

Araştırma Makalesi

Ambivalence, Alienation, and Subalternity: Reading Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* through Bhabha, Fanon, and Spivak

Müphemlik, Yabancılaşma ve Madunluk: Naipaul'un A Bend in the River'ını Bhabha, Fanon ve Spivak'la Okumak

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Öz: Bu makale, V. S. Naipaul'un *A Bend in the River* (1979) adlı eserini Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon ve Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak'ın eleştirel perspektifleri ve kullandıkları terminolojiler ışığında incelemektedir. Postkolonyal Afrika'ya yönelik ihtilafli bakış açısıyla tartışılan roman, bir yandan gerçekçiliğiyle övgü toplarken, öte yandan imparatorluk söylemine olan yakınlığı ve kolonyal pratiklere ilişkin vizyonu dolayısıyla eleştirilmiştir. Bu çalışma, Naipaul'un kışkırtıcı fikirlerini anlatı otoritesinin tekrarlama, kararsızlık ve parodiyi nasıl temsil ettiğini incelemek için taklit ve melezlik kavramları aracılığıyla çelişkilerin yeniden incelendiği bir platformda araştırmaktadır. Naipaul'un karakterleri, 'ulusal bilincin tuzaklarında' kaybolmuştur ve sömürgeci yabancılaşmanın acısını çekmektedir. Makale, *A Bend in the River*'in epistemik şiddet, alt sınıfların ikilemi ve susturulmuş özneler aracılığıyla çökmekte olan bir ruh halini ve değişen kimlikler ile sömürge mirasının yükünü sorunsallaştırdığını savunmaktadır. Ayrıca makale, karakterlerin postkolonyal kırılganlık, kolonyal travma ve susturulmuş sesler hakkında betimleyici bir söylem yerine, bir umutsuzluk anlatısı yoluyla güven ve epistemik otorite peşinde olduklarını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, Postkolonyal Teori, Müphemlik ve Taklit, Madunluk

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Abstract: This study examines V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) from a postcolonial perspective, using the terminologies raised by Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri C. Spivak. Considering so far controversial view of the ambivalent postcolonial settings in Africa, the paper analyses Naipaul's disappointed vision of colonial practice and its complicity in the dissemination of imperial discourse. The study extends Naipaul's provoking ideas to a platform where contradictions are reexamined through the concepts of mimicry and hybridity to explore how narrative authority represents repetition, ambivalence and parody. Naipaul's characters are lost in the the 'pitfalls of national consciousness', and suffer from colonial alienation. The paper argues that *A Bend in the River* problematizes collapsing psyche, unraveling identity and the burden of colonial legacy through epistemic violence, subaltern conundrum and silenced mediums. The paper shows how the characters pursue reliable mediation and epistemic authority through a narrative of despair rather than a descriptive discourse of postcolonial fragility, colonial trauma, and silenced voices.

Keywords: V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, Postcolonial theory, Ambivalence and mimicry, Subalternity

Introduction

The present study argues that V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* is best understood not as a pessimistic chronicle of postcolonial decline but as a diagnostic text that performs, on the level of narrative voice and form, the contradictions of the postcolonial condition. The central thesis is that Naipaul's novel enacts rather than simply represents the tensions that Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identify in their theoretical interventions: the instability of authority through mimicry and ambivalence, the psychic devastation and 'pitfalls of national consciousness', and the silencing of the subaltern through epistemic violence. While earlier scholarship has often polarized Naipaul's position as either prophetically accurate or ideologically complicit, this article situates the novel as a critical site where theory and narrative converge. It thus offers an interpretation that is both textually grounded and theoretically original. In doing so, it contributes to current literature by bridging a gap between general applications of postcolonial theory and the kind of sustained close reading that uncovers how Naipaul's prose itself, in terms of its repetitions, its metaphors of ruin, its shrieking slogans and silenced figures, becomes a performance of ambivalence, alienation, and silencing.

The distinctive quality of this study is threefold. First, it differs from much of the existing criticism that either disdains Naipaul for his politics or excuses him for his realism by reframing the question entirely. Instead of asking whether Naipaul is anti-African or prophetic, the article demonstrates how his text enacts the very contradictions postcolonial theory has conceptualized. Second, while prior studies have frequently treated Bhabha, Fanon, or Spivak superficially, this article applies central narrative concepts to a particular narrative regarding the narrative voices and perspectives in the novel, investigating narrative strategies. Third, such a methodological intervention makes it possible to demonstrate how the critical readings of the novel so far with theoretical lenses can be integrated with a technical aspect of narrative fiction.

Furthermore, this technical shift in the present inquiry contributes to literary critical reception of Naipaul in two ways. First, it repositions the author, who insightfully explored the recurrent postcolonial themes, i.e. ambivalence and subalternity. Secondly, it examines the narrative performance that elevates the critical and theoretical analysis to a more coherent level of form, which considers a novel also a text, fiction, and narrative that extends the boundaries of established judgements.

