim’s identity is shaped by his historical roots and migration too. He is deeply involved with his roots and has acquire deep insights into the situation of his community regarding its wider social and cultural context. Belonging to the Indian community in the town and been in close touch with the African community, he develops a deep involvement with the Eastern coast and continuously thinks of it.

Salim’s identity is mediated through the colonial history too. His historical identity is documented by Europeans, and he remarks, “Without Europeans, I feel, all our past would have been washed away, like the scuff- marks of fishermen on the beach outside our town” (BITR 13). Knowing and diving into the past is important to have an understanding of the present and aligns well with Naipaul’s in his novels. Lynda Prescott remarks, “In practically all his work he affirms, directly or indirectly, the need for individuals and whole societies to know and to understand their history in order to make sense of the present” (550). However, from an early age, Salim develops the habit of looking at things from a distance- as a detached observer and

the idea of being left behind as a community comes to him. To quote him, “It was from this habit of looking that the idea came to me that as a community we had fallen behind. And that was the beginning of my insecurity” (BITR 17). It was this insecurity that led him to leave the coast later and travel to the interior of the town when he gets an offer from Nazruddin. Basically, his insecurity is his urge to have better prospects in economic and social terms.

Another important character worth mentioning here is Inder. Just like Salim, Indar’s identity is constantly created and reshaped. His grandfather had migrated from Punjab to work as a contract labourer in the railways. However, he did not return, and got settled on the coast and became a moneylender. Indar always thinks about his fate in the town, and escape is his only solace. “We’re washed up here, you know. To be in Africa you have to be strong. We’re not strong. We don’t even have a flag’ (BITR 21). He escapes to London, but unfortunately, he is unable to live the life of his dreams there also. Even he does not want to visit his home and says to Salim, “You see that the past is something in your mind alone, that it doesn’t exist in real life. You trample on the past, you crush it” (BITR 130-131). Indar crosses border to border, and in return, he evolves.

A migrant has an intricate connection with his home. The condition of diasporas requires understanding the concept of home. In traditional discourse, home is considered a place of belonging, that connotes comfort, security and relief. For Avtar Brah, home is “a mythic place of desire” as well as physical and felt reality (*Cartographies of Diaspora* 188). William Safran defined diasporas by linking it with home and return to it, if possible (83-84). However, for diasporas it is not limited to a single place, rather “...bound to change as one moves in times and space. Rather than referring to one single home, in diasporic settings feelings of belonging can be directed towards both multiple physical spaces and remembered, imagined and/or symbolic

spaces” (Stock 27). However, for Robin Cohen, the land of settlement can be a home too, a place to which the diasporas settle (240). When the diasporas are unable to feel secure and attached to their place, they suffer from homelessness. The protagonist Salim and his friend Indar face homelessness from time to time. In the midst of the boom, when Big Man has constructed the Domain and economic activities are flourishing, Salim gets anxious and dissatisfied as he was in the beginning. “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” (BITR 118). Actually, Salim craves for security and home. He says, “I was homesick, had been homesick for months. But home was hardly a place I could return to. Home was something in my head. It was something I had lost. And in that I was like the ragged Africans who were so abject in the town we serviced.” (BITR 124). Clearly, Salim’s home is a mythic place- a place which exists in imagination only. Just like Salim, Indar has no place to return to. When he goes to the Indian High Commission for a job, he feels both closeness and distance from India. He says, “I had never felt so involved with the land of my ancestors, and yours, and so far from it. I felt in that building I had lost an important part of my idea of who I was” (BITR 169). However, after going out, a thought of going home comes to him, but he was not sure where he wanted to go. This confusion clearly tells us that he does not want to go to the African coast or the town. Notably, Salim and Indar are the two characters in this novel who brood over their existence. They live a fragmented life, not completely belonging to one place, and trying to make a secure future for themselves. Here, the case of Salim is different from Indar. Salim leaves the town when conditions in Africa worsen. However, Indar continues to move from place to place despite his anxiety.

In works, depicting conditions of marginalised characters and colonised voices, people try to establish an identity of their own, voice out their concerns, assert their visions and beliefs,

share their stories and experiences and think about their past. Stuart Hall makes a crucial remark that all of us have different histories and cultural backgrounds, and we speak and express ourselves from these specific points. Therefore, “what we say is always ‘in context’, positioned” (222). In light of this statement, Salim’s narrative is a narrative of diasporic consciousness and fear of political disorder. Salim’s consciousness of being an outsider in the town, his homelessness, and his anxiety reveal his diasporic consciousness. Revealing his exilic condition, he says, “but now we who remained- outsiders, but neither settlers nor visitors, just people with nowhere better to go- put our heads down and got on with our business” (BITR 99). These lines suggest Salim is very much conscious of his diasporic status and his rootlessness.

Yvette, who is wife of Raymond, is equally rootless like Salim and Indar. She is in Africa with her husband, but Africa seems strange to her. Regarding her stay, she remarks, “My life is still fluid. I must do something. I just can’t stay here” (BITR 222). This fluid nature of life is applicable to all the foreigners in the town, who do not have any sense of certainty and are adjusting themselves to the demands of the situation. The political condition of the nation plays an extremely important role in making the diasporas feel secure and insiders. Bruce King remarks, “In Naipaul’s novel the central characters are not protected by imperial power and their lives are endangered by the rapid changes and instabilities of postcolonial Africa” (119). These lines stand true in the case of *A Bend in the River* too. Africa is passing through a transitional phase, and fear and tension are rampant. The police and other officials are not doing their duties properly, and corruption and greed are at their peak. People have rejected the President’s authority and have smashed the statue of the African Madonna and the child as a protest. Young people are being kidnapped by the army, and riots are taking place. the Stability of the town is replaced by chaos and disorder. Bruce King aptly says,

In *A Bend in the River* dignity, beauty, and order are illusions; energy, cunning, ruthlessness, will, the acceptance of all experience are ways to adjust to an unsatisfactory world in which there are no security, no continuing traditions, no home, and only a creeping disorder, whether in the African desire to destroy the modern state and return to village life or in the western reliance on Arab oil. (vii)

The narrative of fear of political disorder is shared by Ferdinand as well. Salim is imprisoned and brought before Ferdinand, who is now the Commissioner. Ferdinand fears the growing disorder and unchecked power and asks Salim to leave the town. The following lines talk about their condition in detail. “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. They feel they’re losing the place they can run back to” (BITR 319). These lines highlight the pathetic stage through which Africa is passing because of unchecked power and authority.

