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An Unbreakable Colonial Cage in

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

The story took place in a town at the bend of a great river in a newly-independent African nation which just escaped from British's domination, and was narrated by the main character – Salim. Obviously, the author wanted to emphasize the conflict between two cultures – Western culture versus subaltern culture, and show the contradiction in a postcolonial world by Salim's point of view. In this paper, I will analyze this story by using postcolonialism because the theme of this story mainly concentrated on the relationship between the colonial culture and the native culture. It was the contradiction of two cultures that led a miserable ending which made me feel that those Africans can never break the cage of Western culture. By conferencing our textbook – *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* and *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, I will discuss this story with the basic assumptions of postcolonialism including culture issues, identity issues and so on.

“Postcolonialism is concerned with what exists and happens after the end of colonial rule” (Dobie, 186). This was what the situation Salim, the narrator, exactly faced. In this story, he was the only one who had the ability to observe things; moreover, I should say that it was the author who gave him this ability to make readers realize what Africa looks like. Shifting to the lives of others, Salim's narration bewildered and attracted me because of his different judgments of the same person. There was always something that could change his thought suddenly. However, Salim himself was judged in this story; he was just an observer. At least, there was no concrete sentence judging him. We were given all the description and details of the place by this astute observer who was introduced to us as an immigrant from an East

African Muslim Indian family. This background seemed a little complex at the beginning because we could not easily figure out his position in African society. The background of a person was an important thing because it was a standard that decided one's fate, that is, to dominate or to be dominated. With this background, Salim had a nicer life than those natives and was respected by them but he could not compete with the Europeans who were the "real" dominators in African society. Salim said "I was without the religious sense of my family. The insecurity I felt was due to my lack of true religion" (Naipaul, 16). What he said showed us one of the main problems in Africa – lost of identity which was another important part in postcolonialism. This thought was one of the reasons that caused Salim to be so pessimistic and made this story full of sadness. Throughout the story, Salim did not show his struggle toward his own culture because he said he had no hope but he did show others' struggle of creating and keeping their own culture which I am going to discuss as following. Interestingly, after reading *A Bend in the River* I realized that it was the other characters and the entire story that made whom Salim was.

The first impressive character Ferdinand, an intellect African student, was the man who could represent a hope of Africa. As a native, the basic assumptions of postcolonialism could all be seen in his life. He was arrogant and considered himself a more outstanding person than his friends because he could perfectly imitate the Western culture by joining in the New Domain project. This corresponds with what I learned from our textbook that "colonial subjects practice mimicry – imitation of dress, language, behavior, even gestures – instead of resistance"(Dobie, 189). On the other hand, he was afraid of losing his own culture, his identity, and everything he had. (This kind of contradiction filled and constructed this book.) He did not have a dependable model to teach him or help him find and stable his self-identity. He

mimicked different characters to convey that he was a special one in the town. At the beginning he mimicked Salim and then turned to those Europeans, but in his heart he could not find his position in his society. He always thought he had boundless prospects so that he looked down upon others. He did not know that his confidence and his prospect were composed of another culture which originally does not belonged to him. This was exactly how other Africans felt: they were satisfied with some ridiculous things with their narrow mind and they were also satisfied with living in their own world – a small world. For example, Mahesh, a native who took over the Big Burger franchise in the town, was proud of his career and became arrogant. In fact, his career did not mean anything to the outsiders, including Salim. Although the natives said they wanted to be independent, asserted that they loved their own culture and willing to fight for it, they could not get rid of the effects of Western culture completely. The culture they adopted had already been a hybrid one.

“The analysis of postcolonial literature characteristically explores the complex interactions and antagonisms between native, indigenous, ‘precolonial’ cultures and the imperial cultures imposed on them” (Leitch, 26). As a reader, I could feel that they tried to find their self-identities by pretending someone else, and prove their value by showing off something unworthy in those white people’s mind. For example, Ferdinand was proud of that he was involved in the New Domain project, which was actually a big lie. It seemed ironic to us. However, such an ironic thing happened all the time in every African character. They never had a viable culture or base of their own; they kept parroting the culture of the oppressor; they had nothing to look back to. Those people with few cultural values and without technological abilities had no way out except mimicry. This kind of cultural breakdown forced them to make a decision between the traditional culture and Western culture. In this book, it seemed that they

usually choose the Western side. The contradiction between two cultures rooted in village life and the seemingly modern Westernized city was appalling. Choosing the Western side might also partly due to the colonial history. “A related line of inquiry in postcolonial theory studies how institutions of Western education function in the spread of imperialism...It helps Western colonizers rule by consent rather than by violence” (Leitch, 25). This explained why those Africans could not reject the occupation of Western culture – it had already permeated. After colonial period, they were left with a fragmented society that lacked creative potential, with a society that could not govern itself, a society that needed to be governed by an external power. Just like what Salim described at the beginning, those slaves in his town did not want to change their status; they were accustomed to be governed. For example, Salim’s servant who followed him to central Africa was so dependent that he hoped Salim to fulfill his expectation instead of doing it himself. Most people in Africa did like the “peaceful” time before. They actually did not want to change because they thought a revolution would destroy the old regime and bring a worse one with destruction and bloodshed.