This framework prepares the ground for a close re-examination of Naipaul's narrative itself. If the argument here is that *A Bend in the River* performs postcolonial contradictions through style and form, then its very first sentence already enacts this tension: "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (Naipaul, 1981: 3). With this uncompromising declaration, V. S. Naipaul opens *A Bend in the River* (1979), setting the tone for a novel that unsettles through its stark vision of human disposability. The line has long provoked debate: is it the voice of a detached narrator or an echo of colonial ideology, a dismissal of African lives as 'nothing'? Edward Said observed that "The most attractive and immoral move, however, has been Naipaul's, who has allowed himself quite consciously to be turned into a witness for the Western prosecution" (Said, 1986:53). This understanding of him has shaped Naipaul's critical reception: although he was widely admired for his unsparing realism, Naipaul has been harshly condemned for complicity with imperial perspectives. The African postcolony in his narrative appears as a site of ruin, nervous bureaucracy, mimicry, and silencing, its figures at once vivid and voiceless, a portrayal that, in Bruce Bawer's (2002) words, presents a 'terrifying vision of social chaos and tyranny' (p. 376). The interpretive challenge lies

precisely in this ambivalence. Naipaul's novel is neither a celebration of independence nor a straightforward continuation of colonial discourse; it is a text that stages the contradictions of postcolonial life.

"Naipaul never saw himself as a postcolonial writer in either its oppositional (writing against the sovereign texts of the metropolitan centre) or complicit (reworking the tradition albeit always in its shadow) sense" (Mishra, 2024:14). This dilemma has long been questioned by scholars. Elleke Boehmer, for instance, notes that Naipaul captures the anxious liminality of the postcolony, its ruins and repetitions (2005: 239). In contrast, Rob Nixon warns that he is one of the sharpest observers and the most problematic interpreters of Africa's postcolonial state (1992: 27). Therefore, the novel compels the readers to be attentive in not only grasping what it depicts but also how it depicts through concentrating on the narrative strategies which make Africa both understandable and obscure. Postcolonial theory is the point where one can utilize the essential tools to comprehend the essence of dominance.

Being as a critical response to the legacies of empire, postcolonial theory probes how colonialism endures in cultural, political, and epistemological forms long after formal independence. As Ania Loomba explains: "postcolonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism" (2015: 16). Naipaul's fiction is a primary site for this contestation, since it dramatizes the persistence of colonial categories in societies that claim sovereignty. His landscapes are filled with the ruins of colonial architecture, the anxious gestures of new elites, the silence of the marginalized, and the tense performance of authority. These are exactly the dynamics that three of the most influential postcolonial thinkers, Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, analyze through concepts of ambivalence, alienation, and subalternity.

Homi K. Bhabha's vocabulary of mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity reveals how colonial authority is never monolithic but fractured by its own repetitions. In *The Location of Culture* he describes mimicry as 'at once resemblance and menace' (1994: 86), a condition where the colonized subject is required to imitate colonial forms while never achieving equivalence. Naipaul's novel is saturated with such performances. The Domain, a model village curated by Raymond and adorned with portraits of the President, is an imitation of colonial pedagogy masquerading as national originality. Salim notes:

Everywhere the President's photograph looked down at us. In the town, in our shops and in government buildings, it was just the photograph of the President, the ruler, something that had to be there (Naipaul, 1981: 127).

Sovereignty here is reduced to spectacle, its power dependent on borrowed signs. Indar, the cosmopolitan intellectual, similarly performs the gestures of Western culture: He always gives a lecture, always saying how it is in London or America. He speaks as if he brings the world back with him, but it is a world already torn down (Naipaul, 1981: 181). His authority is "almost the same" as his metropolitan counterparts, but hollow, exposed in its inadequacy. Even the President's maxims, painted "literally as big as a house" (Naipaul, 1981: 258), become less pedagogy than parody, a shriek rather than a message. Bhabha insists that colonial authority is undone in the very process of its assertion, that ambivalence is constitutive rather than accidental (1994: 88). Naipaul's novel performs this precision: the more the postcolonial state replicates sovereignty, the more fragile it appears.

While Bhabha reveals the instability of authority, Frantz Fanon exposes the psychic injuries that underlie it. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon interprets the alienation of the colonized subject as “overdetermined from without,” forced into a “third-person consciousness” (2008: 95). Salim voices precisely such alienation: “I had visions of beggary and decrepitude: the man not of Africa lost in Africa” (Naipaul, 1981: 184). His identity collapses under the weight of displacement, an East African Indian unable to present himself in either European or African labelling. Fanon’s concept of epidermalization explains Zabeth’s representation as well. She is not allowed interiority but is defined by aura: “Her smell was the smell of her protecting ointments” (Naipaul, 1981: 15). As Fanon writes, “I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance” (2008: 95). Zabeth is downed to physical signifiers, overdetermined as superstitious and different.

