

An Analysis of Africans' Blind Worship Towards European Culture in V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*

CAO Dongdong, JIA Xiao-yun

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

As an important early work of Nobel laureate Naipaul and a model of postcolonial works, *A Bend in the River* has been studied for decades. It is not hard to find Africans' blind worship towards European culture after reading this book. This paper aims to explore the manifestations of Africans' blind worship towards European culture in the novel by a close reading and acts as a wake-up call for almost every nations existing in the age of globalization to firm their own national cultural stand and enhance cultural confidence so as to remain invincible in the unprecedented changes.

Keywords: *A bend in the river*, Naipaul, blind worship of culture

Introduction

A Bend in the River, Naipaul's first novel since *Guerrillas*, offers an even bleaker picture of postcolonial societies than what we have expected of him. Africa, which Naipaul first used as a setting in *In a Free State*, takes its place beside the West Indies and India as one of Naipaul's "new worlds" (Cooke, 1979, pp. 736-737).

Since it was published in 1979, *A Bend in the River* has drawn many scholars' attention. Haidar Eid holds that the novel centres on the conflict between traditionalism and Westernism, and "the contradiction between traditional culture, rooted in village life, and the seemingly modern Westernized city is appalling" (Eid, 2000, p. 3). And Luo Xiaoyun's article studies the manifestation of the conflict between different cultures in the novel. It can be found that cultural conflict is a main object of most researches. However, apart from the conflict between two different cultures, the outcomes it brings to Africa deserve better attention, especially the phenomenon of Africans' blind worship of European culture, which is discussed in this paper.

Manifestations of the Africans' Blind Worship Towards European Culture

It is known that Europe has been the colonizer of Africa for almost a hundred years. Some cultures and ideology have been infiltrating into the African continent and people's heart. In Luo Xiaoyun's article, she concludes that neocolonialist uses economic monopoly and cultural hegemony to interfere with the colonized countries (2004, p. 103). The cultural implantation from Western colonizers is the main reason for Africans' blind worship towards European culture. And in *A Bend in the River*, Africans' blind worship towards European culture can be found clearly and mainly embodied in language, education, and architecture.

CAO Dongdong, Postgraduate, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

JIA Xiao-yun, Adjunct Professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

The Manifestations of the Blind Worship in Language

In the novel, Africans' blind worship towards European languages is mainly reflected in their blind worship towards English. This kind of worship is embodied in Africans' acceptance of the English names of new things and their admiration for the people who speak English.

On the one hand, it is found in the novel that Africans calmly accept the English names of new things. In the novel, there is a flower which has no name in Africa, because it only appeared in this land a few years ago, so Africans call it "the new thing" or "the new thing in the river" (Naipaul, 1979, p. 28), but Europeans at that time already have had a specific name for this flower—water hyacinth. So Africans blindly accept the word, not naming it with a new word, but following the European way. The rapid adoption of the new name of a plant reflects people's trust and blind worship of English.

On the other hand, Africans' blind worship towards English is reflected in the local people's blind worship towards English speakers. Zabeth is a vendor in the novel, whose admiration for the protagonist Salim stems from her admiration for his ability to speak English. In Salim's presence, Zabeth does not have the ostracism and vigilance she showed to others. She is respectful to Salim and trusts him, introducing her son to him, asking him to take more care of the boy and beat him if he makes mistakes. Zabeth has a blind worship towards Salim because she thinks the one who speaks English must have been from Europe or to Europe, somewhere she has never been to, but in fact, Salim is not European; instead, his roots are in Northwest India and he grew up on the east African coast where he received a British education. In this way, blind worship can lead people to make the wrong judgement of strangers.

Language is necessary for human communication. From worship towards a person to the worship towards the language he speaks, Africans should be aware of the dangers of this kind of blind worship.

The Manifestations of the Blind Worship in Education

In the novel, Africans' blind worship towards European education is embodied in their worship towards the content, form of education and educators.

First, Africans blindly worship the content and form of European education. In the novel, Zabeth pays special attention to her son's study and works hard to send her son to school where teachers are Europeans. She thinks in the school her son can learn something that cannot be acquired in other places. To some extent, the knowledge taught by the European teachers represents the European culture, so Zabeth's emphasis on education embodies her blind worship towards European culture. Meanwhile, she repeatedly says that she had no education then, so now she has to give her son access to this new kind of teaching, which makes her more proud to have such an opportunity.

