

A Bend in the River Study Guide

A Bend in the River by V. S. Naipaul

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Plot Summary

A Bend in the River is the story of an Arab-African man, Salim, and his journey through the rule of Mobutu Sese Meko of Zaire. Salim's family is of Indian descent and has lived on the eastern coast of Africa for generations. Aware of the country's growing unrest, Salim becomes unsure of the future of his family in that area. He buys a store in the interior of the country. The town is a natural market point by a bend in the river. There he works and waits for the town to rebuild from the destruction of the revolution.

A family servant tells Salim that his hometown was attacked and that his family has scattered. Salim slowly makes friends with other people, who are waiting for the town to re-emerge. He meets a woman who buys his merchandise and returns to a remote village. She is able to make this dangerous journey, because she is a magician with protective ointments. She brings her son to town to go to the newly reopened school and asks Salim to look after him. He reluctantly agrees.

As the town begins to grow, the President builds a huge government complex outside the city. Through a childhood friend, Salim is introduced to the people who work and live there. He begins an affair with the beautiful wife of a government historian who works for the President. Many call the older man "The Big Man's White Man."

Another revolution threatens and tensions build. Salim viciously beats his lover and decides to get out of Africa for a while. He travels to England and becomes engaged to a woman from his hometown. He returns to Africa to close-up shop and get his money. He finds the President had "nationalized" all property owned by foreigners. A drunken, uneducated former mechanic now owns Salim's business.

Salim begins dealing in gold and ivory and tries to get as much money as possible out of the country. He is caught with ivory and jailed, because he will bribe the police. In jail, he is untouched, but he watches as boys who have been kidnapped from their villages are beaten and forced to memorize tributes to the President. The young man, he has watched over since childhood, bails him out. The young man has gone from a schoolboy to a government official with authority over the town.

The man tells Salim the country is in desperate turmoil and holds no safe place for him. He tells Salim to leave the next day. The family servant begs Salim to take him along, but he doesn't have a passport or visa. Salim gives him his car and tells him to lie low and wait for the unrest to end.

The steamer Salim gets on is attacked, and when an attached barge full of people is cut loose, the people onboard are killed. The story ends with Salim on the steamer ship, sailing away in the dark.



Book 1, Chapter 1

Book 1, Chapter 1 Summary

The narrator, Salim, begins by describing his weeklong trip from the eastern coast of Africa to the interior of the country. He plans to open a store he bought in a town at the bend in the river. The past owner sold it cheaply after the revolution. Men with guns, who want money and supplies, stop Salim often. He thinks about slaves who were taken from their villages and driven on foot in the other direction. As he moves deeper into Africa, he wonders if he's made a mistake. He reaches the town and finds it more than half destroyed. His shop is in shambles. He will wait and see if the peace holds, and the people come back.

His first customer is a woman named Zabeth. She will become a regular customer, because she buys goods for her remote village. She is bigger than the small people of the region, and her skin is copper, while people in the area are very black. She has a strange, unpleasant odor that Salim later learns is used to repel strangers. Metty, Salim's family servant, says Zabeth is a magician. The odor is from her protective ointments.

Book 1, Chapter 1 Analysis

The story begins without telling the name of the country, the name of the President, or when the story takes place. It helps to know that the setting is Zaire, during the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was a time of political chaos in the country.

The first sentence of the book is a bleak judgment, "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it." Salim questions what kind of person could be considered a nothing and what he or she may have done to deserve being considered as such. It's clear that he doesn't think Zabeth is nothing. For him, she symbolizes authentic Africa, and he admires how fearlessly she travels the river and comes in and out of the bush. Perhaps, the key to the sentence is not nothingness, but people who allow themselves to be nothing.

On the way to the village, Salim feels like a slave far from home, wanting the journey to end. He especially admires Zabeth for getting on the river at night. He is afraid of the river at night. It makes him feel out of control. For some reason, Salim has moved to a place that seriously threatens his sense of worth. He has gone from one unsafe place to another.

Book 1, Chapter 2

Book 1, Chapter 2 Summary

Salim talks about his family's mixed heritage. Although they are from northwestern India, they are considered Arab. They are Muslims with customs and attitudes of Hindus. He doesn't know a lot about them, because they are not the kind of people who record the past. They live in the moment. Europeans, who took the area from the Arabs, have written any history he knows. Now the Europeans were being driven out. Outside his hometown are stockades where, at one time, slaves were kept before they were sent overseas. Unlike slaves on the west coast, slaves were not sent to American plantations. Many went to Arab families. Others became members of the family they joined. These slaves are fiercely dependent on the family's protection and prestige. Salim's family had two slave families who had been with them for three generations, and the last thing they wanted was freedom.

A childhood friend from a wealthy family tells Salim he is going to a university in England. He tells Salim to open his eyes. Their days in the area are numbered. Salim decides to break away from his family and his community. He buys the store from an old family friend who left it after the revolution. The friend is going to Uganda, where he thinks things will be calmer. Salim knows this family friend expects him to marry his daughter some day, but he pushes that out of his mind and starts the trip to his new home.

Salim hears from the BBC that Africans have attacked Arabs on the eastern coast. Letters from his family confirm this. They have left the coast and scattered. They still have the responsibility of the slaves, and everyone in the family is taking at least one. Salim is sent a boy who is part African. At home, he is called Ali. Here, he is Metty (the French word for mixed race is metis). He arrives hungry and upset and tells Salim about the attack. Salim initially thinks that Metty is going to be a burden, but he becomes well-liked in town, helps at the store, and keeps Salim company.

Book 1, Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter introduces the themes of alienation and isolation. Salim's family is not quite Muslim, not quite Hindu, and not quite Arab. The coast is filled with people who are not truly African. Salim calls it an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place. They lived in Africa, but they face the Indian Ocean. Salim does not fit into this world either, because he observes, analyzes and records events. His people live in the moment, and he sees a bigger picture. He feels, as his friend does, that "another tide of history was coming to wash us away."

Salim sees the huge impact of Europeans on his world. He and his family live in a European colony. Europeans have recorded his history. When looking at British stamps,



he sees his country depicted as backward and quaint. This plants the seeds of doubt that push him to move away.

Once more, Salim thinks about the issue of control when he says to himself (after buying the store), "I will no longer submit to fate."



Book 1, Chapter 3

Book 1, Chapter 3 Summary

Zabeth has a son who is 15 or 16. His father is a trader from a tribe in the south. The son, Ferdinand, used to live with his father, but is now back with Zabeth. She brings him to town to go to school and asks Salim to look after him. Salim is uncomfortable, but says "yes." He tries to interest Ferdinand in his science magazines, but Ferdinand is not interested. In the following weeks, Salim watches Ferdinand try on different personalities. First, he acts like a schoolboy, then like a stern-faced man from another tribe, then like a forest warrior. One day, he asks Salim to send him to school in America. Salim asks angrily why Ferdinand acts like Salim owes him something. Salim has lunch with friends, and they say Ferdinand has been telling people that Salim was sending him to America. Soon, other boys begin coming to the shop and asking for money for school. One boy comes with a book that was obviously stolen from the school. Salim takes the book and tells Ferdinand to return it, or he would have him sent home. Ferdinand is truly furious and walks out. At the end of the day, Salim takes the book that Ferdinand has left.

Book 1, Chapter 3 Analysis

A pattern is emerging of Salim saying one thing and doing another. He wants more security than his family has on the coast, yet he moves to an area that is even more unstable. He says he does not want responsibilities, yet he becomes Ferdinand's guardian. In Chapter 2, Salim calls this "the lie," and says it was introduced by the Europeans. Europeans could assess themselves, they were aware of how things looked, and they wanted to look good. Salim says they wanted gold and slaves like everyone else, but they also wanted statues of themselves put up, because they were good to the slaves. So they said one thing, did another and got the slaves and the statues. Salim does not see the lie in his own behavior, but he does see it in the new President. Salim sees the Big Man assuming the white man's lies. Although he is aware of the lies, he is still afraid they will sneak around him and gain control of his life.

