

# Ethics and Escapism in V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*

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**Abstract** Edward Said and others have argued that V. S. Naipaul is a standard bearer for imperialism. But this paper argues that these scholars have misread the ethical implications of what Naipaul says about the future of Africa and its politics. By examining the ethical crises and crimes of “escapists” in Naipaul’s novel *A Bend in the River*, it can be argued that, according to Naipaul, the future of Africa depends on people’s sound judgments and choices. That is to say the future of Africa is ethical in nature.

**Key words** ethics; politics of Africa; V. S. Naipaul; *A Bend in the River*; escapists

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V. S. Naipaul’s novel *A Bend in the River* (1979) is the story of two escapes. It begins with Salim’s escape from his hometown and ends with his escape from central Africa. In both escapes Salim is confused about the answers to questions such as “Who am I?” and “To whom am I responsible?”

In the first escape Salim changes from an outsider to an insider of central African life, from a vain glory seeking young man to a moral merchant who takes racial and domestic responsibilities and cares the lives of the local Africans. Unfortunately Salim’s moral merchant identity is shattered by the despotic new government. Salim’s final escape reflects his insistence on his ethical identity

because if he had chosen to stay in the town he would have to obey the Big Man's orders and renounce his ethical values. In the end of the novel, Salim does not feel excited in escape. He expresses his nostalgia for the good old days instead, which demonstrates Salim's moral emotion toward his neighbors, business partners and local Africans. Salim's final escape is a pursuit of individualism within a chaotic postcolonial political context characterized by "power and the distortions of power" (Coetzee 98). Within such a political context self preservation in the form of escape becomes an appropriate and necessary ethical choice for Salim.

In an interview with Elizabeth Hardbeth shortly after the publication of the novel, Naipaul declared that "Africa has no future" (Handwick 36). Darkness, primitivism, barbarianism, and inferiority are examples of prejudicial words used to describe life in central Africa by Salim, the first person narrator.

As a result of such pessimistic evaluations of the status quo of Africa within and beyond the novel, Naipaul scholars often unanimously regard *A Bend in the River* as a novel not just of escapism but of apocalypse. Professor Edward Said considers Naipaul to be a standard bearer for imperialist idea of "self-inflicted wounds, which is to say that we 'non-Whites' are the cause of all our [Africans] problems, not the overly maligned imperialists" (Said 36). Others object to the way in which the contrast between the western world and Africa is depicted as a contrast between "civilization and barbarism, modernity and primitivism, light and darkness" (Hayward 176-177). Ranu Samantrai argues that it looks like European civilization is based on a form of mercantilism: "Under their [European] rule the continent knows a 'miraculous peace': they [the Europeans] control the destructive nature of Africa" (Samantrai 53-54). In the parallel case of India, Guyatri Spivak has questioned the "emancipatory possibilities" of nationalism "within the imperialist theater." Spivak argues that postcolonial nationalism in India (let alone Africa) has often worked to suppress the "innumerable examples of resistance throughout the imperialist and pre-imperialist centuries" (Spivak 245).

Said further says that Naipaul is "in favor of the tritest, the cheapest and the easiest of colonial mythologies about wogs and darkies" (Said 37). George Lamming likens Naipaulian "apocalypse of Africa" to "a castrated satire" and observes that novels of Naipaul have failed to offer a referential value system for African revival (qtd. in Cooke 31). At least one critic, comparing *A Bend in the River* to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, calls Naipaul "the darkest Conrad" and sees Salim as an instrument of colonialism like Conrad's Marlow (Thieme 180).

Despite these attacks, even on the theoretical level it can be seen that in *A*

*Bend in the River* Naipaul shares Spivak's worries about postcolonial politics in decolonized countries. What is true in India is also true in Africa. The novels of Naipaul may be "novels of chaos and escapes" (Simpson 571) because so many characters flee their circumstances in novels such as *A Bend in the River*, *Miguel Street* (1959), *Half a Life* (2001), and *Magic Seeds* (2004). But this paper argues that scholars have misread the ethical implications of what Naipaul says about the future of Africa and its politics. Naipaul may have his share of prejudices, but his novel provides a careful examination, much of it based on his own reporting, of the problems the bedeviled countries like the Congo in the mid-twentieth century.

