

## Naipaul's Praise of the Traditional African Civilization- An Analysis of Image in In a Free State

Xia Zhou<sup>1\*</sup>, Jing Li<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Associate Professor of North China Electric Power University in China, studying translation, China, Beijing, Changping, China

<sup>2</sup>The post-graduate student majoring in English language and literature of North China Electric Power University in China, China, Beijing, Changping, China

### \*Corresponding author

Xia Zhou

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**Abstract:** Present studies at home and abroad on V.S. Naipaul's novel *In a Free State* is not enough in the aspect of textual analysis. The in-depth studies in this aspect are wanted. This thesis aims to analyze the image existing in the title novella of *In A Free State*, one of the five novellas in the collection of *In a Free state*. By discussing the symbolic meaning of the three images and then comparing the symbolic meanings of these images, it can be inferred that Naipaul tends to criticize the mimic of the western civilization but praises the traditional African civilization.

**Keywords:** image, the fat African, the native shirt, the colorful clothing, the symbolic meaning, the praise of the traditional African Civilization, *In a Free State*.

### INTRODUCTION

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul 1932, whose ancestor came from India, was born in Trinidad. In 1950, he was sent to England for further training and graduated in Oxford with excellent grade. Later, he worked, married and settled in England. Because of his complicated background, Naipaul was influenced by several different cultures, which caused his own unique perspective in English writing. For example, he devoted himself to describe the real condition of the third world by his works like *An Area of Darkness*, a revelation of poor and unenlightened Indian, and *In a Free State*, a criticism of the disordered African state.

Naipaul has great achievement in English writing. Most of his work was published and widely accepted by the British. Qu Shijing and Ren Yimng, two Chinese scholars, list 22 pieces of his works, including *The Mystic Masseur* 1957, *The Suffrage of Elvria* 1958, *Miguet Street* 1959, *A House for Mr. Biswas* 1961, *The Middle Passage* 1962, *Mr. Stone and the Knight Companion* 1963, *An Area of Darkness* 1964, *The Mimic Man* 1967, *A Flag on the Island* 1967, *In a Free State* 1971, *A Bend in the River* 1979 and so on [1]. His achievement depends on not only his large amount of works but also his several awards. He has been awarded Smerset Maugham Award and Book Prize in 1971 by his work *In a Free state*. Otherwise, he won the David Koen Prize for Literature. Moreover, in 2001, he became the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature for "having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories" [2].

Although with the great reputation, Naipaul is criticized by critics. According to Gao Zhaocheng, the criticism on Naipaul and his works can be divided into three parts [3]. Some critics describes Naipaul as the

most honest narrator because he speaks out the truth of the former colonies and the Moslem states. The second view on Naipaul is that he praises the British culture of imperialism under the post-colonial context and satirizes the third world. As Said says, Naipaul prefers to show the ruined and depressed post-colonial history without sympathy. Some critics criticize and praise him at the same time [4]. They disagree with his political attitude but think highly of his writing ability and his objectivity of some issues. However, these criticisms ignore Naipaul's positive attitude towards Africa. The writer wants to study Naipaul's praise of the traditional African civilization by his work *In a Free State*.

*In a Free State* was written by Naipaul in 1971, which won the Booker Prize in the same year. As a collection of novelette, *In a Free State* contains five stories: *Prologue, from a Journal: The Tramp at Piraeus*; *One Out of Many*; *Tell Me Who to Kill*; *In a Free Stat*; *Epilogue, from a Journal: The Circus at Luxor*. Generally, the study on the book covers all of these five stories. However, this thesis only focuses on one of five stories: *In a Free State*. This novelette has the same title with Naipaul's collection of novelette,

which demonstrates the importance of this story. In other words, it is the main part of the collection of novelette. In the prologue of another version of the novelette, an offprint, Naipaul admits that, in the collection of novelette, the core novelette named *In a Free State* is buried by other four stories [5]. So the writer thinks that it should be researched particularly.