Salim sees Ferdinand as a symbol of many of the complications of Africa itself. Tied to colonialism (school), yet feeling like a new man of Africa; having strong feelings but little information; overwhelmed when enraged; proud and embarrassed by his country; eager to learn, but only to get ahead.



Book 1, Chapter 4

Book 1, Chapter 4 Summary

The next day, Salim takes the book back to the school. A Belgian clerk tells him Father Huisman (who runs the school) is on a trip to the bush. He complains to Salim about how hard it is for him in Africa. He can't eat after watching the students eat caterpillars or seeing the kitchen. He says he's leaving. A week later, Salim returns to the school, and the priest is back with a mask and carving he got on his trip. He shows Salim his collection of African pieces that were made for religious purposes. Salim sees that the priest cares about the African pieces, but doesn't seem to care about Africans or Africa itself. For Father Huisman, Africa is a wonderful place full of new things for his collection. He also thinks that civilization is coming, and the true Africa is dying. He sees his collection as saving relics. Salim comes to regard him as a pure man.

Book 1, Chapter 4 Analysis

Salim, the pessimist, is attracted to Father Huisman's optimism and fearlessness. He isn't bothered by the priest's self-absorption and lack of concern for others. In fact, he envies that indifference. He sees the priest's single-minded focus as purity. To Salim, everyone is isolated. At least, Father Huisman adds something to the town by talking about his interests and attitudes.



Book 1, Chapter 5

Book 1, Chapter 5 Summary

The area seems peaceful and villagers begin coming to the town. Many of them stay, and the town gets crowded. Tempers flare, and people begin talking again about war. Europeans, Arabs and other Africans had mistreated people of this region. During the war for independence, they were overcome with rage. They destroyed their own town to show their anger. Then, they mourned its destruction. Now that the town is growing, they are becoming afraid of it again. Many move back to the villages and plan to destroy the town again. They form an army and move into town. The army men spend a lot of money and learn about rugs from the Arabians. People begin to be ambushed, and tension is very high. The town seems to quiet and wait. Ferdinand is distraught with fear and wants to go to his father or his mother. Travel is impossible, and Salim and Metty find it comforting to comfort the boy.

Salim has dinner with an attractive Indian couple. The woman, Shoba, is from a wealthy family, but is estranged from them. When she met Mahesh, they slept together before they were married. Her brothers threatened to kill Mahesh and throw acid on Shoba's face. They fled to where they are now. Shoba says she is always afraid, of the town and the people who come there. She thinks her brothers will send a stranger to hurt her.

Mercenaries are sent by the President to stop the budding war. Two army officers are shot in public, and the people in town are relieved that at least the President is in charge. It will not become the chaos of the past. The next day, a fighter plane drops bombs into the bush. The planes return during the week, but the "war" was over with the first bombing.

In the days soon after the uprising, Father Huisman travels into the bush and is murdered, mutilated, and sent floating down the river with his head on a stick. Soon after that, an African-American, who is starting a gallery in the United States, steals his collection.

Book 1, Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter is filled with anger, violence and retaliation. The Africans rage with a fury that destroys everything around them. As far away as they are, the anger shown by Shoba's brothers consumes her with fear. There is the threat of violence, the memory of violence, and the terrible aftermath of violence. Salim sees one form of violence (the President's attack) as better than another (the chaos of an uprising), because the President appears to be in control.

It is interesting that Salim is disgusted by the Africans' pattern of building, destroying, rebuilding, destroying, but does not see stupidity in the actions of Father Huisman. After colonialism, a Belgian walking into a village and taking religious items is putting himself

at extreme risk. Rather than a thief, Salim sees the priest as an inquiring man who found human richness where others saw bush.



Book 2, Chapter 6

Book 2, Chapter 6 Summary

After Father Huisman's death, the town becomes a thriving marketplace, just as the priest knew it would. Squatters stay in their settlements and just throw their garbage out the door, creating big hills of garbage. The town begins to stink.

Mahesh keeps trying new get-rich ventures. He buys a machine to engrave signs and finds there are no signs to engrave. He researches making little wooden spoons for ice cream cups and finds out ice cream is made with dairy products not found there. He trades items with the army, which is dangerous and makes Salim nervous. Then he buys a Bigburger franchise, and it's an instant hit. Guests, from the hotel across the street, come for meals. Everybody else comes to get away from the garbage smells.

The President builds a huge complex at the site of a ruined suburb outside town. Some say it will be a model farm and an agricultural college. Others think it will be a concert hall. It becomes a university city and a research center called the Domain, and Ferdinand starts attending classes there.

Salim feels anxious and restless, as if he has no home. He is jealous of how easy it is for Ferdinand to take on a new life. He starts to hate his house. Metty, too, becomes moody and starts avoiding his friends. One girl comes often to try talking to Metty and tells Salim that Metty has a child who is sick. Salim and Metty spend an evening reminiscing and pretending like their relationship hasn't changed.

Book 2, Chapter 6 Analysis

Salim usually sees everyone as isolated and adrift, but in this chapter it is only him. The town is successful, his friend Mahesh is successful, but to Salim everything just smells bad. An opportunity for change appears when the Domain is built, but Salim is on the outside, while Ferdinand walks right in. Even Metty has a family in town. Everyone he knows is connected to something, only Salim is unmoored.



Book 2, Chapter 7

Book 2, Chapter 7 Summary

Metty assumes responsibility with a family and becomes less bright and airy. Indar, Salim's childhood friend, visits them. Indar is the person who told Salim that their coastal community had no future. He went to school in London, and now he is staying at the Domain as a guest of the President. He is a lecturer and tours throughout Africa.

Salim shows his old friend around town, which seems to consist of rundown shacks and dumping grounds. Indar takes Salim to the Domain and into his lavishly decorated, air conditioned home. Salim sees the Domain is filled with young African men (like Ferdinand) who have a big, romantic picture of the New Africa. The foreigners around them have an equally high idea of Africa. The young men are there on government scholarship and soon will graduate and become part of the President's world. They are bright and developing fast.

Salim goes to a lecture Indar is giving, which is supposed to help the students practice English. Indar talks about the other parts of Africa he has visited, and the audience is fascinated. The lecture becomes a discussion about Africa, and Ferdinand asks whether a New Africa could include old African religion. Indar asks why they need the old religion, and there is tense silence. Later Salim explains that Ferdinand's mother is a magician.

As he hears and sees more in the Domain, Salim wonders if people like Indar aren't fooling themselves by ignoring the difference between the Africa they talk about and the one they knew. They do not take into account their own past, the smashed life of their communities. Salim feels the Domain is both a hoax and real, as is everything else made by man.

Book 2, Chapter 7 Analysis

Living in a rundown, smelly town and visiting the Domain, Salim naturally envies the young men who will move from this world of ideas into positions of power and control. Salim is too critical to ever find the peace of a true believer. He cannot connect intellectually to a single idea. Because of that, he must live in a world of uncertainty.

Ferdinand's question about religion, and the tension that follows, shows some of the struggle of socializing men with tribal roots into citizens of a modern state. They do not find Western values a good substitute for the beliefs of their people.

The Domain is based on Nsele, the Presidential Domain built by Mobutu near Kinshasa. It was at Nsele that heavyweight-boxing champion Muhammad Ali trained for his "fight of the century" with George Foreman in 1974. Nsele, like the Domain, was meant to represent the best aspects of the new, modern Africa. Its potential was never realized.



Book 2, Chapter 8

Book 2, Chapter 8 Summary

Indar takes Salim to a party in the Domain. He says the hostess, Yvette, is married to a man named Raymond. Raymond, a historian, keeps a low profile, but actually runs the whole show. He's called "the Big Man's white man." The President, it is believed, reads everything Raymond writes. Indar says Raymond knows more about their country than anyone on Earth.

Yvette is young, white, small and beautiful. Salim is surprised to see that she is barefoot. The house is like Indar's, but a lot of the furniture has been replaced with cushions and mats. Raymond is in the other room working. Couples are dancing. Salim looks at a woman's legs and feels a desire and freedom he has never felt at a brothel. He realizes he has never seen men and women dancing for mutual pleasure. He is moved by the emotion in the music, a Joan Baez album.