By examining the ethical crises of the escapists in Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River*, it can be shown that Naipaul believes the future of Africa depends on people's sound judgments and choices. That is to say the future of Africa is ultimately ethical in nature. Despair leads to hope, but not in the short term of the novel itself, and that is part of the critical problem the books raises. Overall, the evidence suggests that Naipaul has an ethical purpose in writing about what are often appalling deeds and misdeeds. To show this we will examine the problem of the political dictators (Big Men) in Africa, the cast of characters Salim finds himself associated with, and the nature of Salim's itinerary.

## I

The concept of the Big Man, or corrupt dictator, appears in Naipaul's travel article "A New King": "In 1965, as General Mobutu seized power; and as he has imposed order on the army and the country so his style has changed, and become more African" ("New" 205). In *A Bend in the River*, the president of the new African country has committed massacres and created a school of Arts and Sciences to suppress disobedience by violence, deception and brainwashing. Naipaul creates a new "Domain," where the inhabitants are mainly Europeans, foreign experts invited by the Big Man, and African students who are educated to be the Big Man's puppet-like supporters. Salim realizes that the new Domain is nothing but a hoax. It is an "Africa of words and ideas as it existed on the Domain (and from which, often, Africans were physically absent)" (Naipaul, *Bend* 144). From one point of view, this can be taken as anti-African. From another, it is an ethical critique.

Either way, the establishment of new Domain is a political strategy through which the Big Man pleases the West and cultivates what are termed "new Africans." In *A Bend in the River*, after achieving his purpose the Big Man reveals his intentions to create a dictatorship, a sort of metamorphosed performance of African chieftaincy. Salim thus witnesses the Big Man's despotism and the farce of his

self-deification as well as the escalation of violence in the region. Most of Salim's neighbors leave. People who stay behind live in unending anxiety. Eventually the new government confiscates Salim's private property and destroys his merchant identity and sense of belonging he has achieved.

Where Salim's emotional attachment with local Africans and his commercial activities have come to define his identity as a merchant, the outbreak of African civil war endangers peoples' normal life and severs the emotional bond between Salim and local Africans. Separated from neighbors and local Africans, Salim's "moral emotion" (Nie 249) loses its attachment. Deprived of private property Salim's merchant identity becomes meaningless.

This disaster casts an ironic light on the beginning of *A Bend in the River*, where Salim leaves his home on the east African coast and moves to central Africa.<sup>1</sup> He does so for good reasons. He wants to become financially "strong," for as Indar says, "to be in Africa you have to be strong" (Naipaul, *Bend* 21). Instead of marrying Nazruddin's daughter and living a comfortable family life in his hometown, Salim is determined to pursue business success and follow in his ancestors' footmarks in central Africa. Through his escape to the already de-colonized central Africa, Salim intends to become a successful businessman and make contributions to his family. Salim's escape is thus ethically justified because he takes responsibilities for personal growth and family prosperity.

## II

In his new home Salim finds himself in a social and political situation that Naipaul represents through characters, especially Salim's Westernized friend Ingar, and associates of the Big Man: Father Huismans, Raymond (the Big Man's white consultant), and Raymond's wife Yvette; and an American thief. Through the description of the four Westerners and a half (Ingar), Naipaul not only criticizes the die hard western god of colonialism and the rise of neo-colonialism but also raises a series of ethical political questions such as "Should 'God' look on with folded arms?" "Should 'God' take advantage of a conflagration to loot?" and "Should 'God' reap where He has not sown?"