Fanon’s critique of the postcolonial elite in *The Wretched of the Earth* deepens the reading of *A Bend in the River* in a way well beyond the clichés of postcolonial interpretations. He warns that “the national bourgeoisie discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary... of being the transmission line between the nation and capitalism” (2004: 152). Likewise, Ferdinand exemplifies this tragic fate. Once a hopeful student, he becomes a bureaucrat “shrunk and characterless in the regulation uniform...” (Naipaul, 1981: 280). His confession is simple: “Everything that was given to me was given to me to destroy me” (Naipaul, 1981: 282). He further embodies the nervous collapse Fanon diagnosed in colonial patients, the psychic devastation of elites who reproduce domination rather than transform it. The President’s shrieking slogans can be read through Fanon’s lens in the same way. Colonial authority, he wrote, “turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (2004: 210). The President’s maxims downgrade memory into monologue, their excess betraying anxiety rather than confidence. In Naipaul’s pages, sovereignty is not only fragile but pathological, a performance of authority haunted by nervous collapse.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak adds yet another dimension by insisting on the structural silencing of subaltern voices. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” she argues that “the subaltern cannot speak... the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (1988: 287). Naipaul’s novel is full of figures who appear but cannot speak in epistemically recognized ways. Zabeth, despite her agency as trader and mother, is reduced to smell. Metty, though acknowledged as possessing insight, “five minutes’ talk with someone like Metty” (Naipaul, 1981: 187), is never allowed epistemic authority. His voice is always filtered through Salim’s narration, ventriloquized into lesser categories. Although once hopeful, Ferdinand, becomes audible only as despair, his words dissolves into confession without transformation.

Spivak’s notion of epistemic violence is intensely illustrated in Raymond’s history. He rebuilds Africa by “quoting and quoting from letters and reports in the archives” (Naipaul, 1981: 98), substituting colonial documents for active testimony. Spivak warns that representation is always double, both *Vertretung* (speaking for) and *Darstellung* (re-presentation), and both risk silencing (1988: 275). As Raymond’s history exemplifies: it speaks for the people while erasing them, representing their past through European traces. The colonial monument operates similarly. Its altered Latin motto overwrites memory with classical authority, but is swiftly destroyed. The destruction is counter-speech, yet even that resistance is narrated by Salim as inevitability rather than recognition. Voice remains mediated, erased in the very moment of assertion.

Reading *A Bend in the River* through Bhabha, Fanon, and Spivak does not resolve the controversy over Naipaul's politics, but it reframes it. The bleak mood in the narrative indicates more than ideological imposition. The diagnostic representation of mimics, dislocations, physical and psychological ruins, neurotic ambivalence, and ambivalent silence exhibits the inconsistencies of postcolonial identity. As Bhabha earlier suggests, the prevailing state of mimicry causes the fragility of authority. Fanon considers such internalised weakness a neurotic psychopolitical phenomenon that exposes the elites in hesitation and the displaced identities in alienation. Hence, drawing on Spivak's subaltern theory, it is possible to examine the unmediated voice that reinforces epistemic violence in narratives, including authentic documents such as archives and monuments.

Elleke Boehmer's argues that "postcolonial texts are mainly characterised by their ambivalence, which brings about simultaneous production and subversion of colonial authority" (2005: 6). The ambivalence in *A Bend in the River* is also embodied in a layered and twofold structure. The opening pages of the narrative assert rejection; the closing pages represent a desperate *echo*. Between these poles, however, the narrative portrays the characters in mimicry, who are silenced by alienation. Such a structural arrangement reveals how the narrative corresponds to the postcolonial themes addressed in the story. From a critical lens by Bhabha, Fanon, and Spivak, we add a narrative perspective to the present analysis.

1. Ambivalence, Mimicry, and the Fragile Sovereignty of the Postcolony – Bhabha and *A Bend in the River*

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) has reformatted the terminology of postcolonial criticism by maintaining that colonial authority is never secure but always fractured by ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity. He argues that colonial power depends on the production of difference, while that difference cannot be absolute: it must be close enough to resemble the colonizer's authority in order to be legible, but never so close as to obliterate hierarchy. This "almost the same, but not quite" generates mimicry, a form of repetition that simultaneously reinforces and undermines authority. "Mimicry," Bhabha writes, "is at once resemblance and menace" (1994: 86). For Bhabha, ambivalence is the condition of this instability, and the "Third Space" is the site where identities are negotiated in the spaces between cultural systems. Reading Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* through Bhabha's framework allows us to see the novel as a sustained performance of ambivalence: its ruins, its intellectuals, its bureaucrats, its monuments, and its slogans all stage how authority weakens at the moment it attempts to assert itself.

One of the earliest images in the novel already stages this instability. Salim describes the ruined suburb near the rapids, destroyed after independence in an attempt to erase colonial presence:

The wish had only been to get rid of the old, to wipe out the memory of the intruder. But more unnerving than anything else was the ruined suburb near the rapids... Sun and rain and bush had made the site look old, like the site of a dead civilization... You were in a place where the future had come and gone (Naipaul, 1981: 32).

