

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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V.S. Naipaul: *A Bend in the River* A Threat to Indian Diaspora in Africa

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Abstract: The novel *A Bend in the River* is a multifaceted novel. The novel has taken serious issue —the social and political threats to Indian migrants in Africa. The neglect of European people by the new President after consolidating his position became the focal point. He was cunning and shrewd. He was a diehard communal. The novel ends with the declaration of radicalization and the nationalisation of property owned by the non-Africans.

Key Word: Diehard, radicalization, nationalisation

A Bend in the River is a poignant depiction of deplorable life of migrated Indians in Africa. The novel presents three prominent characters — the unnamed President, Salim and Indar. They reflect their political, social and cultural ideology. The President was a shrewd and cunning politician. They struggled in their own way to establish their own ideology and get space in this world. The President established himself as a despot and tyrannical ruler. Both prominent Indians Indar and Salim were decimated. Salim's ancestors had migrated from north-western India whereas Indar's ancestors had migrated from Punjab. Both belonged to India. Indar's ancestors earned a good fortune and became a rich family in the east coast. Salim belonged to a humble family. His ancestors were brought by the British colonial masters. They were engaged in rubber plantation. Despite the financial gap between Salim and Indar, they were good friends and played squash together. After the independence of the nation in Africa, the struggle for power began among the tribes. They were drawn towards violence to prove their tribal supremacy. The violence and murder of people became the order of the day. Law and order had

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completely collapsed in the nation. Nazruddin, a prominent businessman of the east coast decided to leave the place for good. He left for Uganda to do his business. Indar was politically matured. He heard the echo of imminent danger for the migrant Indians. The new President wanted to consolidate his position. He had adopted several measures. He was a tribal leader. He knew the art to please the people of his own community. He had only worn the mask of progressive and democratic leader. He had sinister design in his mind to overcome the problems. His way of doing the work was unfair. He deprived the non-Africans from

their fundamental rights. The President's mind was read by Indar. Indar opened his heart before Salim and told him about the ensuing danger of their community people.

We were sitting on the steps of the squash court, in the shade. Indar said in his quiet way, 'We're washed up here, you know. To be in Africa you must be strong. We're not strong. We don't even have a flag.'¹

The anticipation of Indar was close to reality. The President wanted to establish him as the sole voice of Africa. He aspired to become the undisputed leader of the tribals. The President took unprecedented steps. He nationalised the property of the non-Africans. Their property was nationalised. The government distributed property of the non-Africans among the tribal Africans. They were called the state trustees. They were appointed by the President. When Salim was in London, his shop was ceased from his ownership by a decree, issued by the President. He lost the proprietorship of his shop.

Radicalization: two days before, in the capital, I had seen the word in a newspaper headline, but I hadn't paid attention. I had thought of it as just another word; we had so many.... The President had sprung another surprise, and this surprise concerned us. I- and others like me—had been nationalized. Our business had ceased to be ours, by decree and were being given out by the President to new owners. These new owners were called 'state trustees'. (299)

The decree issued by the President inflicted injustice on the non-African people. Indar was aware of these things because he was a minute observer of the nerves of Africa. He left for London for higher education. He graduated from one of the universities of London. He searched for jobs. He did not get success. The erstwhile land of his ancestors dashed his hope. He tried to get the job of diplomat, but

remained unsuccessful. He was born in Africa. His birth place betrayed him. The place of his ancestors rejected him. Indar was surprised of this development. He was anguished to see the crippled leadership in India. The erratic behaviour of foreign officials in Indian embassy shattered the hope of Indar. The insensitive and callous behaviour of the officers showed their lack of professionalism.

"But you say in your letter you are from Africa. How can you join our diplomatic service? How can we have a man of divided loyalties?" ... 'He said, "If you become a citizen of India, there are the examination ... Mr. Verma should have told you. He shouldn't have sent you to me" (173)

The officers behaved like a clown. Their childish behaviour only highlighted the hypocrisy of India in foreign soil. To qualify for Indian citizenship the person concerned should pass the examination. This was a ridiculous argument given by the person in authority in foreign officer of India embassy. Indar lamented the top leadership of India. He decided to withdraw himself from diplomatic service. He thought that his ancestors only cherished false hope for India.