*In a Free State* mainly tells a story about the experience of Bobby and Linda in Africa. One of the backgrounds of the story is the change of political power, that is to say, president's replacement for the African king. The unknown African state is a post-colonial country, which is another background of the story. Bobby and Linda start their travel with white supremacy but end it with fear of the unknown Africa. They come to the unknown African state for pursuing freedom but finally feel safe only in the compound. Through the perspective of Bobby and Linda, Naipaul shows us a poor and disordered state. However, the writer is interested in discovering the beauty of African nature and the noble and pure African people from the forest. By analyzing several images in the novelette, this thesis aims to prove Naipaul's praise on traditional African civilization by criticizing the hypocritical white and the English-style city Africans and African army.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

*In a Free state* was a representative work of Naipaul. Since its publication in 1971, it has received varied responses from the critical world. Many scholars both at home and abroad pay attention to the work and conduct their studies from various perspectives. Generally, the criticisms on this book can be put into the following classifications: the studies from the textual, colonial, post-colonial, archetypal, existential, and spatial approaches.

Both at home and abroad, the colonialism and post-colonialism is a main aspect of studies. Some critics think that, in his novel *In a Free State*, Naipaul keeps a pessimistic attitude toward African future. As one of them, Gillian Dooley [6] suggests that Africans mimic the white because they have no confidence in their own culture and policy. Dennis Walder [7] says, in *V.S. Naipaul and the Postcolonial Order: Reading In a Free State*, that it provides a "postcolonial writing". In the work *The Analysis of Naipaul's In a Free State with Homi Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory*, Dou Min [8] points out some issues in Africa, including the conflicts of different cultures existing in the novel and the damage that the colonial ruling of western countries brings to Africa.

As regards to the studies from the aspect of textual analysis, scholars analyze the novel from irony, paradox. Anthony Boxill [9] focuses on the paradox of freedom in the novel. Furthermore, he endeavors to reveal the impossibilities of freedom in the unknown

Africa state. In the thesis *Irony in V.S. Naipaul's In a Free State*, Zhao Jin [10] has a similar view on the freedom. By emphasizing the irony in the novel, he points out that "the people who live in the post-colonial society cannot get the absolute freedom identity".

Naipaul shows us that people try to choose something for freedom and choosing is just what existentialism concerns. In *An Analysis of the Characters in V.S. Naipaul's A Free State from the Perspective of Existentialism*, Tian Yuan [11] uses Sartre's existentialist theory to reveal "the restrained, rootless and isolated existential dilemma of people from ex-colonies and former metropolitan states".

As for archetypal perspective, Dhahir [12] devoted to find the archetypal meaning of Mother Earth. He discussed the relationship between the land and the image of woman. As he says, "woman appears as the lands representative or 'proxy'".

With the development of in-depth studies and theory, scholars adopt some new perspectives to analyze the title novella of *In A Free State* such as spacial theory. Among them are Guo Xianjin and Wang Shalie. Wang Shalie [13] demonstrates that the diversity of the culture in the social space in Africa "exerts great pressure upon human psyche". In the work *Structure, Space, Perspective: Narrative Art in In a Free State*, Guo Xianjin [14] states that the novel shows us the sense of alienation of immigrant and reproduces the "free state" in the post-colonial period.

After a survey of the critical history and heritage from both home and abroad, the writer finds that considerable studies have been made on this novel in the English-speaking countries. The focuses and perspectives employed by them are comparatively diverse. Otherwise, foreign studies have longer history than domestic studies. Foreign scholars became interested in the book since its publication in 1971. However, it is until the 21st century that the book was widely criticized at home. Moreover, the studies on the novel in our country are inadequate both in quantity and in profundity. Although above review shows the diversity of study perspective, but most of works focus on the macro features and issues, such as post-colonial issues and freedom. However, in-depth study in micro feature and issues is also needed, especially in textual analysis. Although in the aspects of textual analysis, there are Anthony Boxill's analysis of paradox and Zhao Jin's interpretation of irony, these studies are not enough. For example, the study about image in the text is not analyzed particularly. So the writer is determined to make up for the inadequacy of the studies of title novella of *In A Free State* on this aspect. Otherwise, most of studies of this novel focus on Naipaul's pessimistic attitude towards African issues. However, the writer wants to state that there exists a positive

attitude in the novelette. the writer hopes that he can contribute his share of efforts to the studies of this wonderful book.