Here, the desire to erase colonial traces results not in renewal but in an uncanny temporality: a 'future' that seems already used up. Bhabha would identify this as ambivalence. The suburb, once the sign of colonial permanence, is destroyed in the name of independence. Yet its ruin does not mark freedom; it produces an image of expiration, of a future already past. What was meant as an assertion of sovereignty instead reveals dependence on colonial forms of signification. The paradox raised here acutely addresses Bhabha's idea of colonial authority that it is "never simply power imposed from above or below" but "an agonistic process of negotiation" (p. 122). The

suburb indicates a sheer ambivalence: 'the erased and persisting' lingers. This is what he calls "Third Space", where meaning fails; yet, the past and future persist. This instability of space finds its counterpart in the instability of time, where linear narratives of progress give way to fractured temporalities. Naipaul, as Erica L. Johnson observes, "reconfigures temporality in such a way that progress and modernity are displaced as inherent qualities of postcolonial nationhood" (2010: 212).

The Domain provides a more explicit dramatization of mimicry. Intended as a model village for the President's vision of modernity, it becomes a laboratory where history is rewritten and "new men" are manufactured. Salim notes the presence of the President's portrait everywhere:

The Domain had been created by the President; for reasons of his own he had called certain foreigners to live there. For us that was enough; it wasn't for us to question or look too closely (Naipaul, 1981: 123).

The Domain is designed as a spectacle of sovereignty, a performance of independence. Yet its very structure depends on repetition of colonial forms: archives, lectures, display, surveillance. Raymond, the historian, reconstructs Africa not through oral histories but through "quoting and quoting from letters and reports in the archives" (Naipaul, 1981: 187). The Domain thus embodies mimicry. It imitates the colonial pedagogy of modernity while claiming to reject it. The result is ambivalence: sovereignty appears as repetition rather than originality, as resemblance rather than rupture. Bhabha's observation that "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (1984: 126) finds direct resonance here. The "new Africans" of the Domain are recognizable to colonial authority, repeating its forms, but they are also a menace to its stability, for the repetition exposes dependence.

The characters' precariousness is ironically portrayed in their rhetoric and intellectual confidence after their encounter with the colonial contexts. For example, when Indar returns from Europe, he carries with him a metropolitan discourse:

The language exercise turned into a discussion about Africa, and I could feel polytechnic topics, lecture topics, coming to the surface. Some of the questions were dynamite; but Indar was very good, always calm, never surprised. He was like a philosopher; he tried to get the young men to examine the words they were using (Naipaul, 1981: 127).

Indar resonates the signs of Western intellectual hegemony by performing the idioms from the seminar room through which one can easily recognize that Indar's authority depends heavily on mimicry. Whereas his audience, and even he himself, senses the fragility of this performance. Still, since he loses the coherence in the performance outside the metropolitan infrastructure, the 'world' he seeks to re-create is already precarious and shaky. In that sense, Indar's case is a strong example Bhabha's claim that mimicry is "a difference that is almost nothing, but not quite" (1994: 91). His speeches are impressive but hollow, resembles the gestures but deficiency is obvious. The ambivalence here is double: Indar is both cosmopolitan and provincial, both empowered and vulnerable, both admired and mocked. Hybridity is not liberation but exposure, a position in which identity is constantly negotiated and never secure. Naipaul's portrayal of Indar thus illustrates the paradoxical condition of the postcolonial subject who is suspended between worlds yet belongs to neither. *A Bend in the River*, as Serafin Roldan-Santiago (2008) notes, is a novel that addresses "alienation and fluctuating identities in the post-colonial world where tragic figures, marginalized and frustrated, grope for a sense of identity and meaning in life" (p. 162).

The President's maxims extend this logic of mimicry to the spectacle of the state. Driving through the capital, Salim is overwhelmed by slogans and portraits:

All along the road were big boards... each with a separate saying or maxim of the President. Some of the painted portraits of the President were literally as big as a house... I felt it more as a shriek (Naipaul, 1981: 258).

The excess here is telling. The President's presence here is so amplified that through repetition, it is magnified into gigantism. However, the effect here is still not a reassurance but anxiety since Salim regards it as a 'shriek'. Once again, that is the purest of ambivalence as the authority asserts itself by saturating the landscape with signs, but the need for saturation itself reveals insecurity. Bhabha notes that mimicry "articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority" (1984: 88). The President's portraits threaten his own authority: the more they multiply, the less convincing they become. Sovereignty here is mimicry of colonial show, but its scale bares fear rather than stability.

The Latin motto carved on the riverside monument condenses these dynamics into a single allegory. Salim recalls:

In the motto... three words were altered to reverse the meaning... To carve the words on a monument beside this African river was surely to invite the destruction of the town... And almost as soon as it had been put up the monument had been destroyed (Naipaul, 1981: 68).