Raymond, who is at least 30 years older than Yvette, joins the party. He talks to the guests about the President and Africa. When prodded, he tells how he met a hotel maid who begged him to give guidance to her son. The boy went on to become President long after Raymond counseled him. Raymond praises the President for allowing freedom of thought in the country. Asked about the portraits of the President seen everywhere, Raymond says the President anticipated that people would need a symbol so they could say, "It's him, but it's Africa, and it also seems to be me." Raymond goes back to work, telling them how hard it is to actually create the first historical narrative of Africa.

After the party, Salim and Indar walk to the river. Salim is exhilarated by the evening, but Indar is edgy. When Salim thanks Indar for opening this world to him, Indar says the world is fragile, "We believe and we don't believe." He tells Salim that Raymond has come to a point where he is no longer guiding the President, but just taking orders. The President is going his own way and no longer needs Raymond's help.

Book 2, Chapter 8 Analysis

Salim is excited to find that, although he cannot connect with the Domain intellectually, he may be able to enter the world socially. The party seemed like an exhilarating meeting of free spirits, complete with Joan Baez music. Indar reminds him about the unspoken message Raymond brought when he came in: You are all guests of the President. Indar says that everyone in the Domain exists on faith, but only the President is in control. The freedom Salim feels there is an illusion.



Book 2, Chapter 9

Book 2, Chapter 9 Summary

Still by the river, Indar starts talking about his life. He seems irritated and depressed. He starts by saying that most cultures trample their own past. That is what this go-go-go world requires. When he first left Africa for London, he thought he'd never come back. He was so unhappy then; he knew his family was soon to lose everything it had built. He thought he could leave all the sadness and rage behind when he got to England.

"University" seemed like a magic word, and Indar thought a magic life awaited him. He didn't realize how the simplicity of Africa would affect how he saw the outside world. He said people from Africa accept everything they see without trying to add to it. They feel the world is something for them to explore but not to change.

Indar says he went through university learning nothing, accepting everything, getting nothing. When it was time to start a career, he was lost. The school couldn't place him anywhere, and the counselor got frustrated, because he had no direction. He tried applying for a few jobs without luck. Once a month, he had lunch with a woman lecturer who said he was a man of two worlds, and that the combination of his education and his background made him extraordinary. She thought he should have an extraordinary job, and she suggested he become a diplomat.

Indar manages to get an interview at the Indian High Commission in London. When he arrives, he sees all the fake Indian decorations on the building and becomes furious at all the people who let their culture become foreign kitsch. Inside, he is sent from person to person and finds them all nervous, unprepared and fawning to their superiors. Finally, when he is told he needs to become a citizen of India before he can even apply, he gives up and leaves.

After the interview, Indar has a moment of complete insight. He knows without a doubt that he belongs to himself alone and would surrender his manhood to nobody. That moment changes everything. He starts acting and living as a Bohemian until everyone around him leaves to take real jobs. A friend takes him to lunch to meet an American who is interested in helping Africa. Indar realizes that his background makes him valuable to someone like that. He proposes an idea.

Indar says that Africa is full of refugees, who are also first-generation intellectuals. He suggests a continental exchange to move them around. This would be a way to give the men hope, to give Africa better news about itself, and to make a start on the true African revolution. The idea is adopted and seems to be working perfectly. However, Indar is afraid the men are only working so they'll get good jobs.

No matter what happens next, Indar now knows how to exploit himself. He says he has created his own world, where he is of value just as he is. He belongs to himself.



Book 2, Chapter 9 Analysis

Indar, like Salim, is consumed by the idea of losing control. Even more, he fears the loss of dignity. He leaves home because he can't bear to watch his family lose everything they have. When he gets to England and does not feel confident, he blames it on Africa. He has been trained to watch the world passively. He forgets that a friend took him to lunch just to meet the American. Now, he insists that he is in control, that he belongs to himself. He doesn't realize how fragile his sense of identity is when he says he will happily turn his back on his heritage and the past if that is what it takes to win.



Book 2, Chapter 10

Book 2, Chapter 10 Summary

Every time Salim sees Yvette, she's with Indar. He thinks about the way she looked at the party, and he is becoming obsessed with her. He now sees Indar as fragile and feels protective of him. Indar's stylishness, which Salim always envied, now seems to be all he has. He introduces Indar to Shoba and Mahesh, but they don't get along. Salim thinks they might be too much alike. Shoba asks Indar how much money he makes, and he says, casually, that he gets by. Later he rages at Salim, because they didn't recognize his worth. As his time at the Domain comes to an end, he is irritated and depressed. He leaves abruptly for a flight out.

Ferdinand is leaving for a cadetship at the capital, and Salim takes him to the steamer. Salim marvels at how comfortable Ferdinand looks wherever he goes. He is himself everywhere. At one end of the deck is a private cabin. Indar appears with Yvette and the cabin is his. He had to carry his own supplies onboard, and he is upset and complaining loudly. Salim asks him why he didn't fly, and he says the President took the plane at the last minute without an explanation. Indar is shocked and upset at how hard it was to get the steamer ticket. There were rules, locked doors, and an endless checking of papers. He shows them that he has food and drink for the trip. The purser tells Indar that it will be safe for him to drink the ship's water. He will see it purified and serve him separately.

Then, the purser uses French words (Monsieur, Madame) forbidden by the President. In spite of this, Indar tips him generously. Ferdinand tells Indar that this was a mistake, and it turns out to be true. When they see the purser again, he ignores them. Indar says Ferdinand will have to be his guide on these things. When it's time to go, Indar and Yvette embrace formally, and Indar says he will check on the status of Raymond's book while he's in the capital. Ferdinand does not shake hands. He just says "Salim." As the boat takes off, Salim is happy to be staying on the bank with Yvette.

Book 2, Chapter 10 Analysis

Indar's claims of being comfortably secure with his own value are forgotten when he becomes outraged that strangers don't instantly recognize his real worth. Also gone is any sign of Indar's independence. He is going where he is told, and if the plane is taken away, then he'll take the boat. The control at this point belongs to Ferdinand. Salim, Indar and Yvette watch as he manages every situation they encounter. He knows what to say to the woman checking papers, and he knows how to handle a purser who disrespects the President. It is Ferdinand, not Indar, who appears to be his own man.



Book 2, Chapter 11

Book 2, Chapter 11 Summary

After seeing off the steamer, Salim and Yvette stop for a snack. A family who ran a place in the capital before the revolution owns the restaurant. During the uprising, they moved to Europe and are now here. They have obviously spent a lot of money on the place. Lunch is over, and the people still working are standing around. Salim and Yvette enjoy the air conditioning, the wine, and the smoked salmon. Salim asks Yvette about her relationship with Indar, and she calls him "an encumbrance that has become a habit." Salim asks about the black silk shirt she wore at the party the night they met, and the subject pleases her. She says she is having a lunch the next day for a visiting lecturer and asks Salim to come.

The next day Salim goes to Raymond and Yvette's house and finds out she's cancelled the lunch and forgotten to get word to him. While she's finding them something to eat, Salim looks around the living room. It is different in the sunlight. Everything seems faded and worn. A book with Raymond's name and the date inscribed seems old and dead. Salim says he'd like to read something of Raymond's. Yvette says he's working on a book but hasn't published one yet. Salim asks if it's true that the President reads what Raymond writes, and Yvette says that's what used to be said. Salim starts to find the house sad and thinks that Yvette must find it a prison. He asks her to lunch the next day. Before he goes, Yvette gives him articles written by Raymond.

The next day, Yvette comes to Salim's apartment, and they have sex. Salim marvels at how different it feels than sex in the brothels, which is all he's ever known. He is amazed by the beauty of Yvette's body and uses every bit of his energy to bring pleasure to it. The next day, Yvette calls, and Salim closes his shop. It is noon, and he doesn't get back until 3:00. He worries that the affair is already making him fall apart.