Father Huismans is a reclusive person and spends most of his time wandering alone in African bush. He disguises himself as an African art devotee, but behind his self-declared love of Africa is his hunt-for-novelty mentality and fetishistic colonialist identity. His religious identity as a Father makes him an ideal spokesman for the western "God" of colonialism. Naipaul draws a caricature of Father Huismans with rhetoric devices such as simile, hyperbole and reiteration. Naipaul

uses words such as “half a man,” “a pure man,” “a man apart” (Naipaul, *Bend* 70), “unfinished face,” “babylike quality,” “premature birth,” “early disturbance,” “fragile,” and “incompleteness” (Naipaul, *Bend* 68) to describe Father Huisman’s underdeveloped physical features, and he uses the word “tough” three times to highlight Father Huisman’s eccentric personality. Father Huisman’s indulgence in African collection is a symptom of colonial fetishism.

Arguing that the Western colonization of Africa is mainly conducted by those babylike, unfinished, and fetishistic Europeans, Naipaul successfully launches his satire on European colonialism. Father Huisman’s colonial fetishism is a positive answer to Edward Said’s question “Shouldn’t we [western colonialists] have held on to the colonies, kept the subject or inferior races in check, remained true to our civilizational responsibility?” Father Huisman is not only nostalgic for the old colonial days but also expects a second coming of Western colonization of Africa: “He didn’t simply see himself in a place in the bush; he saw himself as part of an immense flow of history. He was of Europe; he took the Latin words to refer to himself” (Naipaul, *Bend* 71).

Father Huisman regards colonial relics in Africa as a part of European civilization and thinks that he has the responsibility to collect and preserve them. He tells Salim that “our town would suffer setbacks but that they would be temporary. After each setback, the civilization of Europe would become a little more secure at the bend in the river” (*Bend* 99). According to Huisman, the future of Africa lies in its past and only by returning to the past Africa can have a future. But a return to the past means westerners’ re-colonization of Africa. Father Huisman’s logic is against ethics because he thinks the future of Africa is based on western colonization. If the “prophecy” was made by an ordinary person it would not be of great influence. But when it is made by a Father, messenger of God, people would regard it as God’s will and the Africans already engulfed in the chaos of civil wars will fall into the abyss of despair after hearing Father Huisman’s “holy prophecy”.

Father Huisman is seemingly a professional researcher on African culture but he turns out to be a perennial colonialist and an escapist from practical political concerns for African future. Naipaul intends to point out that the “God” served by Father Huisman is an epitome of western political and economic interest groups in Africa. The violent death of Father Huisman suggests the disillusionment of the re-colonization politics of Africa and the failure of westerners’ colonial God-role play.

In *A Bend in the River* Naipaul also criticizes western neocolonialism in Africa

through his portrayal of an American thief. After the death of Father Huismans, an American young man steals Huismans's African collections. The young American thief epitomizes westerners' shameful behavior of neocolonial robbery.

The collection began to be pillaged. Who more African than the young American who appeared among us, who more ready to put on African clothes and dance African dances? He left suddenly by the steamer one day; and it was discovered afterwards that the bulk of the collection in the gun room had been crated and shipped back with his belongings to the United States, no doubt to be the nucleus of the gallery of primitive art he often spoke of starting. The richest products of the forest. (Naipaul, *Bend* 95)

In the so called fervor of African culture, Africa becomes not only a place for cultural speculation but also a place for the practice of western neocolonial "pillage politics" (Pantin 18). The late president of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah argues that "Africa is a paradox which illustrates and highlights neo-colonialism. Her earth is rich, yet the products that come from above and below her soil continue to enrich, not Africans predominantly, but groups and individuals who operate to Africa's impoverishment" (Nkrumah 1). In the novel, Salim witnesses westerners' plundering of African resources such as copper, tin, lead, gold, uranium and ivory.

Characters such as Indar, Raymond, Raymond's wife Yvette are Naipaulian archetypes of Western speculators who pretend to be devotees of African culture. They take advantage of the unstable African political situation to seek fame and accumulate wealth. After his graduation from Cambridge University, Indar could not find a job in London due to his African origin. In despair Indar still regards London as his home. He tells Salim that "For someone like me there was only one civilization and one place – London, or a place like it" (Naipaul, *Bend* 175). After a period of Bohemian vagrant life in London Indar finally realizes that "It's a difference in civilization." (*Bend*, 177) Indar is lucky to join an African development organization founded by some westerners and move into the new Domain set up by the Big Man. The new Domain becomes the place like London, a substitute for London in Indar's mind.

