



Research Article

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Received: 9 February 2024 / Accepted: 19 April 2024 / Published: 5 May 2024

The Existential Crisis in Naipaul's Novel *a Bend in the River*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2024-0060>

Abstract

The novel A Bend in the River presents the transitional period from colonial to postcolonial in an unnamed African country through the life experiences and challenges that the main character, Salim, goes through. Naipaul presents everything through Salim's perspective by making him the representative of all the migrants that have to undergo a double tragedy: losing their native country, its culture, and customs and tradition by adopting into the new country. The second tragedy occurs when they no longer are seen as part of this new country, where they have already tried to make themselves fit to the new culture, traditions, and mentally they consider themselves as an integral part of it. Thus, Salim and all the migrants go through this transitional process but with a very high cost: losing themselves, their identity, and the feeling of rootlessness. This paper focuses on the crisis of identity and their existential quest in this never-ending process of transformation toward political democracy and prosperity.

Keywords: post-colonial, existentialism, alienation, conflict etc

1. Introduction

After the Second World War, it was noticeable the appearance of multicultural and postcolonial society. Migration created struggles to survive for the migrants and produced hybridity. The clash between the local cultures and the migrants created identity problems. The identity crisis in these post-colonial societies was described by Bhabha through the concepts of "mimicry, cultural hybridity, ambivalence, in-betweenness, and the third space." (Bhabha 1997; 245) According to Bhabha, "hybridity is the integration of conflicting cultures within a third area and the formation of a new culture" (Bhabha 1997; 245), whereas in post-colonial societies, it refers to the cultural exchange and the formation of intercultural forms after the coming together of two separated cultures.

Another important concept in post-colonial societies is the concept of mimicry which refers to the ambiguous relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The mimicry occurs when the colonized country imitates and adopts the colonizer's culture. In this imitation, a new form of culture came into existence that reflected both the features of the colonizer and the colonist by providing a new form of identity and space. These new concepts of cultural hybridity challenge and require a new

form of identity to fit in this new space. These challenges are presented in the novel *A Bend in the River* through the characters as they transit from colonial to postcolonial regimes.

Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* presents his experience with colonization. The novel focuses on the challenges facing post-colonial people, their plight, and their continued quest for self-identity. The fictional world is based on external conditions that restrict and impose private life and affairs. Naipaul focuses on the challenges and the turmoil that the African countries experienced after the disruption of the colonies and their failure to self-govern the country and to create prosperity and peace in post-colonial Africa.

2. Salim's Quest for Identity in *a Bend in the River*

Naipaul, through his novels, presents his observations and experiences in colonial and post-colonial societies. His characters, borrowed from real life stories, are always in search of establishing their identity crisis that is a problem quite common in the post-colonial era. His novels shed light on the post-colonial and post-imperial realities that have shaped contemporary societies. Through his novels, Naipaul emphasizes the fact that the migrants' identity is constantly connected with their country of origin, their native land, and their customs. Thus, the clash between the new nation and the native one becomes unavoidable which causes a feeling of alienation and a continued search for the fragmented identity.

The colonizers, with the pretence of introducing education, civilization and religion, conquered countries and exploited them economically by causing social and political transformation. They tried to subvert the national identity, culture, tradition, and even their language by forbidding the natives to use it. The final aim is to completely lose their national identity and gain the new identity imposed by the colonizers. In *The Black Skin White "Masks"* (Fanon; 1952) and *Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon; 2004,) the author presents the reader not only with the racial discrimination in colonial societies, but he also suggests solutions for this conflict. Fanon believes that colonialism constantly questions the identity of human beings, not only of the natives but also of the migrants. These human beings are in a continuous struggle to answer the question, "...who am I?!" (Fanon 2004; 182). The quest for identity is based on the conflicting power of what is inherited and what is imposed.

Naipaul's characters are deprived of the independence and freedom derived by these unstable post-colonial countries. This instability recreates the desire to go back in time and space, to the country of origin. This desire is neither practical nor achievable. They find themselves in a space where they cannot relate or find a real home. The characters are not attached to the possession of a home, but rather they are affected by the dramatic loss of it and the idea of returning to their origin. These characters suffer from a wrong idea of citizenship and national identity. They represent the transitional process from one identity to the other: "*The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.*" (Naipaul 1980, 9)

The novel covers a decade from 1965 to 1975 and presents a complex vision of the countries that are undergoing the transitional process from colonial rule to freedom and self-government, but unfortunately, these countries not only could not reach the blessings of democratic governance and promises, but at the same time they served as a failed model that disguised the hollowness of the proclaimed democratic achievements after the liberation.

