

# A bend in the river

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A Bend in The River is a book published by V. S. Naipaul in 1979. The novel is set in Zaire during the rule of Mobutu Sese Seka in the late 1960s and early 1970. The country nor its president are ever mentioned but many commentators agree that it is in fact Zaire.

This period was one of great social and political upheaval in Zaire, later known as the Democratic Republic of Congo. There were armed coups, political machinations, guerilla rebellions, urban riots, rural massacres and widespread social reforms. Against this backdrop, the transformation of Salim is presented. External sources are one in saying that Salim transformed from a propertied and upright man into a poor scoundrel because of the environment he was thrust in. I am in agreement with this.

" The tall lilac-coloured flower had appeared only a few years before, and in the local language there was no word for it. The people still called it 'the new thing' or 'the new thing in the river,' and to them it was another enemy. Its rubbery vines and leaves formed thick tangles of vegetation that adhered to the river banks and clogged up waterways. It grew fast, faster than men could destroy it with the tools they had. The channels to the villages had to be constantly cleared.

Night and day the water hyacinth floated up from the south, seeding itself as it travelled." This except from the book can be taken as a simple botanical statement, yet in the subtle mind of Naipaul this simple botanical fact suggests a broader truth in relation to the life of Salim. It will be a foreshadowing of the creeping corruption that will rend Salim's soul.

In the beginning of the novel, Salim is an Arab-African of Indian descent who comes from a lapsed Muslim family that has resided in eastern Africa for generations. However, Salim sees no future for himself or for his culture along the east African coast. He also has a bit of an inferiority complex, in chapter two he says he left English language school when he was 16 not because he was not smart enough to graduate but because no one in his family went to school beyond 16.

He decides to travel to the interior of the Continent. However, because of the chaos prevalent in those days his trip takes a full week and Salim paid bribes to many people to facilitate his travels. Family friend Nazruddin had sold him sundries and supply store which he discovers is a mess. and travels to the interior of the African Continent to start a new life.

At this stage he still has high hopes and aspirations for a better life. He eventually arrives along a town at a town along the bend of the river, this is likely based on the river Kisangani, there he is joined by his servant Metty and he establishes his business. Salim quickly gains a regular customer in Zabeth the merchant.

Zabeth is an authentic African who is in touch with the tribal ways, she uses charms and potions to defend from evil yet is easily able to enter the modern world. By comparison her son Ferdinand is a through and through 'modern' African who is in the process of being educated in the modern ways. Since Zabeth is his friend Salim takes an interest in watching over the boy as he grows up.

Clearly in the beginning of the novel, Salim is a man of some property and he is also an upright and moral person despite his lack of faith in his religion.

However Salim is trapped in a rather miserable environment, the post colonial environment he resides in is a no-man's land. There are European Intellectual advisers, mercenaries, profiteers and other Third World flotsam and jetsam who populate the land.

These people and the environment of rebellions and repression will slowly degrade Salim as he loses his properties and his integrity in the mounting chaos. By the end of the novel Salim's transformation is complete when he notes in page 36-7 that even Natives have become exiles in their own country, so can become exiles in their own country when life itself is lived at the whims of the ruler.

This descent from propertied upright man to improvised scoundrel happens gradually. It begins for our man living along the bend of the river with Bigburgers. This is the name of the place where the prominent members of the local society meet. It is also the name of a large hamburger which Salim, descendant of fastidious Indian immigrants, describes the Bigburger as “smooth white lips of bread over mangled black tongues of meat” Here is where Salim goes regularly and strikes acquaintances with the locals.

In the beginning the town is admirable in its simplicity. The Villagers descend from the bush to sell monkey meat to the steamer passengers. Then they turn around and use it to buy pots, cloths and razor blades from the shops. The shop owners can then go to Bigburgers for their meals. Salim for his part moves his sundry and supplies store and converts it into a dry-goods store,

he bought the place cheap because the revolution depressed real estate values. Lucky for him he catches on to the economic boom that occurs shortly after he arrived.

Soon the jingoistic “ Big Man’s” misrule takes its toll on his prosperity. Father Huisman, a Belgian priest who taught at the school where Ferdinand studies is depressed at his relative wealth compared to the young Africans who must eat caterpillars just to sate their hunger.

He decides to leave but dies before he can go. In chapter 6 the town becomes a thriving marketplace. However the lack of urban planning, since the “ Big man” has neglected the town, leads to squatters who have no homes and just throw their garbage out the door creating a big hill of garbage making the town stink.

In chapter nine Indar talks about his life to Salim, Indar reveals how in the past he too was idealistic and appreciated nature in all its beauty. His visit to London changed him greatly, he became London-centric in a sense believing that all other life was false and London was the true life.

Indar was so in love with London that he wanted to stay there for good. However, he had a change of heart and after graduating from college he already had a cynical view of life. He now thinks only of himself and cares little for the greater world around him. Little do we know that Indar is a foreshadowing of Salim’s fate.

By chapter 13 things are really going bad for Salim as well. He is now intimately involved with a woman named Yvette who in the past was

seduced by Raymond. Before, he derided Mahesh as a half man because of his devotion to his wife.

Now he is doing exactly the same thing with Yvette seeing the world based on how it would affect their relationship. After the Youth Guard is disbanded in chapter 14, things get even worse. The police are harassing everyone thinking them to be rebels, supposedly, in fact they are merely trying to extort money from everyone they suspect still has any.

" The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it." Reads the first sentence of page one. It summarizes, Naipaul's rather cynical world view and the thesis of his book. In the end Salim casts doubt upon the validity and legitimacy of the historical documents from which he draws his identity.

Despite all the turmoil he sees around him his friend Raymond, a historian, can be seen painting a rosy picture of the events. He asks himself if it were possible that his own past had been manipulated too?

This crisis is the last straw that breaks the camels back. With his present in ruins and his future bleak, Salim finds that his past is also a sham. This is too much to bear, following his trip to Europe and seeing that even Europe is not the paradise it was made up to be Salim returns having lost all hope in the world.