Through Salim's observation of the life in new Domain, Naipaul criticizes the parasitic and hedonistic ethical values of the western speculators who claim to be assistants and builders of the new country. "But now, being with them [the westerners] in the Domain, which in every way was their resort, and being admitted so easily to their life, their world of bungalows and air-conditioners and holiday

ease, catching in their educated talk the names of famous cities ...” (*Bend*, 136) In the Domain westerners talk about every thing but avoid discussing African problems while African turmoil and crises are merely several miles away.

Different from patrial westerners, Indar who has received western education and imitates westerners is only a half westerner. He belongs to the “bogus middle class” “bankrupt of ideas, uninventive, unproductive, and derivative”. With its “wave lengths tuned in to Europe,” it “has adopted unreservedly and with enthusiasm the ways of thinking characteristic of the mother country, has become wonderfully detached from its own thought and has based its consciousness upon foundations which are typically foreign” (Fanon 178). According to Fanon, the bogus middle class is characterized not only by philistinism but also by the betrayal of their birthplace.

Indar who regards Britain as his mother country betrays his birthplace in eastern African coast and also betrays the new Domain where he enjoys wealth and honor. Foreseeing the Big Man’s plan of abandoning the new Domain, Indar flees away. Indar once applied for an Indian diplomatic job but was rejected and rebuked by an Indian diplomat who asked him “But you say in your letter you are from Africa. How can you join our diplomatic service? How can we have a man of divided loyalties?” (Naipaul, *Bend* 173) Describing Indar’s humiliating job interview Naipaul criticizes Indar’s lack of ethical political concerns for homelands, his birthplace and his adopted home in the Domain.

Raymond and his wife Yvette are also among the Western speculators who make their fortune in Africa. Raymond used to be a teacher in an African university in the capital of the country. He is acquainted with the Big Man by chance. At that time the future president is only a precocious and sensitive teenager. Answering the eager request for help from the teenager’s mother, Raymond agrees to talk with the boy who suffers from mental depression and offer life guidance to the boy. After the boy grows up and becomes president of the country, Raymond is rewarded and promoted to be president’s white political consultant. Raymond often accompanies president to attend international conferences and is invited by many universities to give lectures, in which Raymond enjoys utmost honor and respect. Yvette is acquainted with Raymond when he is at the pinnacle of his political career. Moved by Raymond’s position and hospitality, Yvette decides to marry him in spite of his history of divorce and their big age difference. Although Yvette tells Salim that it is a marriage by deception, Salim observes that Yvette is married to Raymond in order to make use of Raymond’s social and political influence for self success.

Disinterested in Raymond’s national development plan, the president puts

Raymond in the new Domain that is far away from the capital of the country. Local Africans think that Raymond is instated by the Big Man as a supervisor in the Domain but in fact this is a way in which the Big Man estranges himself from Raymond. Raymond thus becomes a victim of the Big Man's new national development plan and his wife Yvette the victim of Raymond's speculative political career. Raymond lives in the fantasy that he will be in the Big Man's graces again. Young Yvette who can not endure loneliness and obscurity commits adultery and has extramarital affairs.

Salim soon discovers Raymond's pseudo-scholar identity as a western expert on African political issues. Salim reflects that "The article about the race riot — after that bright opening paragraph which I had read in the shop — turned out to be a compilation of government decrees and quotations from newspaper" (Naipaul, *Bend* 209). According to Salim, Raymond's knowledge about Africa is not even comparable to that of Indar's and Nazruddin's. Through Salim's narration of Raymond couple's stories of success and failure, Naipaul expresses his ethical criticism on westerners' speculation on postcolonial African politics. For one, Indar's sense of superiority and knowledge of African politics humbles Salim. Learning of the blood-shed in anti-colonial rebellions across Northern African among inland tribes and the British failure to suppress the rebels, Salim worries about the future of his hometown and the future of himself. Although like other family members Salim tries to avoid political discussions, the change of African political environment has inevitably influenced his daily life. Uncertainty and anxiety brought about by the change of African political environment constrains Salim to escape.