He tries to read Raymond's articles. One is a review of an American book about African inheritance law. Another is a detailed analysis of the voting patterns of a tribe in the south. Two articles look interesting. One is about a race riot that led to the formation of the first African political club, and the other is about missionaries in the 19th century who bought slaves from Arabs and resettled them in "liberty villages." Both stories start well, but are just a collection of newspaper articles and government decrees. It's clear that Raymond didn't go to any of the locations or talk to anyone involved. Salim realizes Raymond was an ordinary teacher who entered an extraordinary world by chance. He sees that a younger Yvette must have mistaken him for extraordinary.

Book 2, Chapter 11 Analysis

Salim's fantasies hit the light of day and are both better and worse than he imagined. The apartment loses its appeal, and Raymond appears to be a man in over his head.



This makes the marriage of Yvette and Raymond seem sad. The reality of Yvette is beyond his expectations. He is swept into a world of pleasure and desire. It is intoxicating, but instead of giving in to the enjoyment, he worries that he is losing control of himself. He says he is "falling apart."



Book 3, Chapter 12

Book 3, Chapter 12 Summary

Salim thinks that if he'd read Raymond's articles earlier, he might not have gotten involved with Yvette. He wants something to help him transcend reality, not people who are trapped like he is. He keeps photographs of Yvette in his desk drawer. She tells him how Raymond seduced her when she was a student. He showered her with money and, even though she knew it was government money, she was impressed. After they were married, they toured with the President, and she often sat by him at dinners. The President had a regal style, starting every conversation and suddenly turning away when he was done. One night, he banged his walking stick down and Yvette didn't know this meant "Silence!" and kept talking. After that, the President never spoke to her or appeared in public with her again.

Yvette's mistake was not the reason the President broke ties with Raymond. He remained friendly with Raymond until he no longer needed him. While Yvette is clearly hurt by their situation, Raymond seems to follow an inner code that forbids showing disappointment or envy. When people come to dinner and talk about events he wasn't invited to, he is polite. One night, a guest refers to Raymond applying for a job in America and getting turned down. The guest says times have changed, and maybe the decade of Africa is over. Yvette looks at her watch and says, "The decade of Africa ended ten minutes ago." Everyone laughs, but now Salim knows Raymond and Yvette may be leaving. He finds out Yvette pushed Raymond into applying. Raymond amazes Salim. He is in such a shaky position and so dependent on the President, yet he remains loyal to the President, to himself, to his ideas, and to his work.

Salim falls into a domestic routine with Yvette and Raymond. He spends the afternoon in bed with Yvette, has dinner with Raymond and Yvette at the Domain, and then brings Yvette back to his flat for more sex. Raymond's routine revolves around his work. If they have guests for dinner, he often allows himself to be drawn into talking about intellectual topics. He doesn't bring up politics, but he doesn't shy away from them either. Visitors become increasingly critical of the government and the "cult of the Madonna," meaning the shrines set up as a tribute to the President's mother. People have been making pilgrimages to them. Raymond explains that they represent an immense idea about the redemption of the woman in Africa. The Youth Guard now watches the part of the Domain open for public tours.

There is no word about Raymond's book, but a small book of the President's thoughts, called "Maximes," is published and pushed on everyone. In Salim's town, the Youth Guard plans a parade with children holding up the book and shouting tributes to the President. The parade is a mess; it's pouring outside, and the children just hold up the book and yell when they're yelled at. After that, the book seems to disappear. Raymond thinks that's good, because the President may now realize he's being badly advised.



Book 3, Chapter 12 Analysis

Salim begins and ends this chapter by again saying one thing and doing another. He says he became involved with Yvette to help himself transcend reality, yet over and over he reminds himself not to lose himself in the affair or in Yvette. He may long for it, but he sees it as a loss of control.

Salim says he admires Raymond for keeping himself under tight control. He feels that Raymond has a code of honor, which forbids him from showing disappointment. Salim says he is impressed that a man could believe so much in himself and his own ideas. Whatever is really happening between Raymond and the President, Raymond continues to show confidence in their relationship and Salim says he admires that.

Ironically, Salim shows his admiration of Raymond by sleeping with Raymond's wife. In truth, Raymond's behavior is no different than that of Salim's family. They deny the danger around them and are unable to move before it strikes. Salim didn't admire this in his own family, and it's doubtful he respects it in Raymond.



Book 3, Chapter 13

Book 3, Chapter 13 Summary

Salim has always thought of his friend, Mahesh, as half a man. He is devoted to his wife and sees himself through Shoba's eyes. Now he is doing the same thing with Yvette. Yvette has opened up worlds to him, but narrowed things as well. Now, he looks at everything with an eye toward whether it affects him and Yvette.

Noiman, a successful Greek businessman, sells out and moves to Australia. This signals the end of the town's boom. Local businessmen try to kid themselves by talking about how their town is better than anywhere else. Salim tries to laugh about this with Mahesh, but Mahesh, too, is seriously touting the quality of life. Salim thinks Mahesh seems full of himself.

Nazruddin sends Salim a letter telling him that things are not going well in Uganda. The country is just too small for all the tribes and cars. Nazruddin is thinking about moving his family to Canada. Salim is afraid Nazruddin wants him to assume his responsibility and marry his daughter, so he writes back about how unstable things are in the town and in his life.

Shoba's father dies, and she goes back home to visit. Salim is surprised because he thought she had been disowned by her family, and that her brothers would throw acid in her face if she comes back. Mahesh starts to act like a grieving son-in-law, but when Shoba comes back early and goes into isolation, then Mahesh really starts grieving.

Salim and Metty listen to the President's speech on the radio. He uses crude speech meant to appeal to the masses. He speaks only African now, with the exception of the words "citoyens" and "citoyennes." He shocks everyone by disbanding the Youth Guard in Salim's area.

Book 3, Chapter 13 Analysis

Salim's sense of security is beginning to unravel. He no longer feels superior to Mahesh and that strains their relationship. The rosy outlook for the town and its businesses is starting to fade. He is still dogged by responsibilities he doesn't want to take on, and, perhaps most unsettling, the President no longer seems to be following a plan. He has completely changed his position on westernizing the country. His actions, his speech, even his clothes are incomprehensible to the outside world. Isolated, he is now pandering to the crudest of the masses, and he is making snap judgments that seriously threaten the stability of Salim's community. In spite of the inconsistencies, the President is tightening his grip.



Book 3, Chapter 14

Book 3, Chapter 14 Summary

Things get bad after the Youth Guard is disbanded. Police and other officials start harassing people. Metty is tormented every time he takes out the car. At one point he is arrested, and after that, Salim starts taking the car until he is harassed. He has to show his papers over and over, and they always want money. They sense the President's weakness in the area. Everything in the area looks the same, the army and the photos of the President. However, the people have lost faith in authority. Salim holds off paying the bribes, because he still believes in the power of the President.

Violence erupts in town. There are assaults on police stations, and statues are toppled. The uprising seems somewhat organized, and one morning Metty brings Salim a leaflet he found from a group called The Liberation Army. Salim sees two differences between this group and the group that organized before the revolution: The Liberation Army has intelligent local leaders, and the action starts in town instead of the bush. Salim is afraid and becomes surprised at how you can go on living calmly with fear.

Raymond is stunned and weakened by the uprising. Salim realizes his affair with Yvette depends on health and optimism of all three of them. Salim and Yvette start spacing out their meetings, usually meeting every tenth day.

One night, Salim is in bed reading when Yvette runs up in evening clothes. She'd been at a dinner and thinking about him all night. He is moved, but after sex, she speaks to him in a way that upsets him. "Do you think I am Raymond?" he asks. Then, he severely beats her. As she climbs into bed, he spreads her legs and spits on her. Then, he beats her again. She leaves but calls later to see if she should come back. Metty takes care of Salim. In the morning, Salim goes to Bigburger for breakfast. Mahesh says Shoba wants to see Salim and asks him to lunch the next day.

Zabeth comes to the store. Salim asks about Ferdinand and says he expects he'll become the local commissioner. "If they let him live," Zabeth says. She says she is afraid of the President and his jealousy. She points out how there is never a photograph in the newspaper bigger than the President's.