### Analysis of Images

In *In a Free State*, image is an important presence, which helps the reader to interpret the text with its rich symbolic meanings. This thesis mainly focuses on three images: black fat African, native shirt and colorful clothing.

### The Fat African

The image of fat African appears many times in the novel. For example, Naipaul [15] describes the city Africans in the bar of the New Shropshire by the words "plump". The leader of police Bobby and Linda meet on the way after they leave the hunter's hotel is also described as a fat man. Furthermore, those African soldiers who assault Bobby are also fat. In a word, Naipaul concerns the image of the fat African much.

The reason that Naipaul describes the fat Africans is that he intends to highlight the symbolic meaning. These fat Africans live in a poor state which lacks of development in economy, politics and culture. Most of its people suffer hunger and is very thin. However, why does Naipaul show us the characteristic of some African's fatness for many times? Why doesn't he use the thin African to show the poverty of the state? In the writer's opinion, the reason for it is that Naipaul wants to emphasize the significance of the image. Because fat people in the poor country have its unique contributing factor. The analysis of symbolic meaning of the fat African is as follow.

Firstly, the fat African symbolizes the mimicry of the western civilization, which can be embodied by the mimicry of clothing. In the novel, many fat Africans Naipaul presents are with English style, such as some city Africans, policemen and soldiers. In the beginning of the story, some fat city Africans are introduced when Bobby is in the capital of the state to attend a meeting about the development of the community. Before he leaves the capital, he comes to the bar of the New Shropshire and sees some city Africans who have decent works such as high civil servant, politician, the relative of politicians and director in an international company. They are young and plump, wearing the suit made in Britain and drinking in the bar which only receives the white once. Those Africans are the representation of some part of city Africans. They are influenced or educated by the western culture, especially the British culture, and become a mimic of Britain. Being a mimic of English style suit and living style is a tool of pursuing higher status. In the novel, Naipaul writes that those decent Africans with suit come to the bar for being seen by the white and finding a job. Another example for the anglicized fat Africans is the armed forces, including the police and the soldier.

These two kinds of Africans also mimic Britain from clothing. When the police appear in the novel, Linda says that "So English those policemen, with their black uniforms and their capes and caps [15]." For Linda, the dressing style of those black African policeman completely imitates that of English policemen. Similarly the fat leader of those policemen Bobby and Linda see also is a mimic of English clothing. As for fat soldiers, it can be found when Bobby and Linda's travel is about to stop. Around the Leopard Tor, they meet five lorries filled with African soldiers, which stop later before a building that is a gift the American gives to the newly liberated state. In *In A Free State*, it writes, "in the shade of the lorries there were groups of fat soldiers [15]." These soldiers wear green cape with rifle, which also mimics the dressing of the western soldier. According to these fat Africans, it is inferred that the fat African symbolizes that the mimicry of the western civilization.

Secondly, the fat African symbolizes the violence and the oppression in the unknown African state. In *In A Free State*, those fat Africans are not praised but criticized by Naipaul. Naipaul tries tell us their violence and oppression on the ordinary people, including the ordinary white and Africans. For stating this view, he provides us with many plots, one of which is the burned countryside.

*... until the first explorers came. The villages were close together; the highway was normally full of pedestrians and cyclists. But the road now was empty; and the villages they passed were empty, dead, burnt-out [15].*

These sentences describe one of changes in the state. When the road is full of pedestrians, the life of the country is safe. However, at present, the life becomes unsafe because of the turmoil in the state. People's home is ruined and the road becomes empty. The western civilization has great influence on the African development. As Naipaul points out, when the unknown state is controlled by western colonist, the road is full of pedestrians and cyclists. The west helps the Africans to build their city, their town, their road. Moreover, the white provide many jobs to local people such as being a staff of the international companies, being a waiter in hotels or restaurants the British people manage. However, when the western colonist leaves the land, local government can't keep the development. The road becomes empty and the villages are burnt. It seems that Naipaul supports the colonist. However, the background of this story is the president's attacking on the king and the king's people under the support of the white. If there is no intervention of western countries, it is possible to avoid violence the president brings. So the disordered African circumstance originates from political control of the white in post-colonial age. In other words,

western civilization can't bring the peace but the violence.