Here, colonial authority attempts to naturalize itself through classical ancestry, rewriting Virgil to sanctify conquest. Meanwhile, the borrowed words are not secure but rather vulnerable to reversal thus making the alteration itself instable. Thus, the monument which is meant to be permanent, becomes a provocation and, as a result, is simply destroyed. This episode seemingly exemplifies what Bhabha designates as hybridity: "a third space, which enables other positions to emerge" (1994: 211). Because, the altered motto is neither the original Virgilian line nor a purely African inscription; it is a hybrid text that reveals the instability of both. Its destruction is not simply erasure but counter-signification, a reminder that mimicry cannot guarantee permanence.

Similarly, Salim's transactional position is marked by this ambivalence. The shop he inherits is a remnant of colonial trade, reoccupied in the postcolony. It becomes a 'Third Space' where mimicry is survival strategy, arranging goods, adopting bureaucratic idioms, negotiating prices all which never quite belongs to him. His life depends on repeating forms of authority "almost the same, but not quite", nevertheless these repetitions never assures security for him. Such survival strategy through mimicry and exposure through resemblance demonstrate how ambivalence becomes a daily condition. Bhabha's vision that "the menace of mimicry is its double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (1984: 88) elucidates Salim's precariousness. That is, he is both inside and outside, both participant and outsider, both necessary and suspect.

All these episodes of the ruined suburb, the Domain, Indar's mimicry, the President's shrieking maxims, the altered motto, and the precarious shop, reveal how *A Bend in the River* is a portrayal of the contradictions Bhabha names. The ruins that look like expired futures, intellectuals who repeat a fraying world, monuments that reverse their meaning, slogans that shriek rather than reassure exhibit the ways of which ambivalence builds every assertion of authority. Likewise, the 'new Africans' of the Domain, the cosmopolitan Indar, the bureaucrats who rehearse colonial forms all embody resemblance that undermines rather than secures which portrays mimicry, sustaining sovereignty but also destabilizing it. And lastly, Hybridity emerges not as celebration

but as fragility: the shop, the motto, the very narrative of the novel itself are 'third spaces' where meaning fades.

Consequently, Naipaul's narrative, which is often labeled as bleak, can be read through Bhabha's theory since it does not simply describe decline but also performs ambivalence. In the novel, authority is almost never absolute but rather it is always repetition, mimicry and instable. Reading *A Bend in the River* alongside Bhabha reveals that Naipaul's pessimism is not only authorial bias but also textual performance. The novel indorses the contradictions of postcolonial sovereignty, dramatizing how power depends on mimicry that is constantly "almost the same, but not quite," always resemblance that threatens to become menace.

2. The Psychopolitics of the Postcolony — Fanon and *A Bend in the River*

Theories of colonial violence, identity, and psychic fragmentation can be best read through the insights of Frantz Fanon. His dual formation as psychiatrist and revolutionary allowed him to see how colonialism was not only a system of economic exploitation but also a pathology inscribed into the body and mind of both colonizer and colonized. *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/2008) explores the alienation of the colonized subject who internalizes the colonizer's values, while *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961/2004) diagnoses the psychic and political distortions of the postcolonial nation state. Reading V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* through Fanon reveals how the novel dramatizes the psychopolitics of the postcolony: the persistence of colonial categories, the nervous conditions of the elite, the alienation of diaspora identities, and the ambivalent performances of power. What emerges is a text where colonial violence endures not as memory alone but as nervous collapse, disillusionment, and psychic rupture.

Zabeth, the trader and "prophetess," provides a crucial example of how colonial discourse is mapped onto the body. Salim defines her through sensory detail:

She had a special smell... Metty said that Zabeth's smell was strong enough to keep mosquitoes away... Her smell was the smell of her protecting ointments... Zabeth's ointments repelled and warned. She was protected (Naipaul, 1981: 15).

Fanon insists that racism and colonialism 'epidermalize' inferiority, embedding it in the skin and body of the colonized subject. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he writes: "I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance" (Fanon, 2008: 95). Salim's account of Zabeth embodies this overdetermination as she is narrated through her smell, her aura or her bodily presence rather than her actions or words. For Salim, Zabeth is site of both attraction and disgust since she fetishized for her difference while on the other hand excluded from normative categories of civility. As an East African Indian, Salim cannot fully belong either to the European or African order, and Zabeth's embodied presence exposes his precarious place within colonial hierarchies therefore disclosing his own alienation. Zabeth's embodiment in a liminal space where the colonized are reduced to corporeal signifiers of difference is what Fanon terms as the 'zone of nonbeing'.

This sense estrangement is often articulated by Salim himself who is simply aware of his own identity fragmentation:

I had my first alarm about myself, the beginning of the decay of the man I had known myself to be, the man not of Africa lost in Africa (Naipaul, 1981: 184).