Salim's hybrid identity of being and not being an African at the same time is another reason for his escape. As an Indian Muslim descendent, Salim imagines a kinship with Arabs who once held sway over Africa so "I [Salim] was worried for the Arabs. I was also worried for us. Because, so far as power went, there was no difference between the Arabs and ourselves. We were both small groups living under a European flag at the edge of the continent" (*Bend* 17). Salim's early escape takes place at a time when European colonization in Africa is under crisis. Europeans are gradually losing their control over Africa as Naipaul wrote "The Belgian past is being scrubbed out as the Arab past has been scrubbed out. The Arabs were the Belgians' rivals in the eastern Congo..... But who now associates the Congo with a nineteenth-century Arab empire?" ("New" 217) Within this historical and political context, Salim's escape to central Africa where European colonial powers have been overthrown implies his personal hope for Arab racial

revival.

### III

Upon his escape from African central bush, witnessing the darkness of totalitarianism and African primitivism, like Marlow Salim panics. But scholars have ignored the fact that Salim is not a western colonialist. Business profits and self achievement are Salim's major motives in buying Nazruddin's bankrupt store at a low price in central Africa. Accumulation of wealth can not only bring Salim a higher social status and sense of security but also enables him to live a decent life once enjoyed only by Europeans in old colonial period.

Salim's sense of vanity is greatly satisfied by his newly acquired identity of a successful merchant. Local traders represented by African female trader Zabeth respect and call him "Lord". Escaping from wars in eastern African coast, Salim's previous family servant Metty becomes his employer. Within the political vacuum after the decolonization of central Africa and before a new African state is founded, Salim has gradually materialized his dream of being a wealthy merchant.

Salim is also a moral merchant. He introduces new products to Zabeth hoping they can help bush people to live a better life. Salim takes on the role of mentor, educating African youths Metty and Ferdinand and helping them correct their mistakes. Salim is also a protector of African heritage. After decolonization many African colonial relics are sold as antiques. He sends the school account book stolen by a student back to the public school instead of selling it and making a profit. He grieves upon the murder of Africa-lover Father Huisman (whose real identity will be discussed later in the paper). Helen Hayward regards Salim as an irresponsible outsider who "has made more of an investment in his adopted society. Nevertheless, he remains an outsider and mixes with other outsiders" (Hayward 197). But the truth is the opposite of Hayward's observation. From daily life, to the education of young Africans and the protection of African cultural heritage, Salim has been engaged in various aspects of local African life and takes due responsibilities, as a result of which he is no longer a foreign outsider but becomes an insider.

Being confronted by chaos caused by African civil wars, Salim is not concerned with his personal safety; on the contrary he shows a strong sense of belonging to the town and sympathy toward poverty stricken bush villagers:

One night I had a premonition that the war had come close. ...I thought of the crazed and half-starved village people against whom the guns were going

to be used, people whose rags were already the colour of ashes. This was the anxiety of a moment of wakefulness; I fell asleep again. (Naipaul, *Bend* 77-78)

Although Salim feels sentimental at sight of dilapidated buildings left by western colonialists upon his first arrival at the central African town, yet he is not a disillusioned escapist affected by colonial nostalgia. After insurgencies, the town in a bend in the river revives and ushers in a short period of prosperity. Within a temporarily promising environment of politics and economics, Salim's business flourishes. His career comes to a climax. Salim is full of hopes for the future of the town. Salim used to feel disgusted at and resentful to local Africans in the town. His earlier feeling of abhorrence can be understood as a natural psychological response of "cultural shock". Living in the town for six years, Salim has begun to understand and sympathize with local Africans. Thereafter Salim's ethical identity changes from a mere money making foreigner to a moral merchant who cares the fate and sufferings of local Africans.

