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A Comparative analysis on V. S. Naipaul's A Bend in the River and Joseph Conrads Heart of Darkness

Critical analysis of V. S. Naipauls “ A Bend in the River” as a Sequel to Joseph Conrad’s “ Heart of Darkness” The claim that Joseph Conrad’s “ Heart of Darkness” champions the colonizer’s godly presence in Africa may engender hot debates because of a reader’s naïve failure to debunk the manifold meanings that are kept hidden beneath the apparently ambiguous structural layers of the text. The fact whether Marlowe represents the “ bloody racist” (as Achebe calls him) or he appears to be the introspectively criticizing voice, of the European conscience, against the colonizers’ vicious racism and rapacity that often remained hidden behind the thick wall of dark African Jungle is more debatable than Naipaul’s assertive attempt, in ‘ A Bend in the River’ to construct the colonial identity as an entity that is racially inferior to the European and inherently incapable to expose itself to changes for the betterment (Boehmer 45-7). The tone underlying Naipaul’s approach to the colonizer-colonized relationship obviously tends to vindicate Achebe’s claim that Naipaul essentially establishes himself as the “ purveyor of the old comforting myths of Africa’s former colonizers” (Achebe 3). Indeed Naipaul’s ‘ A Bend in the River” can be read as a sequel –more appropriately an appendage to- the Conrad’s ‘ Heart of Darkness’.

Indeed whether both Conrad and Naipaul are the so-called racists or not, they need to “ set up Africa as the foil for Europe” and to show an “ image of Africa as the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation.” (Achebe 5)

Though critics like Achebe blame these authors for purveying racism and for championing the west’s superiority, they can be acquitted of this blame

through their literary detachments from the narrators of their novel. Achebe claims that “ Marlow seems to enjoy Conrad’s complete confidence.” (Achebe 6) But he ultimately ignores the fact that Marlow’s narration essentially appears to be the unashamed assertion of the most detestable and rapacious self, of the colonizers, that often remains cloaked under the apparel of being civilized. Indeed referring to the similarity between Conrad’s and Naipaul’s approaches to the people of European colonies, Achebe says that “ one of Naipaul’s favorite aims is his “ determination to use his creative works to prove that the supposed validity of Conrad’s observations regarding Africa in Heart of Darkness remains despite the departure of Africa’s former colonizers” (Walunywa 2). Like Conrad, Naipaul also can be respectfully differentiated from his narrator Salim in “ A Bend in the River”. Naipaul personally was in favor of detaching the writer’s self from his or her book, since he believes in Proust’s approach to the demarcation between a writer and his or her book: “ that a book is the product of a different self from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices. If we would try to understand that particular self, it is by searching our own bosoms, and trying to reconstruct it there, that we may arrive at it” (Naipaul, “ Nobel Lecture”).

In “ A Bend in the River” the narrator Salim primarily plays the role of a conduit that essentially upholds Naipaul’s literary disposition that “ Africans are incapable of negotiating the transition from underdevelopment to modernity because their faults in that regard are inherent” (Walunywa 4). But Salim’s identity crisis, if supposed to be a literary construct by Naipaul in the novel, is a neocolonial product that is subjected to “ considerable

criticism by employing Salim's constricted frame of reference" (Walunywa 3) and obviously Salim's failure to transgress the boundaries imposed by his community and his futile attempt to form a newer identity, meaningful for his existence, breaking beyond the neocolonialist boundaries. The correspondence between Conrad's Kurtz and Naipaul strikingly reveals that both of the narrators are each other's antithesis. Both of them are the products of the colonizer's unquenchable rapacity and racism.

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