The novel starts with Salim's journey from the east coast of Africa to the central part of Africa where he wants to start a new life. This town, built by the colonizers with the idea to get closer to the natives, is nothing more than a ghost town. It was a town created by the colonists by ignoring the natives, and their customs and traditions, very similar to a "patch" next to the African cities. The novel transmits a miserable feeling from the very beginning until the end. This atmosphere reinforces the main themes of the novels, such as the quest for identity, the idea of being rootlessness and estrangement.

The themes of Eurocentrism, migration, alienation and ethnic discrimination are reflected in the experiences of the characters. Many other fictional features are employed in the novel to provide the reader with a wide panorama of the turmoil that post-colonial society experienced. The setting of

the novel is unnamed purposefully to provide us with the illusion and the idea that something similar has occurred in every post-colonial country in Africa. Another important fictional device is the main protagonist of the novel, Salim whose life perfectly describes the plight of the post-colonial people who are in search of their shattered identity.

Through the novel, Salim is twice relocated and uprooted in Africa. He voluntarily escapes from his community to live in another African city. This relocation exemplifies the lack of roots and solid social ties. Thus Salim presents himself as a stranger detached from his own community and from his family: "So from an early age, I developed the habit of looking, detaching myself from a familiar scene and trying to consider it as from a distance." (Naipaul 1980; 22) Throughout the novel, Salim is in pursuit of a sense of belonging somewhere. This continuous search for "belonging" is felt even in this new city. Salim ignores the natives, their culture and customs by living a life that is on the edge of separated cultures. Salim's family lives on the east coast of Africa under the European flag, coexisting with various nationalities such as Arabs, Indians, Portuguese and Persians. Although they live in Africa, they know very little of its traditions and customs. Salim's family background is allegorical, as it represents the diaspora in Africa. Salim and his family feel disconnected from the African people and even from other cultures. He does not feel either Indian or African. Probably, since the beginning of the novel, he senses but cannot explain the feeling of rootlessness and of not belonging: "We simply lived; we did what was expected of us, what we had seen the previous generation do. We never asked why; we never recorded." (Naipaul 1980; 8)

Salim is conscious of the weak position that the Indian diaspora had in the transitional period in Africa. Salim and the other communities that are present in Africa will be exposed and left unprotected by the imperial forces, becoming easy targets and victims. They are threatened by the nationalism and political turmoil the country is undergoing. Salim understands that there is no place in Africa for him and people like him. Thus, he becomes even more alienated and detached by both communities envisioning this as the only form of survival.

3. Identity and Existentialist Crisis in Post Colonial Africa

A Bend in the River presents characters from different strata of society undergoing a transformational period from colonization to post-colonization. The novel focuses in Salim's experience of this transitional period, where he is obliged to face personal challenges as the country is undergoing severe political and social changes that leave imprints on his way of living, even by becoming the catalyst of an identity crisis. Salim is not the only character affected by these political and social changes in Africa; there are many people who have to reshape their identity and the way of living after the independence.

Salim finds himself in this transitional phase that Africa is undergoing and presents this historic period through his own lens and personal experience. Salim turns into an allegorical representative of all the diasporic people of Africa that find themselves to similar conditions. Although they have lived in Africa for generations they are cast as outsiders and a threat to the newly decolonized country. Their idea of self-identity, existentialism and nationality is completely ruined by making them question their identity. Naipaul perfectly mingles together this two-fold tragedy of the African people and the African country through the life of Salim.

Naipaul based the novel on the combination of two separated leitmotifs. One is based on personal and individual bases where we can include the theme of alienation, identity crisis and rootlessness. The other theme axis focuses on social and political themes such as: political transformation, turmoil, racial discrimination, economic crisis, lack of history and cultural crisis.

The characters of the novels might be easily divided into four categories based on what they represent in African society. The first category represents the diasporic people of Africa like Salim, Mahesh, Indar, Nazruddin and Shobha. The second group of characters are the representatives of the "Old Africa" like Father Huismans, Zabeth and Metty. The third category represents the "New African Men" like Ferdinand and his Lycée friends. The fourth category represents the European intellectual

or “Big Man’s Men.” All these characters put together represent Africa, its people and allegorically they represent the African nation with all its discrimination and political conflicts.