As the mimic of western civilization, those fat soldiers are executors of the violence and oppression. They burn the village of the king's people, although maybe those ordinary villagers don't participate in the conflicts between the president and the king. Their violence and oppression is also revealed by their cruel way of treating the captive. The captives have the habit of wearing clothing and contribute to the construction of the road. However, their dignity is deprived of: being naked because these soldiers doesn't give them the clothing; being tied up as slaves; being assaulted so heavily that they seem to be dying. And regardless of the plight of those captives, a soldier smiles. Those fat soldiers have lost their humanity and become tools of present's political fighting. Because of their violent act, Naipaul let readers lose their sympathy on them although they are a part of the poor Africans.

Those fat soldiers not only attack the local people but also the white. Bobby, as a white, was assaulted by them, although he has told them his status as a government servant. When a fat soldier wants Bobby's watch, Bobby refuses him, which brings Bobby a heavy assault. Bobby even thinks that those soldiers want to kill him. According to Bobby's example, those fat Africans also oppressed the white. So it can be concluded that the fat soldiers become a symbol of the violence and the oppression after the white intervened the politics of the unknown state.

### Native Shirt

Native shirt is Bobby's clothing, which appears several times in the title novella of *In A Free State*. It has its own unique symbolic meanings. In the beginning of the novel, the native shirt, as Naipaul describes, is a "fabric with its bold 'native' pattern in black and red [15]." However, it can't be a representative thing of African culture because it is designed and produced in Holland. So it is not a real native shirt. However, it is called "native shirt", which is a fake. This kind of fake "native shirt" is a symbol of hypocrisy.

Bobby in a "native shirt" is a hypocritical white man. One of his hypocrisy is his so-called service for the Africans. He wants to demonstrate his morality by servicing the state but he can't realize it because it is hard for him to do it in practice.

*"I am here to serve [...] I'm no there to tell them how to run their country. There's been too much of that. What sort of government the Africans choose to have is none of my business" [15].*

These sentences show that Bobby doesn't want to control the country but prefers to serve it. However, his target is always destroyed by himself. For example,

when they leave the hunter's bar, Bobby is glad to allow an African pick-up. However, when Linda expresses her attitude against the African hitchhiker, he stops his car, which leads to the African running away from his car. This plot states that Bobby doesn't meet his so-called target of servicing the African people. Furthermore, when he sees an African boy named Carolus, he seems to show his sympathy for the African boy by tear. However, this kind of sympathy appearance after he is scared by the dog, in truth, is for himself. He dares not admit his own weakness and disguises it by pretending to sympathize the poor African boy. Later, he seems to be glad to teach Carolus. But when he asks the African boy to send tea to his room and says "I give you shilling [15]", his so-called kindness he shows is overturned and his hypocrisy is exposed because of his attempt to seduce the African boy. With his seduction, the "native shirt" appears again.

Another aspect of his hypocrisy is his friendly attitude towards the African people. In *In a Free State*, Bobby wants to be friendly to the African people. However, he fails to do that. In an oil station, his attitude toward the African is very rude after one of African workers damages his car, which can be demonstrated by words as follow.

*"What on earth do you think you're doing?" Bobby pushed the door open so violently that the African was hit and thrown off balance.*

...

*"Insurance? I want it back from you."*

...