If protagonist's escape involves not only psychological escape from reality, responsibility and crisis but also geographical displacement, the escape can also be regarded as a kind of "self-exile", but not everyone can afford the cost of "self-exile" (Papayanis 1). In *A Bend in the River* ordinary African people can not escape or exile, because they lack financial support, knowledge about the outside world and vision for the future, In times of war and dictatorship there is no place for them to escape to. Within a hostile political environment, the African female trader Zabeth and her son Ferdinand are not pessimistic fatalists. On the contrary, Zabeth and Ferdinand are the "ferryman" who bridge the past, present and future of Africa and are responsible for local Africans' welfare. Naipaul intends to argue that the future of Africa lies in their selection of and insistence on the ferryman ethical identity.

The description of Zabeth runs through the first chapter of the novel. Although she is scarcely mentioned later, her sense of mission to deliver goods for bush villagers is impressive and highly eulogized by Salim. At the beginning of *A Bend in the River* Zabeth sails a canoe on river transporting goods between bush and town. What Zabeth delivers is not merely products but also a spirit of bravery with which she dares to go out of African bush and ventures into the modern society outside. Zabeth's business is based upon her comprehensive knowledge of villagers' daily needs. She continuously ventures long and dangerous journeys to sell villagers' produces, buy and transport the products they need back to the bush. Salim thinks that Zabeth's bravery lies in her identity as a magician and her

“protecting ointments” covered body whose smell repels and warns people. Salim is right. But the identity as a magician and protecting ointments are gifts from the bush. Zabeth’s sense of belonging to the bush and her responsibility for bush villagers are her real source of bravery.

Being a writer not a politician, Naipaul does fail to discuss the possibilities of certain value systems but he proposes certain ethical values through his portrayal of Zabeth and her son Ferdinand. Naipaulian ethical proposal for a new Africa relies on Zabeth’s business efforts, the growth of Ferdinand and their political awareness as well as ethical criticism of the national politics.

In spite of her illiteracy, Zabeth realizes the differences between the life in the bush and the life in the town and also recognizes the importance of education, as a result of which she sends Ferdinand to attend public school in town and asks Salim to take care of Ferdinand. Zabeth is not blind to the Big Man’s dictatorship that threatens the life of African people. With the help of his mother Ferdinand becomes mature in ethical political judgment. He is the epitome of African intellectuals who will have to take the responsibility for the future of Africa. Going through stages of imitation, rebellion and brainwashing Ferdinand finally becomes an intellectual who is able to make sound ethical judgments.

Ferdinand’s advantage lies in his primitive life experience and his knowledge about the modern world. Ferdinand’s face is impressive to Salim because that face reveals the primitive power of African bush and that power observes the principle: “survival of the fittest”. Uncontrolled primitive power will bring violence and “Violence is a thoroughly documented item in V.S. Naipaul’s fiction. ...violence and antagonism stand for a barrier against self-realization” (Hedi 49). Although he is surrounded by violent, tall, strong and bloodthirsty African warriors, Ferdinand is immune to violence and negative influences of the warriors.

Ferdinand’s growth is a role play process within different political contexts. At the age of 15 shortly after African decolonization Ferdinand leaves his father and goes to live with his mother. Salim becomes a father-like figure to Ferdinand. Nobody has a clear view of the political situation at the beginning of African decolonization. Ferdinand can learn from Salim how to deal with people but learn nothing about politics because Salim is also confused by the ever changing political environment and has no ready knowledge to share with Ferdinand. As an African aborigine Ferdinand has nowhere to escape but to be involved in regional politics.

