

# STUDY MATERIALS

Module No.: 1

Name of the faculty: Satabdi Roy

Semester: VI

Topic: World Literature (DSE- 3)

## *Bend in the River*

V.S.Naipaul

- Go through the text thoroughly which will help you to write short questions and explanations.
- Some study materials are attached below, refer to them while preparing your answers.

*A Bend in the River* opens with a forthright statement of a sobering truth: “The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.”<sup>1</sup> To be nothing, both in material terms and in terms of liberty, and to have no place of one’s own in the world have been the cruel lot of most human beings over the course of history. As V. S. Naipaul conceives it, it is only by way of an uncommon effort of mind, will, and faith—the commitment required to create and sustain a higher civilization—that one can truly exist. Indeed, it is only under the fortunate conditions of democratic capitalism, with its respect for personal liberty and property rights, that this effort is likely to succeed. In much of the world, however, these freedoms have been and remain limited at best.

Among Naipaul’s finest novels, *A Bend in the River* most directly addresses this, perhaps the most important moral concern of our times: the widespread failure to acknowledge and support freedom and the rule of law in the context of an increasingly ideological conception of politics and society. While tyranny has always threatened and often overwhelmed liberty, perhaps only in our time has the

assault on freedom been so persistently and energetically carried out in the name of progress. While in a broader sense the tyranny of the modern state may be viewed as simply a manifestation of the enduring problem of human evil, those who promise a utopian future in return for the loss of freedom are especially dangerous because of the seductiveness of their appeal. What progressivism does share with the more blatant tyrannies of the past is the impulse to secure power over a vast number of subjects at whatever cost to human happiness.

Within Naipaul's oeuvre, *A Bend in the River* marks a new turn toward a focus on the nature of evil and a greater seriousness in its representation. Unlike a number of Naipaul's earlier works of fiction that employed the concept of mimicry to probe the tragicomic failure of postcolonial island nations, including *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *Miguel Street* (1959), *A Bend in the River* offers an unremitting vision of human evil, unalleviated by humor or irony. Published nearly two decades after his celebrated early work *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), *A Bend in the River* is the first of Naipaul's novels to offer an expansive, fully articulated, and unflinching treatment of his newfound sense of human vulnerability.

Set largely in an unnamed African country in a settlement at the bend of a great river, the novel centers on the character of Salim, an ethnically Indian Muslim from the east African coast who has decided to seek his fortune in central Africa. Salim is unfortunate enough to have purchased his shop at a moment of civil unrest, and though he arrives with buoyant hopes and enjoys success for a time, his business is increasingly undermined by events beyond his control. Eventually, as the country's president consolidates power, Salim's business is confiscated and his very life is threatened by the ever more chaotic and violent course of events. Though the president is unnamed in the novel, he would seem to be based largely on Mobutu Sese Seko, the longtime ruler of the Congo whose creation of a personality cult portraying his mother as the "African Madonna" and himself as the savior of African culture helped secure his rule. The personality cult was bad enough, but worse followed. As conditions degenerated, the result of mismanagement and corruption, Mobutu ordered the Zairianization of the economy, including the nationalization of foreign businesses.

In the novel Salim finds himself caught up in just such a course of events. With his shop seized and its title transferred to Théotime, the overbearing new owner for whom he is forced to work, Salim attempts to raise funds to flee the country by trading in illegal ivory. This effort at self-preservation only leads to greater danger, however, as Salim is betrayed by his house servant, is jailed, and faces the

possibility of execution. He escapes but only as a result of the fortuitous intervention of Ferdinand, the son of a river trader whom he has assisted in the past.

To understand the author's intentions in *A Bend in the River*, it is necessary to delve beyond the details of the plot and to appreciate the connotations of Naipaul's use of the word "civilization," the word that grounds every aspect of the novel. In his essay "The Universal Civilization," the 1990 Wriston Lecture presented at the Manhattan Institute, Naipaul singled out the right to "the pursuit of happiness" from the American Declaration of Independence along with the Christian doctrine of "do unto others" as prominent elements of what he meant by a redemptive universal civilization. Naipaul might as well have included in his definition the Declaration's other two rights, "life" and "liberty," and it is "life" in particular, that most fundamental of human rights, with which he is most concerned in *A Bend in the River*. At the center of the novel is Naipaul's newfound grasp of the terrifying fragility of human existence in the absence of civilization and his deepening comprehension of the implications for moral action that such awareness entails.

As a vehicle for exploring this awareness, Naipaul's choice of a susceptible protagonist adrift in an unstable corner of central Africa was an inspired artistic decision. Cast into the political anarchy of a fictionalized central African republic, Salim finds his assumptions of individual autonomy challenged, especially as he grasps the possibility of his own imminent demise. Everywhere he looks, Salim encounters the specter of death. Significantly, however, it is not simply human mortality, death as the natural end of existence, that unsettles him, but another sort of death altogether. What this young man faces in the unraveling of civilized norms is the likelihood of a sordid, utterly banal end at the hands of an unfeeling minor official. Stripped of the most fundamental of human rights, he finds himself in the clutches of a police state, and an unstable one at that, in which the execution of anyone caught in officialdom's net becomes purely a matter of routine.

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