At lunch with Shoba and Mahesh, they talk about the food until Shoba asks Salim to look closely at her face. He can't see anything, but eventually she points out a slight discoloring. She tells him, that when she went home, she was restless and drove around a lot. She started getting blotches on her skin. A beautician said she could help but put peroxide on Shoba's face. Now she won't go outside or travel. Salim sees that Shoba and Mahesh are trapped by more than their obsession with Shoba's skin. They are cut off, isolated, with nothing to fall back on. Afraid the same thing will happen to him, Salim books a flight to London to see Nazruddin and his family.



Book 3, Chapter 14 Analysis

As things continue to deteriorate, Salim is feeling trapped between the lies he has been telling himself and the realities around him. Rather than having a code of honor, Salim sees that Raymond is simply losing touch. Raymond, Yvette and Salim have all been using each other as distractions from the truth and from their fear. Salim's beating of Yvette can be seen as a metaphor for Africa and Europe, with Africans trying to destroy the very thing they are dependent on.

It is also hard for Salim to see that the fearless Zabeth is afraid, and that her son, who seems to maneuver well in every situation, may be in danger. When Salim visits Mahesh and Shoba, he sees the consequences of living with fear. Shoba, who has always been afraid of her brothers disfiguring her face, has caused her own disfigurement. What Salim says of Mahesh and Shoba is true of everyone. They are cut off, isolated, with nothing to fall back on. With a burst of insight, Salim realizes he must reconnect with a wise old friend.



Book 3, Chapter 15

Book 3, Chapter 15 Summary

It is the first time Salim has flown in an airplane, and he is amazed. He is in Africa one day and in Europe the next morning. He finds that the Europe he comes to is not the Europe he had heard about while growing up. This Europe is filled with refugees. The streets are crowded and filled with stalls, booths, kiosks, and grocery stores all run by foreigners like himself.

Kareisha, Nazruddin's daughter, has become a pharmacist. Nazruddin has seen that all his children have a good job that they can do anywhere. Kareisha is serene and affectionate toward men. Salim thinks this is either the result of Nazruddin's kind upbringing or from a past affair.

Salim thinks about going home. The only street he knows well in London is Gloucester Road. Salim's hotel and Nazruddin's flat are both on the road. A lot of Arabs, rich and poor, come to the park on the road. One day, Salim sees an Arab woman with a slave. Nazruddin says that is happening more and more. The slaves even have passports and visas.

Nazruddin tells Salim that all over the world, people have taken the money from their homes and are running to a "better place." Many go to the United States or Canada, where they are swindled by their own kind. Nazruddin was swindled in an oil well scheme. The well actually produced oil, but the scammer ended up taking everything and leaving the investors with the bills. Then, Nazruddin tried opening an ethnic movie theater, but it didn't work out. He moved his family to London where he bought a number of flats on Gloucester Road. Here he has trouble with the tenants, because no one has much money.

Kareisha tells Salim that, with all his complaints, her father is a happy man. Salim sees that it is true. Nazruddin loved the action of Gloucester Road. It is a friendly, holiday place, and Nazruddin's days are full of encounters and new observations.

Kareisha says Indar is in London. His outfit folded two years before. He knew it was going to happen, but it still hit him hard. He wouldn't take advice and became "help resistant." His sense of worth always came from wealth. He thought money made him holy. One day, he goes to New York and stays in an expensive hotel. He spends a lot of money without getting anywhere. The American he met at brunch, all those years ago, befriends him again. Indar thinks of him as his equal. One night, the American invites Indar to a dinner party at his home, and Indar sees that he is very rich and much holier than Indar. He feels cheated, fooled and is sorry he ever opened up to the American. At the dinner party, he meets a couple. It's a young wife and an old journalist who wrote successfully a long time ago. Also at the party is the young wife's lover. Everyone is dismissive of the old journalist, but Indar is rough and unkind.



Afterward, Indar feels it's time to get away and to go home. That's how he's been since, with a dream village in his head. He does the lowest kind of jobs and won't take help. He feels safer with sacrifice. Friends have given up on him.

Salim realizes his yearning to go home is the same "dream village" illusion. He becomes engaged to Kareisha and leaves to go back to Africa. He plans to wind up business and get a fresh start somewhere else.

Book 3, Chapter 15 Analysis

Salim has come to Europe for relief from anxiety, but what he finds makes him more anxious. The city is filled with people just like him, who have fled their homes and are trying to get by in a new world. In Africa, working hard seemed to Salim heroic. Here, it seems pointless. Young girls are locked in kiosks selling cigarettes at midnight.

Nazruddin adds to Salim's pessimism by telling him how he has seen foreigners fleecing their own people when they arrive. Money has become more important than their heritage. The same seems to be true of Indar. Indar told Salim that he would survive whatever happened, because he understood his own value. Instead, he falls apart when his job ends, and he doesn't have the money to prove his worth. Without money he feels completely unworthy.

It seems like Nazruddin's story is as bad as Indar's and Salim's. He has pulled his family from dangerous areas and tried repeatedly to make a good living. He has been cheated by his own people and made questionable business decisions. Why then is he a happy man? Salim says that once again Nazruddin has chosen wisely, which means he has directed his own course. In truth, Nazruddin has chosen wisely because he has chosen to be happy. He may have lost money, but he's made sure his children are self-sufficient. He enjoys life, he is interested in people, and he opens himself to new things and new places. He is what Indar wanted to be. Salim watches the man's good spirits and thinks, "It made me feel that after all these years I had never caught up with him, and never would; that my life would always be unsatisfactory." That is Salim's choice.



Book 4, Chapter 16

Book 4, Chapter 16 Summary

Salim flies to the capital. In the air, it seems flimsy after London and Europe. In the long drive into town, he sees 10-foot high boards with sayings from the President. He sees portraits of the President as big as houses. He feels an odd sympathy for the President. He has just been to Europe and seen what Africa is up against.

Salim's sympathy is lost when he finds his hotel filled with secret police. They are there for show, but their guns are loaded. This was the city where the President grew up. Now it is decaying, but there are new public works here and there. Salim notices that European statues have been replaced with statues of African tribesmen.

The next morning, Salim is stopped at the airport and put in a room to wait for the official to come back for a bribe. The official waits too long and holds up the flight. Salim is released and sees the official getting yelled at. On the plane, several African men in their 30s are drinking whiskey from a bottle. It's 9:00 in the morning. Whiskey is expensive, and Salim thinks they are just showing that they can afford it.

The flight is supposed to be two hours with one short stop. However, at the stop, the plane is taken. There is no explanation, except the President needs it. They wait all day and watch two storms. Salim sees one of the passengers is wearing a bathrobe over his suit. He sees an old man who is barefoot and wearing a fireman's helmet with the plastic visor down. He wanders from table to table, drinking beer from leftover bottles. When the plane comes, he gets into position and Salim realizes he really is a firefighter.

When he gets home, the town looks so familiar to Salim, just with a few more burnt-out buildings. He goes to Metty's house and is shocked to find him angry and cold. He won't come down so Salim goes upstairs to see him. Metty says, "I didn't expect to see you back, patron." The next morning, Metty brings Salim coffee and explains that all businesses owned by foreigners have been "nationalized." A "state trustee," a mechanic named Theotime, now owns Salim's shop. Salim is still expected to manage the store.

Theo is drunk or hung over all the time. He takes comic books and beer back to the storeroom and stays there. Women begin visiting him there. Mahesh tells Salim that he and other businessmen anticipated this years ago. They sold their businesses then and have been managing them since.

Salim wants to make as much money as he can and get as much as he can out of the country. He has to trust strangers to take his money to Europe and loses most of it. He begins trading in gold and ivory, burying the ivory in a secret spot in the yard.

One day, he sees that Raymond and Yvette's house has a new owner. It has been empty for a while, and no one knows where the couple went. Salim stops to talk to the new owner who is putting in a garden in the front yard. He works for the corporation that



runs the steamers. Lots of kids run out of the house, followed by a big Doberman. Salim thinks it's good that Raymond's gone. He wouldn't have survived the Domain now, even with his reputation. People in the town are getting ready for the President's visit. Everything is being painted with bright colors.