In the end of the story, the arrogant Ferdinand appeared as an ordinary, gloomy official. It shown that no matter how hard they tried, the result was the same: they were all controlled by the “Big Man,” and he was controlled by those Europeans. This impacted and influenced Salim who escaped in the end. What Salim saw was a hopeless world. It was this world that constructed his pessimistic personality. The author conveyed a message that they could not break down the situation: they were controlled by someone else forever. Through Salime’s description, we could see that the economy and politics were still affected by those foreigners not Africans. (The leader, Big Man, was just an native president in name.) It showed the fact that it was

very hard to make Africans be independent. “The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it,” said Salim (Naipaul, 3). They lost their identities so that there was no place to let them settle down peacefully, neither in Africa nor in the West world. Just like Salim’s friend Indar who studied in England, he neither felt Africa was his home nor England. To some degree, Salim’s affair with Yvette, a white woman who had husband, had something to do with his self-esteem. This was seen in the latter part of this book. Affecting by the unstable society and people there, he was eager to have a life like those Europeans in the New Domain. He envied Yvette’s husband; therefore, through the affair he had a feeling that he was as good as those white people.

There is an unnoticeable character – Father Huisman who loves to collect African’s works of art. He represented those foreigners who seemed to care about Africa. “On other occasions, the ‘other’ is deemed to have a natural beauty, to be the exotic other” (Dobie, 189). However, what Father Huisman appreciated was originated from the European’s view, not African’s. There was still Eurocentrism in his mind. Therefore, no one in town really felt what Father Huisman did was gratifying. Furthermore, no one cared about his death at all because he never belonged here.

In this book, there was a mysterious person called the “Big Man.” His name and his pictures appeared everywhere to remind people that he was the first native governor. The most influential thing he had done was building the New Domain, a place for educating the African youth by European teachers, a place represented the hope of real change which appeared and then disappears. However the New Domain actually was a trick that the Big Man reinforced his power in the country. The New Domain was a dreamy place for those villagers but a joke for those foreigners.

Ironically, this place was also an imitation of Western culture. The Big Man just wanted to let people think that he had the ability to bring this country to a superior level as West countries; therefore, he created a dream for villagers. On the other hand, to win people's heart, he had to separate from foreigners. That was why he kept Raymond, Yvette's husband, at a distance by sending him to govern the New Domain. It did work at first, but Africa consisted of various tribes and there was too much complicated enmity against each other; the president could not control the situation in the end. This aroused another war in central Africa. This showed the "Big Man" exists in name only: as long as a crack appears in his power, the civil war is unavoidable.

In the end of this book, Salim escaped from the town because of the war, left everything. He could not do anything but run away. Through Salim's narration, I saw the disquiet of Africa; through Ferdinand's eyes, I saw the self-esteem and frustration of Africans; through Mahesh's eyes, I saw the limitation of African's world and thoughts. This book let me see how African preserved their culture with the Western culture's invasion and how people kept living after the invaders left. We can see one kind of result in *A Bend in the River* – doing nothing but running away. The loss of hope came from the lack of cultural and spiritual traditions. The mist appearing in the last page of this book hinted that they could never break out the colonial cage around them. It existed in the bottom of their hearts, their culture no matter in the colonial past or in postcolonial present.

In *A Bend in the River*, the author did not emphasize the race issue like another postcolonial literature *Heart of Darkness*. Instead, he enhanced the conflict and contradiction between cultures by portraying the African world. "Colonizers not only physically conquer territories but also practice cultural colonization by replacing the practices and beliefs of the native culture with their own values, governance, law, and

belief” (Dobie, 188). The culture colonization was what the author wanted to show us. Although Africans did get rid of the physical domination of Western people, they could never get away of spiritual one. “The subject matter of postcolonial literature is marked by its concern for the ambiguity or loss of identity” (187). In fact, globalization had the same result in this century. It was just another name of colonialism. We were affected by other cultures through movies, books, everything around us. We cannot resist this inevitable result. The point is how we find our position when there is no more “pure” culture in this world.

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