This declaration resonates with what Fanon defines as the colonized consciousness. As he famously articulates: "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a

third-person consciousness” (Fanon, 2008: 91). Salim’s identity disintegrates in a context where his diasporic position offers neither belonging nor recognition. He does identify himself as ‘lost,’ no longer coherent, no longer the man he knew. Salim’s confession is not merely personal melancholy but an effect of colonial discourse, which destabilizes identity by denying it autonomy. His “decay” is both psychic alienation, and the internalization of displacement.

Fanon’s account of the colonial elite can be seen in Indar, as well. His cosmopolitan confidence is exceptionally fragile after he returns from Europe from the conversation he has with Salim:

To work for an outfit like this is to live in a construct... Within it, I am of value... And if it folds... I’ve now learned that there are other ways in which I might exploit myself... I’m a lucky man. I carry the world within me (Naipaul, 1981: 161).

The conflict between Indar’s outward performance and his inner disillusionment can easily be seen by this confession. Though he returns from Europe with the aura of a sophisticated, worldly intellectual, his identity is sustained only through the performative mask, which brings, as Fanon emphasizes, alienating factors.

It demonstrates how the colonized intellectuals become “overdetermined from without” (2008: 95). They are made to act in ways that confirm the colonizer’s expectations, obliterating authentic subjectivity. Indar’s hollowness due to “having to charm” explains how he is exhausted by cosmopolitan entrapment within, reducing him to a spectacle of mimicry. In this context, the narrative turns into a critique of the colonial contexts as he stresses in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the national bourgeoisie is responsible for “the transmission line between the nation and capitalism” (2004: 152), reproducing alienation codes rather than transforming them. Fake cosmopolitanism enslaves the characters rather than bringing about freedom. Performance becomes mimicry that lacks action and self; desire for authority turns into a kind of borrowed authority; their ‘already fraying’ world is lost beneath “the pitfalls of national consciousness,” where the mask of sophistication enforced by the educated elite reproduces colonial categories without transforming them. “The national bourgeoisie discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary. Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and capitalism, rampant though camouflaged” (Fanon, 2004: 152). The characters, for example, Indar, find themselves in these superfluous settings and a superimposed milieu. Indar’s parasitic expressions and shallow knowledge of metropolitan discourse resist local transformation. Cosmopolitan confidence almost always indicates mimicry, hollowness, and alienation. Indar’s inadequacy and anxiety lead him to a psychic dilemma as Fanon defines: The more colonial subject acquires European knowledge, the further he discovers its inadequacy, entrapped by the discontinuities between borrowed discourse and real localities.

In this sense, some characters reveal the most striking Fanonian cases. Ferdinand, once a promising mind, is later presented as a sign of African individual success; appears in the novel as a bureaucrat, exhausted by the collapse of neurotic balance:

Below that face, Ferdinand seemed shrunken... These men, who depended on the President’s favour for everything, were bundles of nerves... unstable, half dead (Naipaul, 1981: 281).

Fanon’s neurotic state echoes the depiction of the elite as “bundles of nerves” that trigger the unfortunate instances of colonized depression, which operate within the established colonial violence. Fanon’s clinical occupation in the context of colonial domination determines itself by muscular manifestations such as fear of movement, loss of initiative, and compulsive repetition (2004: 249). Bodily enactment and pathological resistance reinforce Ferdinand’s bureaucratic

“official” mask of so-called confidence, which, in fact, leads to eventual inadequacy and dependency. Authority has not liberated him; it has, figuratively, hollowed him. His later confessions are symptomatic:

You must go right away... We're all going to hell... Nothing has any meaning... Everyone wants to make his money and run away. But where?... Everything that was given to me was given to me to destroy me (Naipaul, 1981: 281).

His lamenting discourse acutely indicates what Fanon earlier stated about the postcolonial nation often reproducing violence through the discourses and practices of the elite: “The unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the mass of the people, their laziness, and, let it be said, their cowardice at the decisive moment of the struggle, will give rise to tragic mishaps” (Fanon, 2004: 148). Ferdinand expresses the tragic conundrum entangled with the superimposed codes of the colonial regime. The characters are consumed, hollowed, alienated, displaced, and more than that, they undergo enslavement rather than authority.

Another character, the President, highlights this pathological situation, as well. Salim amplifies the overwhelming narratives lingering in slogans and portraits as:

Everywhere in the capital there were photographs of the President. They were on the walls of offices, on shopfronts, in the streets; sometimes the same picture repeated ten or twelve times within a few yards. The effect was less of reassurance than of a warning (Naipaul, 1981: 253).

