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Dystopian Views in V. S. Naipaul's 'A Bend in the River'

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Abstract

V. S. Naipaul's novel 'A Bend in the River' is set on the East Coast of Africa. Salim is the protagonist of the novel. The writer narrates the story through Salim. Salim left his place to set a shop in the interior part of Africa. His desire was to get settled in his life well. But, throughout the novel he looked very unsettled, displeased, disturbed and aloof. His fear did not leave him ever. Africa was under the colonial rule for many years. Africa was in devastating situation when the colonial rule ended. For the first time, the word 'development' is heard from the mouth of 'The President'. The novel has many twists and turns. As the story progresses, one finds the deteriorating situation rather than the development. Eventually, the Protagonist of the novel, Salim, lost his hope and returned to

his place disappointedly on the advice of a commissioner. The whole novel brings out the dystopian sense. It starts with the nature of Utopia but as the story progresses, it turns to Dystopia.

Keywords

Africa's colonial rule, Utopian versus dystopian sense, deteriorating economic situations, V. S. Naipaul, A Bend in the River.

Dystopian is often characterized as dehumanization, destruction, deterioration, devastation and demolition. It is an opposite of Utopia, the word that was coined by Thomas More in his book in the year 1516. In fact, Utopia and Dystopia are like the two sides of the coin. If the portrayal of the society has the positive outcome, it will be Utopian society and if it has a negative outcome, it will be dystopian society. There can be many causes for dystopian society right from environment pollution, religious dealings, societal problems, psychological upheaval and many more that may lead to the destruction of the society. The socio-political causes of the period create the devastating situations in front of human being and leave the human beings to live under constant pressure and force. Explaining the difference between Utopian and Dystopian societies, Maria Varsam says,

'Whereas . . . utopia is a manifestation of desire and hope for a better world and an unalienated order that upsets the status quo, . . . dystopia delineates the crushing of hope and the displacement of desire for the purpose of upholding that status quo.' (209)

Dystopian concentrates more on the bad effects of a broken and ragged systems. This concept had come into light highly in the 20th century after the two world wars and it evidently turned as a part of literary genre. Many of the fiction writers of the 20th century focused their concepts on Dystopian views including the societal problems of this technical world.

Four Basic traits of Dystopian literature:

1. Rule by force: Rule by force takes a big role in Dystopian Literature. It talks about the rule that imposed forcibly and the oppressive control over the society. Sometimes, it also brings into light about the society that has no government at all and the society that has the wild culture i.e. the culture that probes the people to do bad and cruel activities.
2. Dislocation: Dystopian literature talks about the struggle for survival. It deals about the people who migrate from one place to another for survival. In search of survival, they often lose their identity.
3. Technological rule: Technology plays a vital rule in dystopian literature. It often controls everyday life and is often used as a fear-mongering tactic.
4. Instability: Dystopian novels are often set in places that are livable but have been destroyed or prepare for destruction.

Brief note of the novel 'A Bend in the River'

V. S. Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River* tells the story of Salim, originally an Indian Muslim family settled in the East African Coast. Salim in search of his settlement in life accepted

an offer of a family friend Nazaruiddin who wanted to sell Salim his trading goods shop in an interior part of Africa located at the bend of a major river. It was the place which was under the colonial rule for many years and released from the clutches of the colonial masters. As it was the place which was under the colonial system with no development, Salim found it dilapidated and strewn. When Salim reached the interior part, the condition in that place was not healthy and many local Africans were in the mood of rising a rebellion to bring some changes in the administrative system. While the uprising was in progress, Salim's family sent a half-African former slave named Metty to assist Salim as a shop assistant. Salim's first customer was Zabeth, an African trader, a renowned sorceress. She requested Salim to keep a watch over her son Ferdinand who was getting educated in the secondary school of Father Huisman, a Belgian priest in the town. Father Huisman was very much fascinated about the African religions who maintained a collection of wooden masks. He was later murdered and the majority of his collection of masks was stolen by an American traveler. The president suppressed the rebellion and he tried to bring the glory to that interior Africa. He seized a plot of land near the town which was a European suburb but deteriorated to bush. The President ordered for the construction of the buildings that would comprise a new polytechnic university. It had become the 'Domain of the State'. Many lecturers and professors came from the capital and also from abroad. Indar, a childhood friend of Salim, who got educated in a foreign university came to Domain. He introduced Salim to the society of Domain, which was full of foreigners, intellectuals and African students. On looking at Indar, Salim felt that he was

well educated and a man who knew well about foreign culture and its tradition. Though Indar boasted of himself that he was foreign returned and educated in a foreign university, inwardly he felt lost and alienated. Salim later understood that Indar was completely depressed, melancholic and pessimist. Among the people with whom Salim maintained a good relation from the beginning of his entry in the interior part of Africa were Mahesh and Shoba. They were lovers and later they got married without the permission of their family members. They both left their village and came to an unnamed African part, to lead a new life. Mahesh always thinks differently. His concentration was mostly on earning money. He started a new Big Burger franchise. Despite his many trials, he faced many failures.