Book 4, Chapter 16 Analysis

When Salim returns to Africa, he sees the corruption and incompetence and is darkly amused. He is not in control of his own business, but he manages to stay calm. In the same way the town is in upheaval but coated with fresh, colorful paint. Salim puts his head down and tries to get out as soon as he can.



Book 4, Chapter 17

Book 4, Chapter 17 Summary

Theo gets comfortable being in charge and starts to become difficult. He makes Salim drive him to and from work and forces Metty to run pointless errands all day. Metty says if it doesn't stop, he'll kill Theo. Salim tries to talk to Theo but is cut short. Metty begs Salim for money so he can get away before he does something terrible. Salim says no, and Metty tells the police about the ivory in the yard. A police officer asks Salim for \$4,000. Salim says he doesn't have that kind of money and is arrested. The officer says Salim will stay in prison until the President leaves. Then, he can see if he has more money.

Salim is driven to jail and fingerprinted. The jail is on the way to the Domain, set off a bit from the road. On the wall is written Discipline Avant Tout: Discipline Above All. It is Friday night, and the jail is full of young men and boys who've been kidnapped and brought there to learn poems of praise for the President. The guards are anxious that they be ready for the President's visit.

There is a market in front of the jail and Salim always thought the jail seemed quaint and not real but he was wrong. All day and night there are sights and sounds of frenzied torment as the boys are brutalized. Salim resolves not to be touched by anyone, to maintain a position of a man apart, about to be ransomed. He knows that touching would lead to more terrible things.

The same officer comes for Salim on Monday, saying the Commissioner has taken a special interest in the case. The Commissioner is Ferdinand, looking nervous and ill. He says his mother has given up her business, and Salim must too. He must go, Ferdinand says. They've taken him to jail once, and they'll do it again. They didn't touch him this time, but they will. Salim asks Ferdinand how he is and he says, "It's bad for everybody...we're going to hell and every man knows this in his bones. We're being killed. Nothing has any meaning. That is why everyone is so frantic. Everyone wants to make his money and run away. But where?"

Ferdinand tells Salim that he must leave on the steamer the next day. Salim gets his ticket and goes home. Metty comes and is frantic for Salim to take him along, but it's impossible because he doesn't have a passport. Salim tells him to hide the car and wait things out. When things calm down, he can sell the car.

At the dock, a woman checks Salim's papers and asks why he is leaving when the President is coming that afternoon. Salim says he'd like to stay, but he has to go. A soldier follows him to the bar and says, "I fixed it for you," meaning he wants money. The bartender stares, and the soldier leaves. The steamer leaves at midday. They pass a village where people in small boats try to tie on to their side. Later, in the dark, young men with guns get on and try to take it over. The Captain keeps control of the steamer,



but the passenger barge snaps off and floats away. There are gunshots, but the steamer keeps going.

Book 4, Chapter 17 Analysis

Salim is hit with the reality of Metty betraying him, and boys being brutalized and tortured. He feels the violence moving in on him and holds very still. He adopts his old pose as a man apart. This keeps him from being touched, but it is not what saves him. He is released by the boy he has watched over since childhood. Ferdinand makes a small space for Salim, so he can slip through and escape the madness. The humorous relationship between Salim and his slave becomes grim when Salim sees that he could have saved Metty by giving him money. However, it never occurred to him. He leaves Metty in hell and runs. The total loss of control is so close that people on the passenger barge float helplessly into gunfire. Salim and the steamer keep going.



Characters

Salim

The first-person narrator, Salim, is an Arab-African of Indian descent in his early 20s. His family has lived on the eastern coast of Africa for generations. He is an observer and an analyzer. This makes him constantly insecure. He begins to worry about his family's position and aspirations. For instance, he left English-language school when he was 16, not because he wasn't bright or motivated, but because no one in his family had attended school beyond 16. He is not willing to stay and work in the family business. He optimistically buys a store in a faraway town from a family friend who has enchanted Salim with stories of the town and the people. The trip to the town takes a full week and with steady nerves Salim pays bribes to many people along the way. He finds the town and his store a mess. He sells what he can and patiently waits for the town to rebuild. He eats meals regularly with the people in town and develops a small group of friends.

When his childhood friend comes to lecture at the local college, Salim is introduced to the sophisticated environment of people working for the government. A new world opens up for him: He goes to parties, attends lectures, and takes a white mistress. The political climate is seething. Salim waits through dangerous, nerve-wracking periods of unrest before exploding with rage and beating his mistress. He is intent on leaving the country as everything tightens around him. When he is jailed, he instinctively knows to not let anyone touch him, because it could lead to something worse. He is bailed out of jail and released from the country by the same government official, someone Salim has looked after since childhood. Like most humans, Salim is a contradiction. He is pessimistic and hopeful. He is restless and faithful. He is unsophisticated and world weary. He is peaceful and violent. He is appreciative and forever unsatisfied.

Indar

A childhood friend of Salim, Indar is from a rich family. As boys, Salim and Indar play squash on a court in Indar's family's compound. Afterward, they have orange juice and black tea because, even at that age, Indar is concerned about his weight. While living with his family, he is handsome, careful of his appearance and slightly effeminate, with "something buttoned up" in his expression. Salim says of him, "The rich never forget they are rich," and looks upon his friend as the good son of a banking family.

Indar went to the local English-language college until he was 18 and has been accepted at the University in England. Before leaving, Indar tells Salim that there is no future for their community on the coast. Eight years later, after attending University in England, he comes to Salim's town as a lecturer in the New Domain. Salim sees Indar's new style as influenced by London: his clothes, his haircut, and his shoes. Salim thinks Indar is



touched by glamour and wants to ask Indar to help him become touched by the same glamour. Indar tells Salim that he had a miserable time in England, that he learned nothing at school and couldn't find work.

After that, Salim sees Indar's stylishness as his only asset and feels protective of him. When Indar's company folds, and he loses his money, he is a lost man. Without money, he thinks, he is nothing. He refuses help from friends and takes the worst jobs available. He doesn't want to risk anything again and enjoys people telling him he could do better.

Metty

Metty is a family servant who is sent to live with Salim after their hometown is attacked. Metty is half African. His real name is Ali, but local people called him "metis," the French word for someone of mixed heritage. He is handsome, slim-waisted, narrow-hipped, and "wonderfully made." The local people see him as a little exotic, and he thrives in the new town. He learns the language quickly, makes friends, and develops a new idea of his own worth. He is high strung and wanders a lot at night. Someone tells Salim that Metty has a family in town. After that, Metty spends most nights with his family, but brings Salim coffee every morning. Salim notices that the new responsibilities make Metty less light and carefree.

Zabeth

A merchant from a fishing tribe, Zabeth is Salim's first customer. She is a big woman with a coppery complexion. At times, her complexion glows as if she was wearing makeup. She is always formally dressed, wrapped in layers of cotton that emphasizes her big bottom. She wears a turban. Zabeth is a magician and has a disturbing smell that Salim learns comes from her protective ointments. She buys basic supplies and takes them back to her remote village. To get there, she travels the river without fear, even at night. She moves from town to village without problems. She is savvy enough to know the President is losing his grip and becoming petty and jealous. She points out something even the observant Salim hasn't noticed. There is never a photograph in the newspaper bigger than the President's. As political chaos builds in the country, Zabeth is forced to give up her business.

Ferdinand

Zabeth's son, Ferdinand is tall and heavier than the men of the region. His face is long and firmly modeled; his features are chiseled as if from an African mask. His skin is perfectly black. Zabeth enrolls Ferdinand in the local school and asks Salim to look after him. In the course of the book, Salim watches Ferdinand evolve from a schoolboy to a government official.