Ferdinand belongs to the African transitional generation who live at present, with the influence of the past still felt and the door to the future slowly opens. African political outbursts have deeply influenced young Ferdinand but he is not

adrift and does not fail to make sound ethical judgments. Ferdinand is inevitably engaged in the Big Man's monocracy and becomes the propagator and executor of the president's dictatorship "in the name of Africanization and the dignity of Africa" ("New" 209). Witnessing Ferdinand's swift rise in his political career by working for the president, Salim mistakes Ferdinand for an arrogant and self-conceited puppet of the president. Ferdinand is deceived by the Big Man's slogans such as "new Africans" and "the people who take over the future." Ferdinand's intention of political participation is good because he wants to make contributions to the development of the country. Being unsophisticated and inexperienced in politics Ferdinand is made use of by the president. Although Ferdinand's social status has been dramatically changed after he becomes a government officer, his friendship with Salim and Metty never changes. At the end of the novel Ferdinand risks his political career and even his life to help Salim escape from prison and eventually from the country. Ferdinand's choice in protecting his friend rather than making political profits proves his moral sentiment.

Ferdinand's ethical choice is based upon his sober recognition of the current political situation, which is the precondition for his "ferryman" identity. He confesses his political judgment to Salim:

We're being killed. Nothing has any meaning. ...I felt I had been used. I felt I had given myself an education for nothing. I felt I had been fooled.... It's a nightmare. All these airfields the man has built, the foreign companies have built — nowhere is safe now. (Naipaul, *Bend* 319-320)

As Ferdinand says, native people who can not escape from the Big Man's dictatorship simply adopt a laissez-faire attitude. Zabeth's business is closed, which seemingly shows the collapse of the bridge that once connects bush and town, African past and present. Ferdinand's despair in central Africa's ugly present seemingly shows the hopelessness of African future. Under dictatorship African people still have three choices: they can return to bush life and resume tribal wars to shift political cries; they can adopt a wait-and-see attitude and remain submissive; African intellectuals can gather strength to overthrow the president's dictatorship. The first choice dehumanizes people and makes them subjected to jungle law. The second choice deprives people's right in ethical judgment and renders them utterly powerless. Educated and having power, Ferdinand who saves Salim and makes harsh criticism of national politics will naturally make the third choice because the previous two choices are escapes from responsibilities for the future of Africa and

the last choice is a selection of and insistence on the “ferryman” ethical identity with the help of which Ferdinand will face the challenges of African politics.

#### IV

Dr. Fadwa Abdel Rahman regards Naipaul as “the white traveler under the dark mask” argues that novels of Naipaul are literary interpretations of racial, cultural superiority of the whites and the substitute of a white man’s narrative with a black man’s narrative can not hide the evil intention of his travel writings (Rahman 169). Many scholars have commented that novels of Naipaul are full of Eurocentric and eurobashing biases and Naipaul has displayed a colonial contempt to the backwardness of newly independent African countries. These judgments are distorting Naipaulian purpose of writing because the Naipaulian declaration (“Africa has no future.”) actually raises serious questions on the fate and future of Africa, such as “why does not Africa have a future?” and “In what way can Africa have a future?”

In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul has provided readers three answers rich with ethical political implications. First, through the depiction of the changes of Salim’s ethical identities and his final escape, Naipaul argues that if a moral merchant such as Salim can not make a living in Africa there will not be a future for Africa. Secondly, Naipaul points out that if western colonial ambitions in Africa still exist, if Africa is transformed into a target of western neocolonialism, if westerners intend to consume African resources and avoid responsibilities for African development, there will not be a future for Africa. The future of Africa depends on people resembling Zabeth who do not shrink from political crises and work hard to build a bridge between primitive bush and modern society. The future of Africa also depends on people resembling Ferdinand who represent a new generation of African intellectuals capable of sound ethical judgments. Suffering from crises of national politics, they have nowhere to escape, but their “ferryman” ethical identity illuminates readers with a vision for the future of Africa.

#### Note

1. Because *A Bend in the River* is based upon Naipaul’s writings “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa” and *A Congo Diary* 1980, scholars identify central Africa as Zaire, not least because Naipaul wrote that “The Congo which used to be a Belgian colony is now an African kingdom and is called Zaire.” See Naipaul, “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa” in *V. S. Naipaul The Writer and the World Essays* (London: Pan

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