The leader's image appears as an essential sign of colonial authority, as Fanon suggests, which functions in a way that the embodied and structured intimidation becomes a source of fascination and terror. “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (Fanon, 2004: 169). The President's disciplinary maxims proclaim the mimicry of colonial pedagogy: portraits, proverbs and slogans do not inspire but unsettle, nurturing fear rather than stability as a means of authoritarian violence. His dialogues serve as imposition, aimed at reading, according, and conforming. Spivak argues that representation is always “a speaking for” (*Vertretung*) as well as “a re-presentation” (*Darstellung*), which risks silencing the subaltern (Spivak, 1988: 275). Authority, through these images, reproduces itself recurrently because the spectacle never secures but causes neurotic instability. Furthermore, a similar function is revealed in the case of the monuments, another pathological embodiment. A riverside inscription, for example, imitated from an original piece of conquest, was another proof of groundless mimicry decorated by verbal and nonverbal markers of authority. The monument calls for provocation, as did the previous images or spectacles, indicating the permanent attempt to monumentalize power. Fanon argues that colonial practices overwrite indigenous memory and do not generate a people's history but erase and distort it (Fanon, 2004: 149). The collapse of the monument, therefore, also indicates an act of resistance, an unconscious repudiation of the violence. Authority, then, becomes an unstable agent of sovereignty and a pillar of repetitive compulsiveness. The authorial desire to inscribe, therefore, exposes the anxiety of the characters as well as neurotic selves.

The narrative voice Naipaul produces in the narrative corresponds to the Fanonian tone of the narrative that represents the characters' neurotic, anxious, distressed, isolated, and psychic voices. As Fanon maintains, decolonization is concerned with the simultaneous repair of political structures and psychic states of the characters. Naipaul's narrative strategies, therefore, align with the spatial features of bleak landscapes.

3. Subalternity, Representation, and Epistemic Violence – Spivak and *A Bend in the River*

Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* dramatizes the epistemic, yet unintelligible, double bind that the subaltern figures apply. They are, however, overtly mediated, ventriloquized, or reduced to tropes. The novel's narrative voice, in filtering and framing these characters, performs the very silencing Spivak addresses. Spivak's concept of "the subaltern" (1988) explains socially, politically, and epistemically marginalized colonial contexts. They not only reproduce authority but also voice dominant forms of knowledge because it is already determined by structured power. Oral discourse seeks recognition within existing discursive systems, and those systems reproduce silence. The epistemic violence is epitomized through ruined indigenous settings. European knowledge systems are determined by colonial categories and presented as the essential grounds for intelligibility. Spivak argues: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears... into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (Spivak, 1988: 306). Such a disappearance is revealed in the case of Zabeth, characterized by projected fear, fascination, and mercantile interest. She never acts as an epistemic subject/consciousness. Her sense of protection is narrated as a mystery, but it lies in Salim's inability to acknowledge her knowledge outside his categories. She remains visible yet inaudible, present yet unrecognized: the novel's emblematic subaltern.

The problem is not confined to individual figures but extends to Naipaul's depiction of history. Raymond, the historian at the Domain, reconstructs Africa entirely through colonial archives:

He gave the names of all the liberty villages... quoting and quoting from letters and reports in the archives... He didn't seem to have gone to any of the places he wrote about; he hadn't tried to talk to anybody (Naipaul, 1981: 187).

The epistemic violence represented here shows that Raymond overwrites memory by incorporating documented administration. As suggested by Spivak: "What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern? The question of 'representation' cannot be solved by simply allowing the oppressed to speak for themselves" (Spivak, 1988: 308). Raymond, rather than affirmation, simply keeps "quoting and quoting" to replace voices with archives, making the subaltern invisible even when they are the object of inquiry. Salim's ironically rendered "five-minute-talk" with another character is a significant critical marker (Naipaul, 1981: 187): Metty's voice/discourse hardly reveals knowledge, but it is structurally excluded from the epistemic realm of authority. As regards Ferdinand, he is no longer a subaltern but a hollow agent of power. He eventually confesses:

You must go right away... We're all going to hell... Nothing has any meaning... Everyone wants to make their money and run away. But where?... Everything that was given to me was given to me to destroy me (Naipaul, 1981: 281).

This confession is a sign of Ferdinand's partial incorporation of power. His status is elevated subalternity into bureaucracy, but his new position implies alienation rather than ascendance. As both an agent and a victim, the muted locutor is bound to authority, which will sooner or later destroy him. Spivak's paradox that the subaltern, once incorporated into the dominant structure, no longer occupies the position of pure subalternity but remains incapable of genuine speech accounts for Ferdinand's confessing voice without recognition, desperate utterances without transformation. Salim recalls the Latin inscription left behind after the destruction of a colonial statue:

And there were the ruins. *Miscerique probat populos et foedera jungi*. These Latin words, whose meaning I didn't know, were all that remained of a monument outside the dock gates... So almost

as soon as it had been put up—the steamer monument had been knocked down, with all the other colonial statues and monuments. Pedestals had been defaced, protective railings flattened, floodlights smashed, and left to rust. Ruins had been left as ruins; no attempt had been made to tidy up... The wish had only been to get rid of the old, to wipe out the memory of the intruder (Naipaul, 1981: 32).

This miniature-like depiction, exhibiting a European text carved into stone as permanence, illustrates the meaninglessness to the local community and is immediately effaced by those it sought to dominate. The erasure here is not only physical but epistemic, exposing the violence inherent in inscribing imperial authority onto a colonized landscape.