The other couple whom Salim met at Domain were Raymond and his young wife Yvette. Raymond was once mentor to the President. He wanted to write a monumental history of the country but he was unable to complete it. Instead he worked on editing a collection of the President's speeches. But the President was not impressed with his work and so published an altered version of the book that only included maxims. While Raymond was busy in editing the President's speeches, his young wife was left unguided. She was introduced to Salim. Salim and Yvette progressed their relation and they engaged in an affair. Salim faced a different kind of experience in his relation with Yvette. But their relation did not last long. When Salim slapped her in a mood of uncomfortable feeling, she recalled her husband behavior and she stopped being friendly with Salim.

Salim sensed a mark of the end of the town's boom when a prominent business owner suddenly sold off his assets and left the town. Political unrest began to grow. To bring control on the situation, the President established a Youth Guard but the things went worse than he had imagined. Youth Guard whom the President appointed went against him and abused his power. So, the President disbanded the group. Enraged with the President's decision, they formed as a Liberation Army who openly declared their hatredness towards the President and their vision of establishing a new Africa. This increasing violence in Africa created fear in the mind of Salim. He tried to seek a way out of the country. He planned to visit London to see Nazruddin whose shop he was running. While he was in journey, he observed that there were many people like him struggling for survival. He was very much disappointed and disillusioned. From his disappointment, he sensed a new kind of experience that made him realize the need to reject the false ideals about security and home and live in the present. With this realization, he returned to the town at the bend of the river. Slight changes he observed in the town. Salim heard that the President had nationalized all foreign-owned businesses. Theotime, a naïve, inexperienced in business dealing, appointed Salim as a manager for his shop. With the intention, to get out of the country, Salim started trading illegally in gold and ivory. Metty who was once an assistant in Salim's shop, observed Salim secretly and informed the police about Salim's secret illegal dealings. Soon Salim was arrested. After a few days in prison, the officer in charge of the jail took Salim to the commissioner who was Zabeth's son, Ferdinand. He informed Salim about the political upheaval in the town

and suggested him to leave the town. The very next day, Salim left the town.

Dystopian Perception in V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*

Rule by force

Though the people of Africa came out of the colonial rule, its effect still continued. Their development stagnated. On the name of development, the President selected the place of Domain. He tried to show a new Africa. Different visitors were encouraged from cities. Different types of photographs of Domain place were taken to post the photographs in magazines. Many lecturers and mentors were recruited to train the scholars of Africa. While taking all these steps, he created a sense of superiority to himself. He moulded the people of that place that he was the only person who was thinking to develop Africa. Slowly, he gained hand and established the Youth Guard to keep control over the situations. His rule day by day became tyrannical turning to dictatorship. He burdened people with his rude laws. At one point, Youth Guards who were appointed by the President got vexed and they stopped supporting the President. They resigned from their posts and raised a rebellion in Africa. It lasted for many days. The situation that was in Africa is transparent from the words of the protagonist Salim:

"The strain was great. It corrupted everything, and for the first time I considered the idea of flight. If there had been a safe house waiting for me in some far city which would have allowed me in, I believe I might have left during this time."
(Page 250)

V. S. Naipaul ended his novel with Salim's decision to get back to his native place on the suggestion of Ferdinand whom Salim guided once. Ferdinand warned him that the upheaval will not end soon and the place was not safe to stay. The place had become a contaminated place.

Dislocation

V. S. Naipaul uses his novel *A Bend in the River* to depict a pessimistic view of Africa's future. The continent gets relief from the clutches of the colonial rule. They got political independence. Still every character in the novel had the feeling of the dislocation. The effect of the previous colonial rule was still on them. Like many other countries, the town in the interior had many troubles after independence. Most of the villagers tried to migrate to the place of better opportunities. Salim, the protagonist was one such person who wanted to move from his place in search of proper location and stable life. He purchased a shop from Nazruddin and left his place thinking of a settled life.

In the very beginning of the novel V. S. Naipaul shows the sign of dislocality through the words of Salim:

"The country, like others in Africa, had had its troubles after independence. The town in the interior, at the bend in the great river, had almost ceased to exist; and Nazruddin said I would have to start from the beginning. I drove up from the coast in my Peugeot. That isn't the kind of drive you can do nowadays in Africa-from the east coast right through the centre." (Page 3)

Though Salim belongs to an Indian Muslim family, he grew up in Africa. He was a diversified ethnic who could not be given a complete and proper authentic identification either as a man of Indian heritage or as a man who had connection to Africa.