'My crash course in diplomacy had lasted a little over an hour... I was full of rage. I followed the curve of Aldwyesh to the end, crossed the strand, and went down the river. (174)

Indar was critical of the rulers of India. They built the nation on a very weak edifice. The nation lacked the vision to protect their diaspora. These people owed their allegiance India since their ancestors belonged to the land. The nation India should not shed her responsibility. Indar was sheltered and protected by London. The universal capital London offered him the space to survive. It was London not India that cared Indar. Indar adopted several professions to survive in London. He was

critical of Indian leadership. They had limited vision for their own people and largely governed by their selfish design. They made their nation rudderless. Indar had no hope from India leaders.

I belonged to myself alone. I was going to surrender my manhood to nobody. For someone like me there was only one civilization and one place — London, or place like it.... We solace ourselves with that idea of the great men of our tribe, the Gandhi and Nehru, and we castrate ourselves. (175)

Salim was politically inert as compared to the intelligence of Indar. But the company of Indar and Yvette made him intelligent. Salim bought a shop from Nazruddin at very nominal price. Salim became stable in the town. He built up his business network. When Salim began his business in the town, it was a deserted place. Slowly and steadily the peace descended in the town. The law and order were restored. Salim also became friendly with his customers. Zabeth was one of his friendly customers. She requested Salim to look after her son as a local guardian. Zabeth wanted to admit her son in lycee. She wanted her son should be given modern education. It was possible only in lycee. Initially Salim did not accept the request of Zabeth but he had to bow down before her. Salim was given the responsibility to make Ferdinand well educated man. Salim observed that Ferdinand was a cunning fellow. He wanted to take advantage of Salim's non-African origin. He also tried to exploit Salim. Salim was aware of his dirty plan. Ferdinand was prejudiced against non-Africans including scientists. He tried to underestimate the achievements of scientists because they were Europeans. During his early days of lycee Ferdinand gave respect to Salim. After few days he became friendly with him. Later he behaved arrogantly with Salim. Salim noticed a massive transformation in his attitude and behaviour. His tribal blood wanted to

discriminate the non-Africans. Salim was one of them. Salim scolded him and he tried to amend his perception to perceive the things. Even in lycee he involved himself in non-Academic activities. Salim was highly enraged by his behaviour. He had sent certain boys from lycee to collect donation from Salim. Salim knew that Ferdinand was brainchild behind this nefarious activity. These boys had stolen the donation book from the lycee to extract the money. They had selected the soft targets including Salim. They were unauthorised collector of donation on behalf of lycee. The mask of Ferdinand dropped from his face. His hatred for Salim came to the surface.

In his face I felt I could see the starting point of certain kinds of African mask, in which features were simplified and strengthened: end, with memories of those masks, I thought I saw a special distinction in his feature. (42)

Ferdinand was intelligent observer. He knew the precarious position of Salim Africa. He emotionally tortured him. He wanted to take advantage of Salim's non-African origin. He rumoured that Salim will send him abroad for higher studies. Salim came to know about this rumour from his friend Mahesh. Salim knew his limitations very well on the soil of Africa.

I was unprotected. I had no family, no flag, no fetish. Was it something like that Ferdinand had told his friends. I felt that the time had come for me to straighten things out with Ferdinand, and give another idea of myself. (169)

Later, Ferdinand faced the same situation. The lycee was raided by the war tribes and the life of other tribals boys were in danger. Ferdinand was without shelter. Salim forgot every nuisance activity of Ferdinand and sheltered him. This incident had transformed Ferdinand forever. He never forgot Salim and his timely help. He

never uttered a single word but delivered his message in a single sentence.

‘Salim, you took me in that time and treated me as a member of your family F.’ (94)

It was Ferdinand who was instrumental to save the life of Salim. Salim was arrested by the police officer Prosper and put behind the bar because of his involvement in the illegal trade of gold and ivory. Ferdinand became the Commissioner of the town after the completion of Administrative Cadets Crops training. When he saw Salim’s involvement in the crime, he personally handled the case and saved Salim. He ordered him to leave Africa to save himself. Salim followed his dictates. Ferdinand was known to the dismal future of non-Africans.

‘... You must go. You must go right away. There is nothing here for you. They’ve taken you into jail now... I won’t be always be here to get you out. (319)

The novel presents the plight of Indians. The novel also presents the weak leadership of India at the international level. The novelist has shown Indar and Salim as the worst victim of communal forces.

References:

1. Naipaul, V.S. *A Bend in the River* (Picador, London, 2011) p.21. All subsequent references to the book will be incorporated in the text.