

Between ideals and survival: How A Bend in the River explores the ethical dilemmas of migration

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How to cite this article: Kartikey Sharma , Prof. Jyotsna Sinha (2024). Between ideals and survival: How A Bend in the River explores the ethical dilemmas of migration. *Library Progress International*, 44(6), 391-395

Abstract

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was a renowned novelist who won the Man Booker Prize for the work titled *In a Free State* in the year 1971 and the most sought-after Nobel Prize in literature in 2001. His works primarily revolve around issues such as rootlessness and identity crisis that are faced by the Indian diaspora settled in different parts of the world. Naipaul is famous for his straightforward way of putting forth his opinions and is greatly revered across the globe. While going through the works penned by the Nobel Laureate, readers can easily connect with the characters. The protagonist of the novel titled *A Bend in the River* is Salim, who belongs to the Western part of Africa and settles in the inner part of an African town where he establishes a shop in order to start a new life. Since the country is suffering the scourge of political turmoil, Salim takes the decision of settling abroad. Unfortunately, the friend with whom Salim intended to become a partner in business suffers heavy losses and again, the former is forced to go back to Africa. He is greatly pained to see that the new government has forcibly taken the control of his shop and has given the ownership to a person named Theotime. Theotime makes Salim do all kinds of menial jobs, which deals a severe blow to the self-esteem of the protagonist. He once again, furthers his resolve to settle abroad. For achieving the aim of gathering money to migrate to some other country, Salim starts smuggling Ivory and Gold. It must be noted here that whatever the protagonist is doing in the form of smuggling, is nothing but an example of expediency. He firmly believes in the philosophy “Ends justify the means” propounded by Niccolo Machiavelli. Salim is hell bent at getting out of a country where he sees no hope but only anarchy and chaos. It is the circumstances which have forced Salim to indulge in illegal activities. One day, he is arrested by the local Police and is sent to jail, where luckily, one of his acquaintances named Ferdinand gets him released. The novel culminates in Salim escaping from the country by secretly boarding a steamer. For a person like Salim, goals are more important than ideals. According to him, one should and must resort to any means for attaining his goals. If one is too idealistic or scrupulous then it will be extremely difficult for him to survive. Thus, *A Bend in the River* successfully throws light on the complexities and adversities of an outsider’s life who moves from one place to another expecting something good to turn up but is troubled by fiascoes every time.

Keywords: Rootlessness, Identity-crisis, Diaspora, Scourge, Turmoil, Expediency, Scrupulous, Fiascoes

Introduction

Niccolo Machiavelli, the famous philosopher of the Middle-ages, wrote in his renowned book titled *The Prince* (1532) a very important line “End justifies the means” [4]. It simply refers to the fact that in order to achieve a target that is morally right, one can use means that are wrong. If your intentions are not bad then resorting to unfair means hardly matters. At a time when the society was facing challenges such as corruption of the Clergy class and malpractices related to administration, there arose a need of drastic changes and those changes could only be achieved through prompt action [2]. It is a universal truth that rules and policies change along with time and therefore, to counter the problems of his contemporary society in a more effective way, the great Italian philosopher propounded the ideal “End justifies the means”

[5]. Whatever that is happening in the present century had already been seen by Machiavelli in the 15th century. Machiavelli's principle is quite similar to the saying "All is fair in love and war" [3]. To win a war or someone's love, one should and must remember that once the right time is lost, it never comes back [6]. If the target cannot be achieved within the right time by using fair means, then the usage of unfair means is advisable. In the same book, Machiavelli has also put forth the thought that "A king should be as brave as the lion and as cunning as the fox" which again, justifies the usage of all kinds of means to handle an extremely volatile situation.

In V.S. Naipaul's work titled *A Bend in the River*, the protagonist of the novel Salim, opens a small shop with the sole aim of leading a happy and peaceful life [11]. Since the book is set in a newly independent African country which is witnessing socio-political disturbances, life is very difficult, especially for individuals like Salim who have come from India. The forefathers of the protagonist were brought to Africa as laborers by the Britishers and so, they settled in Africa. Just like other major novels of Naipaul, identity crisis and rootlessness are the themes that hold great significance in the novel. *A Bend in the River* as a novel is characterized by adventure, alienation, hope and disappointment. Salim dreams of becoming a successful businessman and tries hard to establish an identity of his own in a totally unknown land. Making the best use of whatever he has is the defining feature of Salim's personality. He faces many adversities, has to undergo unbearable trauma but never gives up hope. Salim firmly believes in the idiom "Where there is a will, there is a way". For him, life is nothing but a constant struggle. Facing ups and downs is just like inhaling and exhaling air to Salim. He is an extraordinary character whom readers can easily relate with other prominent protagonists from Naipaul's novels such as Mohun Biswas and Ganesh Ramsumair from *A House for Mr. Biswas* [9] and *The Mystic Masseur* respectively [7].