Possibility of Coexistence:

Although *A Bend in the River* is marked by migration, displacement, and cultural differences, Naipaul’s narrative does not present cultural differences as the primary cause of conflict. Rather, it suggests that coexistence can be possible when negotiation, dialogue, and cultural recognition are employed to address these differences. On the contrary, the possibilities of coexistence can be undermined when political powers and social perceptions become dominant. The African town in the novel is, therefore, a shared space where different ethnic identities encounter one another; however, their ultimate destinies are shaped by the prevailing political forces.

A society built on shared beliefs, cultures, and ethnicities plays a significant role in spreading the message of brotherhood and peaceful co-habitation to other parts of the world. Such a society requires constant interaction with others, which ultimately broadens its worldview and contributes to overall growth and development. In the novel, we find the presence of several communities—Africans, Indians, and Europeans—which suggests the possibility of a multicultural society shaped by cultural exchanges. The town functions as a multicultural space where people participate in business, education, and social relationships, crossing the boundaries of ethnicity and cultural differences. The European couple Yvette and Raymond host dinners, and their house becomes a space of interaction where people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds come together, allowing cultural exchange to take place. People such as Indar and Salim are welcomed at these gatherings, suggesting that coexistence cannot exist in isolation; rather, it requires spaces where culturally diverse groups can encounter and engage with one another.

Further, Naipaul demonstrates that in order to cement these cultural interactions, support of wider social and political structures is required; otherwise, the coexistence will collapse. The untimely departure of Raymond and Yvette, withdrawal of Noimon, the Greek businessman and Salim's own escape reveal that coexistence cannot survive in an atmosphere of uncertainty, chaos and fear. Needless to say, their departures to other places are not their personal choices; rather, they are situational decisions. At the same time, they also reflect the failure of postcolonial societies to embrace diverse cultural and ethnic identities.

In the same setting, we have characters such as Metty who possesses a much greater ability to adapt to the changing social and cultural circumstances. He belongs to a family of enslaved people, but his social background does not hinder the possibility of him mixing with

other people. He applies a flexible approach due to which, he is therefore able to run his life smoothly in the town. He learns the local language quickly and even acquires a new name, 'Metty', to show that he belongs to the town. Later, the President takes away the businesses from foreigners on the name of radicalisation and gives them to new owners, 'state trustees'. As a result, Salim's shop is given to Citizen Theotime. When Salim talks to Citizen Theotime regarding Metty's duties to treat him like his assistant, Theotime states, "I am the state trustee, appointed by the President. Citizen Metty is an employee of a state establishment. It is for me to decide how the half- caste is to be used" (BITR 330). These lines hint at the directives given to the state trustees by the President, irrespective of the fact that people like Metty have been serving in their favour for a long time but are badly treated. Obviously, they belong to a different culture and are not fully integrated in the society. Since a large number of social and cultural groups form a part of a wider world, insistence on cultural purity can lead to problems in survival and therefore block the possibility of coexistence. Through him, Naipaul indicates that possibilities of coexistence can exist if navigated through flexibility.

Father Huismans is another character who has a great historical understanding and favours the existence of many histories. Although he is European, he holds regard for Africa and its colonial past. For him, Africa is much more than a colonial space; rather, it is a product of interaction of multiple histories, such as Arabs and European. Noticeably, he attempts to preserve the colonial heritage of Africa by collecting colonial relics like pieces of old steamers and bits of disused machinery. For him, these colonial relics are as important as things of Africa. Talking about Father Huismans's perspective, Salim says, "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" (BITR 72). However, Father Huismans dies an untimely death, which

signifies that his historical understanding and vision are not shared by the others and is the death of society based on inclusivity and cultural tolerance. Therefore, in this novel Naipaul clearly states the fact that coexistence is possible but conditional. Dulai argues that these characters function as “carriers of the essential elements of civilization as visualised in the novel. They embody in their role the novel's central message that the meeting and harmonious mingling of peoples of diverse origins in one place and an openness to the world beyond the narrow boundaries of one's own culture are necessary foundations for building a civil society” (306). Therefore, he suggests that coexistence is significant for building of a society based on justice, solidarity and dialogue across diverse communities.

Conclusion:

Cultural conflicts are inevitable in a society. However, due to the globalisation and diasporic formations, cultural contact takes place. The society formed, therefore, based on differences, requires continuous interaction and bonding to run smoothly. Needless to say, these differences will create several problems too, but there are possibilities of coexistence as well, which can be achieved through negotiation, flexibility and dialogue. In the novel also, diasporic people who belong to different cultures and ethnicities such as Indians, Belgians, Greeks and Europeans live and come into contact with each other. But due to rampant militarism and authoritarian rule of the President, these people have to face problems. They have to leave the town and flee to new corners to save their lives and earn a livelihood despite their contribution to society, be it economic or intellectual. The town's instability makes them anxious and prevents them from reaching their full potential. The novel suggests that cultural diversity can add richness to

societies when cultural purity and inclusionary policies of political forces are welcomed and practised.

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