The characters’ lives undergo a transformation and are forced to redesign their identities. The policies of racial discrimination after independence made the diasporic people wonder about their national identity. Salim considers himself an African, although he has inherited his Indian nationality from his family roots, he has never been to India, his link with the Indian culture is limited and has not real values where he is actually living. Big Man’s policies have marked all the migrants as outsiders and a threat to the African nation although they have lived in Africa for generations and have never visited their countries of origin as in Salem’s case. These political measures for the migrants not only affected their social and economic stability, but also their identity, causing a severe identity crisis between what they believe and what they are made to believe within a very brief period of time after independence. “[...] we felt like people of Africa.” (Naipaul 1980; 12)

This political conflict deeply affected migrants’ lives and their identities. After this conflict poses itself in the novel, Salim starts his inner quest to recreate his existential identity. Salim, as the main character and a representative of the diasporic migrants, perfectly presents the psychological trauma and the crisis of identity that migrant people undergo after independence: “I had to break away. I couldn’t protect anyone [...] We couldn’t protect ourselves” (Naipaul 1980; 22). Salim shifts from the first-person singular pronoun to the first-person plural pronoun “we” by highlighting the fact that he is speaking even in the names of the other migrants that he allegorically represents in the novel.

Another example of an identity crisis is presented through the character of Indar, who leaves his home country for a better future, denying his identity with the hope to “trample his past” (Naipaul 1980; 157). However, he returns to Congo as a failed man after being rejected and considered inappropriate for the job of diplomat because he was considered a “man of two worlds [...]” (Naipaul 1980; 168) and a man of “divided loyalties” (Naipaul 1980; 171). Indar, like many other migrants, is always in search of his identity and a place to call “home.” The same idea is reinforced by Salim who says, “Home was hardly a place [we] could return to. Home was something in [our] head. It was something [we] had lost.” (Naipaul 1980; 124). Salim considers all the diaspora people as uprooted and with no identity “[we] [were] uprooted, [we] had no family, no flag, no fetish.” (Naipaul 1980; 63)

The post-colonial period did not only provoke the crisis of identity in the diaspora people, but it also required the reshaping of a new identity for the young African generation. Big Man’s mission to come up with the concept of “New African Men” produces men that are African only by colour and European only in attitude. These “New African Men” are nothing more than a copy of the colonizers as their education, their attitude and even their taste has been detected by the Europeans. Thus, we are presented with the “mimic man,” a man that is rooted in the colonial system but with the mission to serve as a “New African Men” the supposedly changing identity from colonial to post-colonial Africa.

In contrast to the two categories previously mentioned, that of the diasporic Africa and the new generation or the “New African Men,” that are forced to question their existential identity and are in an ever-changing transitional period, Naipaul through the characters of Father Huismans, Zabeth and Metty presents the other face of Africa, that of the “primitive” African men who live on the other side of the river, and who want to preserve the cultural inheritance of Africa and its real identity. The identity crisis makes all these people feel alienated and dislocated from their own space. Their identity is constantly reshaping as a basic requirement of their survival.

4. Conclusion

Naipaul’s novel *A Bend in the River* gives the reader a realistic picture of colonialism and the transitional period to postcolonialism in Africa. The novel is based on this conflictual transition presented through a decade of racism, poverty, crimes, turmoil, stereotypes, and contradiction between old and new, between Western and local cultures, between traditional values inherited from one generation to another and the imposed values of the colonial system, between the traditional

education system and the education system imposed by the colonizer, and between the national language and the English language imposed by the colonizer.

At the core of the novel lie these conflicts that cause the fragmentation of the human identity and their personality. The colonizers imposed upon the colonized their language, their tradition, their religion, and their political and educational system with the aim of exploiting them materialistically and transforming them psychologically. Naipaul's novels describe this world realistically, where human beings suffer from alienation, rootlessness and fragmented identity. People who are not able to answer the question "Who am I?" and are constantly trying to define their identity.

The novel is not merely a criticism of colonialism and postcolonialism, political turmoil, dictatorship and racial discrimination. It is primarily a novel that focuses on the fragility of the human identity as it undergoes political turmoil, social unrest, racial discrimination and cultural clashes and differences. This environment produces human beings that are detached and alienated from society. The feelings of alienation, detachment and rootlessness are even more emphasised in the diaspora communities in Africa. Salim, his family and other communities live in the towns that the colonizers established. However, these places are dysfunctional because they are constructed ignoring the local culture and tradition. They are seen as trading places with no identity. In these places, people live in a state of limbo, with no recording of their culture, of identity, of their past, or of their traditions. They "just lived."

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