How "Ends justify the means"

In the novel, Salim does make choices that are immoral. He wholly and solely focuses on making money and amassing wealth. The novel vividly throws light on the dark sides of an individual's character. In the Postmodern era, material happiness overpowers any other kind of happiness which becomes crystal clear in *A Bend in the River*. Degradation of morality and loss of ideals dominate the novel. The author sketches a society that is characterized by a lack of economic stability that compels the characters in choosing unethical means to acquire their objectives. How difficult it was to survive in conditions that were extremely unfavorable to the non-natives is something that makes the characters view morality and ideals through the glass of skepticism. It is a well-known fact that if a man is hungry and desperately looking for something to eat then there are chances that he may commit a sin. The question of survival always prevails over morality and idealism. In a society where anarchy is the order of the day, nobody can even think of keeping his values intact. Principles are compromised, rules are violated because under such circumstances, the only thing that holds importance is survival. Only under a legally formed government, that runs on the principles of honesty and justice, can one think of acting morally. In the absence of such authority, achieving ends by any means and at any cost becomes the ultimate aim of the majority of people.

Salim, an Indian Muslim, opens a shop in a not so developed part of the town with lots of enthusiasm and vigor. One of his friends who is living in Europe invites him to become a partner in his business. Without pondering over the advantages and disadvantages of leaving an established business in Africa, Salim decides to go to Europe. He was only aiming at becoming rich as quickly as possible and therefore, did not feel the need to reconsider his decision of leaving behind his business. Thoughts related to money, wealth and a life of luxury engulf Salim's mind. The business that his friend was running soon suffers heavy losses and Salim is forced to leave Europe. A dejected and heartbroken protagonist comes back to Africa. He is jolted to find that the shop that he proudly owned prior to leaving for Europe had been grabbed by the corrupt administration. He is made to work as a subordinate in his own shop which is being run by an inept person who was given the possession of Salim's shop. Prior to losing the ownership of his shop, Salim had illegally bought Gold and Ivory and had hidden it at a secret place in his house. Keeping in mind future contingencies, Salim had started smuggling Gold and Ivory. This clearly shows that the protagonist wanted to retain wealth and enjoy comfort by hook or by crook. He had unwavering faith in earning money through dishonest means. Salim presents before the readers the view that only those people who possess the capability of adapting to the unpleasant realities of the world can survive in it. One should and must change his mindset according to the changing times, which is a process that does involve relinquishing certain beliefs and ideals.

Just like the protagonist of *A Bend in the River*, many displaced individuals often find it hard to lead a successful life in foreign countries. Despite being able enough to earn money so as to make both the ends meet, they dream of becoming

wealthier. In an era of glamor and consumerism, everyone wants to avail maximum material benefit. To go to any foreign country, youngsters from small towns often resort to unfair means such as stealing money and indulging in fraudulent activities. They only dream of living a carefree life once settling abroad as rich individuals. Salim illegally trades in Gold and Ivory to secure a comfortable place in Europe besides preparing for future uncertainties. He is surrounded by people who are selfish and can go to any extent to further their vested interests. Living in a state of chaos and unrest is a great challenge in itself and in order to counter such problems, people like Salim indulge in wrong activities such as smuggling and cheating. *A Bend in the River* quite effectively elaborates the idea "Survival of the fittest" [1]. In the jungle, the lion being the strongest animal is able to withstand any challenge that befalls its path and so, it symbolizes strength and robustness. The character of Salim also follows the same principle by making himself financially strong in a jungle like state, although by resorting to illegal means. He confidently puts forth the thought that the world is and remain what it is and those individuals who are weak, who possess no extraordinary quality and become nothing in life do not deserve a place in this world. A world where only the end result in the form of success matters the most is meant for those individuals who are clever, smart and do not hesitate in using any tool that may enable them to achieve the desired result. Salim, being a non-native and poor person, wants to break the shackles of helplessness and alienation. His only motive is to become a financially powerful individual who can get things done on his own terms. A person like him very well knows that life is not a bed of roses and to remove the thorns of life, one must make the best use of every trick that is helpful. To achieve success is all that men like Salim want in life. They don't believe in waiting for opportunities to come, rather believe in creating opportunities. Apart from working hard, they also use crooked means. Readers can find a strong similarity between the character of Ganesh Ramsumair from *The Mystic Masseur* and Salim as the former tricks ignorant people by using dubious knowledge of faith-healing. He does so in order to get rich and secure a powerful position in the society. Ganesh befools people with a weak mindset to make money.