Secondly, the blind worship towards education is reflected in people's blind worship towards educators. After attending in the school on the town, Ferdinand starts to put on a brightly-colored sports jacket embroidered with the school motto, "Semper Aliquid Novi", which means "always have something new" in English. He thinks that it helps to show the demeanor he learned from European teachers. In addition, his way of speaking changed. He began to learn his teacher's way of speaking, taking Salim as his experimental object to seek the most suitable way of speaking for himself. In a teaching environment where all the teachers were European, Ferdinand accepted the European way of speaking and dressing because of his worship mentality, and thus losing his own uniqueness.

It's good for Africans to accept some better educational ideas. However, blind worship makes the Africans accept all the ideas of the Europeans, either good or bad, which leads to the difficulty for them to discern the accuracy of knowledge.

The Manifestations of Blind Worship in Architecture

Africans' blind worship towards European culture embodied in architecture is reflected in two aspects: architectural style and the purpose of architecture.

First, the architecture in this place of Africa is totally in European style. In the novel, after the independence of the country, the leader—big man starts planning the construction of new Domain. The Domain, of course, is the big man's experimentation with modernity that is represented as a comical, outrageous gesture (Raja, 2005, p. 230). In order to construct the Domain, the new president of Africa, the big man, invites many European architects and technicians. Consequently, all the buildings they built are in European style. In the novel, these buildings are described as follows,

and to us the larger buildings of the Domain were startling—concrete louvres, pierced concrete blocks of great size, tinted glass. The smaller buildings—houses and bungalows—were more like what we were used to. But even they were on the large side and, with air conditioners sticking out in many places like building blocks that had slipped, looked extravagant. (Naipaul, 1979, p. 61)

It is known that extravagant buildings and skyscrapers are the main characteristics of European architecture. Here, the big man transforms this part of Africa to a miniature of Europe so that its own national characteristics are not preserved well.

Second, the purpose of architecture in Africa is not appropriate. Once the Domain is built, the local government spends money publishing the relevant news in European newspapers. The purpose is to show Europe that they can become better and stronger instead of making their lives better. As time goes by, the Domain is left to decay without further protection. People have gradually lost interest in this place, and the money originally spent has now been wasted. This blind worship of architecture makes Africans only care about the moment when the Domain is just built. The money consumed during this period can be used to build buildings with local characteristics for people to live better, or develop their own architectural design, which should be the purpose of their building the Domain, rather than just show off the prosperity of their buildings in European style to Europeans.

It is consistent with Father Huismans' prophecy that the African Africa will retreat one day, and the European graft will make it. Meanwhile, in the eyes of Salim and others, the Domain represents an unrealistic discourse and an idea that violates local traditions (Wang, 2004, p. 131). Undoubtedly, the blind worship towards European architecture makes Africans lose attention to their traditional culture. The final desolation of the Domain in the novel also symbolizes that blind worship would probably bring the loss of a nation's identity and lead to national recession ultimately.

Conclusion

Due to colonization, Europe brought cultural implantation to Africa for several decades, and the influence of it has not disappeared up to now. In this novel, Africans lose themselves in their blind worship of European culture. At present, people are in the age of globalization, and cultural colonization has become a new way of colonization instead of territorial colonization. In the face of the different cultures of other countries or the

potential cultural colonization of other countries, all countries should inspect their countries from the perspective of the world and strengthen cultural confidence at the same time.

References

- Cooke, J. (Autumn 1979). *A bend in the river* by V. S. Naipaul. *World Literature Today*, 53(4), 736-737.
- Eid, H. (2000). Naipaul's *A bend in the river* and neo-colonialism as a comparative context. *CLCWeb—Comparative Literature and Culture*, 2(3), 1-12.
- Luo, X. Y. (2004). Constructing a special environment and experiencing the clash of civilizations—An interpretation of Naipaul's post-colonial novel *A bend in the river*. *Foreign Literatures*, 24(3), 102-107.
- Naipaul, V. S. (1979). *A bend in the river*. New York: Vintage.
- Raja, M. (2005). Reading the postcolony in the center: V. S. Naipaul's *A bend in the river*. *South Asian Review*, 26(1), 224-239.
- Wang, J. H. (2004). Reflections upon the rootlessness of modern intellectuals in exile: Cultural critique of *A bend in the river* from postcolonial perspective. *Journal of Sichuan International Studies University*, 20(2), 129-132.
- Yang, J. C., & Ren, Y. (2014). Crisis of national identity in *A bend in the river*. *Foreign Literature*, (6), 131-137+160.