Spivak's point that colonial discourse operates by substituting its categories for local ones is starkly illustrated here. The motto is not translation but violence, a rewriting of Virgil to sanctify domination. Its destruction is less vandalism than counter-speech, a refusal of the imposed text. Yet even this resistance remains mediated by the narrator, who frames it as superstition, as inevitability, rather than as epistemic assertion. The monument's ruin does not restore voice but confirms instability.

The mercantile community of East African Indians, represented by Salim, adds another layer to Spivak's analysis. They occupy an intermediary position—neither European colonizers nor indigenous Africans, but complicit in structures of hierarchy. Salim describes their judgments candidly:

We judged traders by their coups... It was the same with Africans. We judged them by their ability... to do us services... Among ourselves we scoffed at African lust for gold... But we wanted gold ourselves; and we regularly paid tribute to the Africans who wore gold (Naipaul, 1981: 126).

The Indian traders, here, are seen to reproduce the hierarchical structures and marginalizing patterns, projecting onto the colonized characters, who use tropes of greed and primitive chunks that Europeans once imposed upon them. As Spivak notes, "the subaltern is not a person but a position without identity, caught in a structure of difference" (Spivak, 1988: 288). Hence, their words punctuated with the cycle of silenc(ing) continues. In the same vein, *A Bend in the River* explores Spivak's concepts through striking episodes. These episodes represent how the subaltern cannot speak. Zabeth's aura, Raymond's archives, Metty's silencing, the President's maxims, Ferdinand's despair, the ruined monument, and Salim's mercantile judgments dramatize the structural impossibility of the subaltern voice, its history overwritten by archives, its speech ventriloquized by elites, its knowledge reduced to aura or superstition. They reveal how the Subaltern is infected with sheer silence, not accidental but symptomatic of colonial and postcolonial discourse.

Conclusion

Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* remains one of the most critical texts in the postcolonial canon. Its narrative explores ambivalences, alienations, and silences. Using Bhabha, Fanon, and Spivak's critical lenses, this study argues that *A Bend in the River* not only dramatizes the postcolonial condition and explores the ambivalent aspects of authority undone by mimicry, subjectivity, and colonial trauma but also investigates voices silenced by epistemic violence through bleak and insecure settings.

Homi K. Bhabha's vocabulary of mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity allows us to see how the novel dramatizes the fragility of authority. The Domain, the President's maxims, Indar's borrowed cosmopolitanism, and the altered Latin motto all enact mimicry: repetitions of colonial

forms that aspire to originality but instead expose dependence. “Mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha, 1994: 86), and Naipaul’s text exemplifies this double bind. Sovereignty is staged as spectacle, yet it’s very excess betrays its instability. What appears as national authority becomes parody, shriek, and collapse. The postcolonial state, in Naipaul’s rendering, is not a site of confident renewal but a precarious theater where ambivalence constantly undercuts authority. Frantz Fanon’s analysis of psychopolitics deepens this diagnosis by exposing the psychic wounds of colonialism that persist into independence. Salim’s confession of decay, Zabeth’s overdetermined aura, Indar’s hollow performance, and Ferdinand’s nervous collapse each testify to the alienation and pathology that Fanon identified. “I am overdetermined from without,” Fanon wrote, “the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance” (2008: 95). In Naipaul’s novel, this overdetermination is evident everywhere: in bodies reduced to signs, in identities eroded by displacement, in elites trapped in the “pitfalls of national consciousness” (Fanon, 2004: 152). The nervous bureaucracy and the President’s compulsive spectacles are not signs of stability but symptoms of colonial violence internalized. Fanon helps us see that Naipaul’s bleakness is not simply cynicism but a representation of psychic devastation.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of subalternity and epistemic violence pushes this argument further by insisting on the structural silencing of marginal voices. Zabeth, Metty, and Ferdinand appear vividly in the novel, yet their voices are always mediated, ventriloquized, or dismissed. “The subaltern cannot speak,” Spivak argues, “the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (1988: 287). Zabeth is reduced to smell, Metty’s knowledge is acknowledged but never authorized, Ferdinand’s despair dissolves into confession without transformation. Raymond’s reliance on colonial archives and the inscription of the Latin motto exemplify epistemic violence: the substitution of colonial categories for indigenous histories. Even acts of resistance, such as the destruction of the monument, are framed through the narrator’s categories rather than restored as voice. Naipaul’s narrative thus performs the structural impossibility Spivak diagnoses: the subaltern appears but cannot speak within the dominant discourse.

Ultimately, although *A Bend in the River* is troubling, its ruins and repetitions, its shrieks and silences, remind us that the legacies of colonialism are not easily overcome and therefore remains as an indispensable text. By reading it through Bhabha, Fanon, and Spivak, one can recognize that its pessimism is also its diagnostic force. It forces us to confront the fragility of authority, the wounds of colonial violence, and the silencing of the subaltern. In doing so, the novel offers not a resolution but a mirror, reflecting the contradictions that continue to shape postcolonial realities.

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