He suffered from the problem of dislocation till the end of the novel. He struggled with anxiety and depression not knowing what to do and what not to do. Due to this dislocation, Salim suffered a lot and he was in total dilemma about his identification and his social status. The purpose of his moving to the interior part of Africa was to relocate himself to attain a stable life. But he was unable to achieve it. Moreover, he could not decide what was the right route to move ahead to gain a stable life. Noimon's departure from the town was a big shock for all the people in the interior part of Africa. They felt that his departure marked the end of their boom and their confidence. Salim who was already in dilemma was depressed and was in confusion with Noimon's move. He later convinced himself that he was better where he was.

"I heard it said that Noimon had sold up only for the sake of his children's education; it was also said that he had been pressured by his wife ----- Noiman, after a lifetime in Africa was going find that out pretty soon." (Page 233).

Till the end of the novel, Salim was in ambiguous and impugnable state. He committed mistakes one after another and finally landed in the jail. Eventually, he left the place on the suggestion of Ferdinand who was under the care of Salim in the first part of the novel.

Instability

The novel's central vision comes through the idea of the President who wants to reestablish 'Africa' as 'New Africa'. He wanted to unify his country. He planned various projects to develop Africa. He selected a place to create new life in the interior part of Africa. The place was called as Domain. The moment 'the Big Man' arrived, a sense of activeness started in

the Domain part of Africa. One could understand through the words of the protagonist Salim:

“The president had wished to show us a new Africa. And I saw Africa in a way I had never seen it before, saw the defeats and humiliations which until then I had regarded as just a fact of life. And I felt like that- full of tenderness for the Big Man, for the ragged villagers walking around the Domain, and the soldiers showing them the shabby sights,”
(Page 117)

The buildings which were once old, dilapidated were buzzed with activities. The Domain had become the pride of Africa. It had become a university city and a Research Centre. The conference hall building was turned into a polytechnic for people of the region, and other buildings were turned into dormitories and staff quarters. Lecturers and professors began to come from the capital and also from other countries. The outward look was high, inwardly there loomed but confusion. The Domain with its grandeur was looking high but shoddy and hoax. No one had faith in the work what they were doing.

“Neither the president who had called it into being nor the foreigners who had made a fortune building it had faith in what they were creating.” (Page 119)

Very few people had confessed their faith in the development that was taking place in Africa. Confusion was little in the beginning but it escalated with the amalgamation of varied happenings that took form in Africa. People lost their faith and the decisions of the President proved to be insensible. The suspension of the Youth Guard army created ambiguous feelings among the people. They planned against the President. Instability prevailed in the city. Chaos, violence, isolation and poverty gradually increased. The officers of the youth Guard who once supported, acted and humiliated the

people according to the decisions of the President, raised rebellion submitting themselves as the most anguished men of the region. The rebellion that was raised by the Youth Guard though similar to that of the rebellion before happened, no leaders were as young and educated as the people of this region.

With the end of the colonial rule, the place was left with no guidance. Out of the situation of chaos, the President came out as the only person who could establish a Utopian society. People extended their support in the beginning but they lost their interest in his speeches and deeds. The idea of Utopian society changed. Instead dystopian society was established. Confusion, atrocity, poverty and unemployment surrounded the African town. Through the words of the protagonist Salim, the deteriorative condition of the society was transparent:

“At the time of the rebellion the town was just beginning to be re-established, and the first disturbances took place far away, in the villages. Now everything was happening in the town itself. There was lot more blood as a result; and the violence, which at first seemed directed against the authorities alone, became more general. Africal stalls and shops in the outer areas were attacked and looted. People began to be killed in horrible ways, by rioters and police and shanty-town criminals.” (Page 249)

Impact of Technology

After a long colonial rule, Africans raised their voice. The colonial system deteriorated the conditions of the natives of Africa. However, there was little impact of technology on the people of Africa. There were some changes in the way they looked at the situations. People of the colonial rule gave high importance to those who were educated in foreign universities

like Oxford University or other places of high repute. The impact of technology though it was slow in Africa, here and there in the novel through the characters like Mahesh & Indra, Naipaul tried to show the effect of technology on individuals. The impact of technology was not highly destructive in the novel as the society was still in the under developed stage.

Conclusion

The perception of Dystopian literature is apparently visible in the novel of V. S. Naipaul. Dystopian literature often concentrates on the confusion and cataclysm present in the society. Chaos and confusion surrounded in the entire novel *A Bend in the River*. Salim who moved to the East Coast of Africa was unable to settle till the end. Fear gripped his mind. Poverty was rampant. The assaults and killings continued and the police made retaliatory raids on those who rebelled. There was no one who could re-establish the society.

Just as the other novels like *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, V. S. Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River* is one such novel that has dystopian insight.

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