Father Huisman

Father Huisman is a Belgian priest who runs Ferdinand's school. He is in his forties with a baby face. He doesn't dress like a priest, but wears ordinary slacks and shirts. Salim knows the priest is tough and says, "The impression he gave was one of incompleteness, fragility, and toughness." Father Huisman regularly travels into the bush to villages throughout the area. He has a big collection of African masks and religious items. He loves the carvings and sees Africa as a wonderful place, full of new and beautiful things. During a period of unrest, he is murdered while out in the bush. His head is impaled on a pole and, with his body, floated down the river as if on display.

Nazruddin

A man from Salim's hometown, Nazruddin is the same age as Salim's father, but seems younger and more a man of the world. He speaks French and wears dark glasses. The lapels of his suits are different. He has European manners, although he has never been to Europe. He is always active, playing tennis, drinking wine and telling stories. He is a man who truly loves life. He loves the food he eats, the places he lives, the people he meets, and the businesses he is in. Things always turn out good for him. Salim considers him "something of a model."

Mahesh

Mahesh is an Indian, married to Shoba. The couple invites Salim to meals when he first arrives. For people in a small town, they are well-groomed and careful about their dress and appearance. Mahesh is madly in love with Shoba, who is a little neurotic. Mahesh is small, spare and full of big plans. He tries and fails at a number of things before buying a hamburger franchise that hits it big.

Shoba

Shoba is an Indian, married to Mahesh. She is beautiful and nervous. Shoba is from a wealthy family but was disowned when she slept with Mahesh before marriage. Her brothers threatened to throw acid in her face, and she lives in fear that any stranger could be sent by them.

Raymond

Raymond is white, in his late 50s, with an air of intelligence. He always looks as if he has just taken off his glasses, and his gentle eyes are attractively tired. He looks distinguished, with his hair always combed back. A teacher, Raymond meets the President when he is young and gives him good advice. He becomes a trusted advisor. Now, his main job is to write a history of the country. Although he is losing influence with



the President, he appears to remain completely loyal to the man and his ideas. If he notices the affair between Salim and Yvette, he never mentions it.

Yvette

Yvette is white, in her late 20s, and beautiful. She wears expensive clothing. When Salim first sees her at a party, she is barefoot. Her feet are beautiful and finely made. She meets Raymond when she is a student in Europe, and he is with an official delegation. He overwhelms her with attention and expensive dinners. Of the two, she appears to suffer more from Raymond's loss of influence. After Salim sleeps with her, he is surprised by how comfortable she is with her own body, often walking in front of him naked.

The Big Man

The Big Man is the President of the country. He came from one of the smaller tribes where "the people had no say in anything." When he was younger, he suffered from terrible headaches. Now, he tries to be larger than life, an icon for the country. His portrait is everywhere. In the capital city, the portraits are bigger than houses. More and more, he dresses as an African chief. The dress consists of a leopard-skin cap, a short-sleeved jacket, a polka-dotted scarf, and a carved walking stick. The walking stick is said to have a carved fetish in its belly. No photograph in the newspaper is ever bigger than the President's.

Kareisha

Kareisha is Nazruddin's daughter. Salim has felt informally betrothed to her since he bought the store. When he meets her in London, she is a pharmacist. She is also serene and affectionate. She knows all the people he knew growing up. By the end of his trip, they are engaged.

Theotime (or Citizen Theotime)

Theotime is a one-time car mechanic, who becomes the "state trustee" of Salim's store after nationalization. Barely able to write his own name, Theo lets Salim manage the store while he spends his days in the storage room drinking beer and entertaining women. Normally a modest man, he becomes assertive under the influence of his new role. He would like to be the owner/manager, in fact, not just in name. He knows that is impossible, so he becomes frustrated and difficult, making drunken, irrational scenes. Salim says, "It was strange. He wanted me to acknowledge him as the boss. At the same time he wanted me to make allowances for him as an uneducated man and an African. He wanted both my respect and my tolerance, even my compassion."



Objects/Places

Salim's Flat

Salim's flat is over an empty warehouse. One bedroom is used by Meddy and is pretty neat. In the sitting room is a table (big as a ping pong table) covered with Salim's junk: magazines, books, letters, shoes, squash racquets and shirt boxes. The previous owner was a Belgian woman who was an artist. In the sitting room, she's left a painting of a European port done in reds and yellows and blues. Salim's bedroom is in the back and has a big foam bed. The place is always messy, the kitchen is filthy, and it smells because they can't open the windows (thieves).

Salim's Store

In the market square of the commercial area, Salim's shop is a shambles. Bolts of cloth and oilcloth are spread out on the floor. A desk is in the middle, facing the door, surrounded by a sea of goods: big enamel basins, plates and cups; iron pots; charcoal braziers, iron bedsteads; metal and plastic buckets; bicycle tires; and torch and oil lamps.

The Domain

The Domain is built by the President on the cleared site of a deserted suburb. The villagers hear it is going to be a model farm and agricultural college, a conference hall to serve the country, or holiday houses for loyal citizens. It becomes a university and research center. The bigger building has concrete louvers, huge concrete blocks and tinted glass. The houses and bungalows have air conditioners and look extravagant. It is meant to represent the best aspects of the new, modern Africa. The buildings have been built fast and poorly and start to decay in the sun and rain. A big swimming pool leaks and is never filled. The trees that have been planted along the main avenue die after the first rainy season.

Palavers

Palavers are bribes. Salim calls them "money to keep going." He gives out many, many palavers on his trip from the coast to the bend in the river.

Airplanes

New to Salim and Indar, airplanes are a marvel. Indar called them "a wonderful thing. You are still in one place when you arrive at another. The airplane is faster than the



heart." Salim calls it more than fast travel. It's like being in two places at once. It also lets him see the world from above, in its entirety.

Lycee

Lycee is the Belgian word for the reopened school in town. It had previously been occupied by squatters. It is a solid two-story stone building with wide verandahs. There are bougainvilleas growing wild over the fence and climbing up the pillars of the main gate and twining around the decorative arch with a motto in metal: *Semper Aliquid Novi* (Always Something New). It is run according to Belgian educational standards with a Belgian priest as headmaster.

School Uniform

The school uniform is a white shirt and short pants with a blazer that has the motto in a scroll. It is a simple but distinctive costume; it speaks of education and a better life.

Bigburger

Bigburger is the hamburger franchise owned by Mahesh and Shoba. Sitting right across the street from the hotel (which has no restaurant) and insulated from the stench outside, the place is a big success.

Ruined Monument Near the Dock

The priest explains to Salim that the Latin words carved into the monument should read "*Miscerique probat populos et foedera jungi*," meaning "He approves of the mingling of the peoples and their bonds of union." It was meant to show approval of the treaties of union between Africans and Romans. The words had been changed to say the great Roman god approves of the mingling of people and "the making of treaties in Africa." In other words, it's good to do business here. Salim is appalled by how the words are twisted and feels that posting them beside the river was to invite the destruction of the town.

The Capital

Salim's first sight of the capital is from an airplane. After seeing London, he finds it small and flimsy, an imitation of Europe. It has buses, a railway train and factories. Big portraits of the President and his words are everywhere. Statues of the African Madonna appear sporadically. The hotel is full of secret police making a presence in front of visitors. The city is where the President grew up, and where his mother was a hotel maid. It is now falling into disrepair, but new public works are all around; including, palaces, state houses and gardens. In the Presidential gardens, there is a statue of an



African tribesman next to a cemetery plot for the earliest European settlers. At the airport, there is an electric sign announcing arrivals and departures. Beneath this modern equipment, the things being checked in were far from modern: cardboard boxes, bundles of clothes, and basins tied up in cloth.

Presidential Portraits

The portraits change in number, size and intent through the course of the story. One day Salim realizes they are everywhere. When he is in the capital, he sees portraits as big as houses. The President begins to wear traditional African clothing in them. Raymond explains that the President feels people can look at the pictures and see Africa. Raymond tests this by making a joke about the portraits to a student at the Domain. The student says when he looks at a portrait. He considers it a picture of himself.