The character of Salim is defined by determination, cunningness and an indomitable spirit. Although he is surrounded by insecurities and apprehensions, he does not give up easily. He tirelessly pursues success and is able to achieve it. He is a keen observer who carefully looks at the life of the town and the major challenges that the newly independent African country was facing. There is some sort of trouble on every step and even a single mistake can cost him dearly. An important point that should be taken into account is that just like the character of Macbeth [12], Salim too encounters dilemma that does result in indecisiveness. Due to this characteristic demerit of his, Salim loses many opportunities that he comes across. Since the work is set in a period that shows transition, the protagonist can be very well seen displaying a strong desire to embrace Western ideals while at the same time, trying hard to keep his Indian values intact. As has always been the case with the majority of migrants, Salim too finds it difficult to mix and mingle with his foreign counterparts. Impulsiveness is one of the notable flaws present in Salim's character. Instead of taking wise decisions so as to make a better path for himself, he often reacts in an immature manner when he is in a tight corner. He often falls prey to his own vices at times which makes his task more difficult. It can be observed that overanxiety and impulsiveness pushes Salim into isolation. The unwise decision of leaving a well-established business just for sake of getting rich using short cut is an example of Salim's shortsightedness. At times, he becomes violent, starts using uncouth language which becomes evident in his treatment of Yvette, an African girl whom he loved a lot. Yvette gets fed-up of his insolent behavior and later on, discards Salim. He is a man who does not consider thinking in an appropriate manner before taking any action. It is right that ends do justify the means, but when the ultimate aim is just to become rich and amass material wealth, then the consequences are often dangerous which leave a long-lasting impact. Had Salim not indulged in smuggling, he would not have been arrested by the Police, had Salim not left for Europe for monetary gains, his shop would not have been taken over by the authorities.

A Bend in the River is a work that effectively portrays the life of an outsider who leaves no stone unturned in fulfilling his dreams. In many of V.S. Naipaul's novels, readers do come across characters who believe in relentlessly going after their goals and do not have second thoughts over the choice of the means. Whether it is Ralph Singh, who staunchly believes in having a dual identity to achieve a high position in a White dominated society [10] or Ganesh Ramsumair who relinquishes his original identity and assumes a foreign identity or Salim who can go to any extent to get richer, the most common factor that can be seen is the strong determination to achieve success. These characters have unshakable faith in the phrase "End justifies the means" which is very well reflected in their actions. Leading life as an outsider in foreign lands makes one desperate to establish a robust identity of his at any cost and therefore, such individuals do take help of unfair means and surprisingly, they also become successful. Yet, following this path is often catastrophic just as in the novel *A Bend in the River*, in which Salim ultimately runs away from the poverty-stricken African country in a steamer and has to jump into the river to save himself from getting killed by gunmen. A crystal-clear point that arises here is that

only those individuals who are wise and have a pure heart can reap good results even if they base their actions on the Machiavellian ideal.

Conclusion

A Bend in the River showcases the journey of a displaced individual who exclusively considers financial success as the supporting pillar of an independent identity. Salim's sole purpose of opening the general merchant shop was to come out from the cobweb of poverty that is also characterized by alienation as well as identity crisis. Naipaul often came across migrants who were living a life of extreme poverty and who aimed at achieving a high status in the non-native lands. For these people, high status means a house of their own, such as in the novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* and becoming a politically powerful person such as in the novels *The Mystic Masseur* [7] and *The Suffrage of Elvira* [8]. To achieve success by becoming a financially strong person within a short time by using crooked means is a theme that is not only found in *A Bend in the River*, rather a theme that can be seen in the stories of a variety of individuals belonging to Indian diaspora living in foreign countries. Salim smuggles Gold and Ivory hoping that he could overcome any kind of adversity that may come his way. For him, being crafty and cunning is crucial to survive in a chaotic society. The author highlights the innate restlessness of an outsider who desperately wants to become wealthy, without taking into account the ill-effects of earning money through illicit sources. *A Bend in the River* is a shining portrayal of how man puts at stake everything once he gets intoxicated by money. The great English proverb "money is a good servant but a bad master" becomes quite relevant while examining the character of Salim. He runs after material pleasure, false glamor and superficial prosperity and leaves no stone unturned in fulfilling his dreams at any cost. In a society where relations exist wholly and solely on materialism, people do not hesitate in indulging in illegal activities such as smuggling, stealing, forgery and swindling. Salim is the embodiment of the modern-day individual who is selfish and money minded. He strictly adheres to the Machiavellian principles that gives a person the freedom to use any means to accomplish his or her target. Living in developed countries is a dream that often gets deferred because of paucity of money. Hence, to counter this problem people like Salim devise plans of making money in an easy manner which is not morally correct. They only believe in prompt action instead of carefully thinking over the catastrophic consequences of such an action. While writing this work, Naipaul had foreseen the norms of the 21st Century where everything revolves around money as well as objects of physical comfort and where there is no place for ideals and morality. End justifies the means is thus, a significant theme that makes the novel *A Bend in the River* a work of great importance.

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