

STUDY MATERIALS

Module No.: 2

Name of the faculty: Satabdi Roy

Semester: VI

Topic: World Literature (DSE- 3)

A Bend in the River

V.S.Naipaul

A Bend in The River, the 1974 novel by Nobel Prize winner VS Naipaul, takes place in an unnamed postcolonial African town. The main character, Salim, narrates the story, which begins when he moves away from his family to the interior of the country to run a town shop. Salim is of Muslim Indian descent, but his family has lived in coastal Africa for many generations. He is neither fully Muslim Indian nor fully African.

Salim travels through the African bush, hundreds of miles to his new home. He has purchased a shop from an old family friend who has filled his head with images of a quasi-European sophisticated town life. When Salim arrives, however, he discovers a town that has virtually returned to the bush. Salim begins his new life, makes friends with other expatriates, and meets Zabeth, a local woman who buys items from his shop to resell in her village. Zabeth has a son, Ferdinand, who will be at the *lycée* in the town, and she asks Salim to keep an eye on him. In the meantime, Salim receives word that there has been a violent uprising on the coast and his family has dispersed. One of their servants, a young man called Ali, has asked to be sent to live with Salim. Ali arrives full of emotional tales of the uprising. He charms the locals, who give him the name Metty, from the French word *métis*, meaning mixed-race. Metty works for Salim in the shop, keeps house

for him (badly), and keeps him company in the evenings. Metty and Ferdinand become friends and are often out together drinking and picking up local women. Salim befriends Mahesh and Shoba, a couple who own another shop in town and are also from elsewhere. Salim has lunch with them once a week at their flat. Boys from the *lycée* begin trying to get money from Salim. When a boy brings Salim a fundraising ledger he has stolen from the school, Salim returns it and meets Father Husimans, the head teacher, a European priest with a love of African culture who often travels to villages in the bush to acquire objects of cultural significance, such as masks and statuettes.

Salim has a premonition of a violent uprising coming to the town and he buries his valuables in a plot of earth at the bottom of the stairs leading to his flat. Salim wishes Metty hadn't seen where he buried the items, worrying that he isn't trustworthy. Ferdinand comes to the flat upset that the school has closed because of the increasing violence in and around the town. Salim and Metty comfort him. Salim hears that Father Husimans has been killed, his body mutilated and sent back to the town in a canoe. Peace is restored and the town experiences a boom thanks to the interest of the president of the country.

Salim receives a letter from his father reminding him that he is bound to become engaged to Nazruddin's daughter. Mahesh asks for Salim's help in several illegal activities. Afterwards, Mahesh opens the town's franchise of Bigburger. Salim's friend, Indar, a rich kid from Salim's coastal hometown, comes to visit. He is staying in the Domain, a government sponsored complex outside of town with a polytechnic and European style houses.

Indar is working to educate and encourage the spread of new ideas on behalf of the unnamed firm he works for. By spending time in the Domain with Indar, Salim feels he finally has access to the more glamorous life he has longed for. He also meets Yvette, the wife of Indar's friend Raymond, with whom he starts an affair. Raymond is a historian and writer who was a close associate of the president and has now been sent to the town to wait to find favor again.

Salim reads some of Raymond's articles and is surprised to discover his knowledge of Africa comes from colonial sources. A modified version of Raymond's book about the President's speeches is published as a simplified series of quotes. The local Youth Guard is disbanded after a children's parade meant to glorify the book goes wrong. After the Youth Guard is humiliated at the hands of the president, violence comes to the town. Metty is constantly harassed by officials and is temporarily detained. Salim's relationship with Yvette cools and one afternoon he beats her badly.

Salim decides he must get away and travels to London to visit Nazruddin. In London, he gets engaged to Nazruddin's daughter and hears that Indar has lost his job and is faring poorly. Salim returns to the town on the river to discover that the state has given ownership of his shop to Théotime, a former mechanic and low-level official. Salim works in the shop as the manager, and begins smuggling ivory and gold to make money for his escape. Metty, angry at Salim for failing to rescue him, tells the police where Salim has buried the illegal ivory. Salim is detained. Ferdinand, who has become a local commissioner, gets Salim released and instructs him to leave the next day on the steamer. The president is coming to visit and everyone, including Ferdinand, is terrified. Salim books passage and sails downriver on the steamer. Armed men attempt to take it over but fail, succeeding only in taking the barge. Salim leaves the town on the river to the sound of gunshots on the barge, leaving the reader to speculate about how successfully he has left his past behind.

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