Gloucester Road

Gloucester Road is one of the centers of the tourist trade in London. Nazruddin and his family live on Gloucester Road. Nazruddin also owns six flats there. The road is about a half a mile long, between the underground railway station and the park. Salim sees that Nazruddin has found in the road the perfect retirement resort. It was a lively, friendly place, with people from all over the world. Every day there was something (or someone) new and interesting to discover. Nazruddin says it's the best street in the world and that he'll stay as long as they let him.



Themes

Post Colonialism

The post colonial future seen in *A Bend in the River* is bleak. The country seems stranded between a past it cannot return to and a future it cannot attain. There is no real leadership, and people seem incapable of creating something new. Salim says early on, "The political system we had knows it was coming to an end, and that what was going to replace it wasn't going to be pleasant." The situation between Theo and Salim can be seen as a metaphor for the relationship between Africa and Europe. Theo represents Africans as complete incompetents who want to be running the show or appear to be running the show. Salim is the real owner, saddled with the dependency of a foolish, difficult man. In the same way, the President speaks of the power and independence of his country while using European airplanes for travel, European experts to rebuild the town, and European mercenaries to stop the rebellion. Without Europe, this story says, the President (and Africa) could not survive. Africans are presented as people incapable of creating; only consuming. Indar sees this when he goes to London. "We have no means of understanding a fraction of the thought and science and philosophy and law that have gone to make that outside world. We simply accept it." In this view, Africans cannot create the products they use, and they can't create a new form of government. They need help from an outside power.

The Reliability of History

Salim is aware that everything he knows about the past comes from European sources (the colonizing countries). He says, "All I know of our history and the history of the Indian Ocean I have got from books written by Europeans." Enter Raymond, a European historian working on the first written history of the country. After reading Raymond's articles, Salim says "I was always hoping that Raymond was going to go behind the newspaper stories and editorials and try to get at the real events. Raymond wasn't interested in that side. He didn't give the impression that he had talked to any of the people involved, though many would have been alive when he wrote."

Raymond's methods raise questions about the validity of historical documents. In fact, Raymond himself questions the reliability of his own work by saying, "Do you think we will ever get to know the truth about what has happened in Africa in the last hundred or even fifty years? All the wars, all the rebellions, all the leaders, all the defeats?" The answer is "no." Not because the information isn't available, but because Raymond is interested only in the material that reports the official story. Raymond is the President's man, which means the President decides what is and what isn't history.



Identity

How do people define themselves in a world without focus? The characters seem out of place wherever they go. Struggling to assume different roles while turning their back on the past, they are filled with a nagging desire to find a "fantasy village," where they belong and life makes sense. Salim starts the book by talking about "men who are nothing." Speaking of his home and family, Salim says, "We who lived there were really people of the Indian Ocean. True Africa was at our back . . . But we could no longer say we were Arabians or Indians or Persians; when we compared ourselves with these people, we felt like people of Africa." As a man with no culture, no real identity, no family, no flag and no religion, Salim struggles in vain to find meaning in his life.

Indar bases his identity on the money in his pocket. Money is his religion; it makes him "hole." Without money he crawls away and disappears. Raymond's identity comes from his work, his ideas, and his relationship with the President. Since his work and ideas are a reflection of the ideas of the President, his identity is dominated by the President.

Ferdinand's identity changes with his position. Mahesh's identity is that of a man who is loved by a beautiful woman. No one has a center strong enough to sustain them. The danger behind this endless search for identity is clear from the first paragraph of the book, "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it."



Style

Point of View

Salim is the first-person narrator on this pessimistic journey. An observant and analytical man, he says, "So from an early age I developed the habit of looking, detaching myself from a familiar scene and trying to consider it as from a distance." He also theorizes the point of view of the other characters. Salim is both an insider and an outsider. He's African rather than European, yet still foreign. This means he can be more involved in African society than any European, yet still observe it from the outside. Major events, like armed coups, guerilla rebellions, urban riots, and rural massacres occur in the background. However, Salim is unflinching in describing a world with an unstable economy, widespread poverty, government corruption and ethnic warfare. What he cannot offer is any possible hope for the future. Salim sees the world divided in two. Third-world countries, like Africa, consume the things that the colonial countries create. This high regard for Europe and low regard for Africa has made critics call the novel Eurocentric. Others have questioned how an inexperienced, uneducated man like Salim could know so much about history and the world.

Setting

Published in 1979, *A Bend in the River* is set in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) during the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko (born Joseph Desire Mobutu) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period of huge upheaval in the area. Mobutu seized power of the Belgian Congo in 1965 and held it for more than 30 years. In 1971, Mobutu changed the country's name to Zaire during a program of national authenticity. Zaire was an old, supposedly more-authentic local name for the Congo River. In 1972, he changed his name to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa za Banga (officially translated as "the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake").

names and renamed many cities. At first Mobutu said he would create a national identity for Zaire, but actually created a one-party state and a cult of personality. Under a "Zaireinization" program in 1973, Mobutu seized more than 2,000 foreign-owned businesses. The businesses were redistributed to people close to Mobutu and most closed, because the new owners were inexperienced.

Throughout Mobutu's reign, Zairians were repressed and neglected by a small group of the political elite. Mobutu stole and hid a fortune said to be in the billions of dollars. An offensive against the government deposed Mobutu in 1997. One of first acts of the new ruler was to change the name of the country from Zaire to the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



Language and Meaning

Nazruddin and the President both have the ability to weave pictures with words. Nazruddin's colorful stories about his travels push Salim into buying his store. Nazruddin is not trying to manipulate Salim with his stories. He is just sharing his enjoyment of life. The President, on the other hand, uses stories to manipulate his people.

In his speeches, the President is masterful at creating the right response. He speaks only African and uses crude language to appeal to the masses. Salim calls it, "Taking a simple language and simplifying it further, making it the language of the drinking booth and the street brawl." While listening to a speech on the radio, Salim says, "This was how, while appearing to just restate old principles, the President also acknowledged and ridiculed new criticism, whether it was of the Madonna cult or of the shortage of food and medicines. He always acknowledged the criticisms and he often anticipated it. He made everything fit; he could suggest he knew everything. He could make it appear that everything that was happening in the country, good or bad or ordinary, was part of a bigger plan.

Structure

The Bend in the River is divided into four sections: The Second Rebellion, The New Domain, The Big Man, and Battle. Part One: The Second Rebellion introduces the characters, brings Salim to his new life, and shows a brief guerilla uprising stopped by foreign mercenaries. Part Two: The New Domain describes the rebuilding of the town, including the President's grand plans to make the area outside town represent the best aspects of the new, modern Africa. Part Three: The Big Man shows the President tightening his grip on the country. An "authenticity" campaign begins to make the country seem more African. Meanwhile, in Salim's village, personal lives begin falling apart. Part Four: Battle relates both to Salim's struggle to leave Africa and the rebellion that will soon throw the country into political chaos.



Quotes

"You can always get into those places. What is hard is to get out. That is the private fight. Everybody has to find his own way." Chapter 1, page 1.

"All that had happened in the past was washed away; there was only the present. It was as though, as a result of some disturbance in the heavens, the early morning light was always receding into the darkness, and men lived in a perpetual dawn." Chapter 2, page 18.

"The rage of the rebels was like a rage against metal, machinery, wires, everything that was not of the forest and Africa." Chapter 5, page 86.

"And paint! It was everywhere in the center, slapped onto concrete and plaster and timber, dripping on the pavement. Someone had unloaded his stock - pink and lime and red and mauve and blue. The bush was at war; the town was in a state of insurrection, with nightly incidents. But suddenly in the center it seemed like carnival time." Chapter 16, page 270.



Topics for Discussion

Salim says, "Without Europeans, I feel, all our past would have been washed away." Support or refute this statement.

As the world becomes more splintered, how will people determine their identities?

Can Third World countries survive without the aid of colonial benefactors?

Why does Salim beat Yvette? What does he mean by "Do you think I'm Raymond?"

Nazruddin is called "A happy man." Why is he happy? Are there other happy characters?

Why does Indar take only the worst possible jobs? Why won't he accept help?

Salim speculates that his problems are caused by a lack of religion. What does he mean? Is he right?