*"I'm going to have you sacked," Bobby said [15].*

When dealing with the fault of the African boy who works at the oil station, Bobby loses his reason and randomly abuses the boy. Even he wants the boy to compensate for his car although he knows that the boy can't afford the damage of his car. And then he threatens the Africa boy by having him fired. The worse thing he does is that he hurts the boy because of his violent act of opening the door. His language and behavior is so scary that the African turns around to escape from him. However, Bobby uses his status of an official staff to threaten the African continually. These series of behaviors reveal Bobby's hypocrisy. His friendly attitude towards the Africans disappears when the Africans don't give him a good service. After his shouting at the African, he runs into his car and the "native shirt" moves with his body. It is interesting that when Bobby's real nature is revealed and his hypocrisy is exposed, the "native shirt" is described by Naipaul. From this, Naipaul emphasizes that the "native shirt" is a symbol of hypocrisy over and over again.

Bobby's hypocrisy is embodied by his sexual transaction. He always wants to use money to seduce African boys. For example, he seduces the Zulu boys in

the bar by seductive behavior and Carolus by teaching him and giving him money. On his mind, there exists such words:

*“You want lift? You big boy, you no go school? No, no, you no frighten. Look, I give you shilling. You hold my hand. Look, my colour, your colour. I give you shilling buy schoolbooks [15].”*

According to Bobby, Africa means other Africans such as African boy who look like adults. Bobby implies that he desires to have some sex relationships with African boy, which is his motive of the seductive act. When Bobby tries to buy sex with money, he is never a good man. Naipaul guides readers to criticize Bobby.

### **The Colorful Clothing**

Naipaul shows us the Africans whose lives have been unaffected by the west. He tends to give those people colorful clothing. The writer thinks that the colorful clothing symbolizes the traditional civilization which has tight relationship with nature.

Colorful clothing is a feature of African culture. The pattern from African nation in “native shirt” is red and black, which is colorful. After passing the Suburban gardens and the African urban allotments, Bobby sees a group of Africans. The clothes of these Africans are patched with large oblongs of red, blue, yellow, green, which is a local style the text tells us, completely different from those English style. The colorful patch is presented by Naipaul again. After passing a valley and a twisted highway, Bobby and Linda meet another group of Africans who wear the brown or dark gray long jacket but with colorful patch. Those people are led to the lorry and monitored by the police with dark uniform. Those Africans keep the local style. In other words, they admire their own traditional culture rather than the western culture. With the tight relationship between the colorful clothing and the Africans who have not been influenced by the western culture, the colorful clothing symbolizes the African traditional civilization supported by Africans in the forest.

According to Naipaul, the colorful clothing have a tight relationship with the nature. In other words, the African with colorful clothing is tightly related to the nature.

*“With the bright colour of their cottons, and the leaves over their heads, they were very nearly camouflaged [15].”*

This sentence states that the Africans in the forest get protection from their colorful clothing and the leaves in the nature. The clothing with bright color have the same function as the nature, which can camouflage

them. By putting the colorful clothes and the leaves together, Naipaul leads readers to focus on the intimacy between colorful clothes and the nature.

Because the colorful clothes are a symbolic of the traditional African civilization, it is inferred that the latter is tightly related to the nature. In other words, the traditional African civilization is a kind of civilization of nature. Naipaul describes a natural life as follow.

*“two naked men covered with chalk who run along the road and people seen tilling the soil with simple implements and living “the immemorial life of the forest [15].”*

The sentence shows the life of Africans who is not anglicized. Their life depends on nature, because their clothes are chalk which is come from the nature and their life depends on their labor too, such as tilling the soil belonged to the nature. Naipaul’s preference of natural civilization can be seen by his much attention to the nature. In the novel *In a Free State*, there are many descriptions of the nature such as the forest, the village, the plant and the valley. The colorful clothing symbolizes the natural civilization from the African forest.

### **Comparing the Symbolic Meaning of Image**

According to the analysis in the third part, the three images have their own symbolic meaning: the fat Africans symbolize the mimicry of the western civilization, the violence, and the oppression in the African state; the “native shirt” symbolizes the hypocrisy; and the colorful clothing symbolize the tradition natural civilization. Naipaul has different attitude towards these images and their symbolic meanings. The thesis tries to illuminate Naipaul’s attitude clearly by comparing these symbolic meanings.

### **Comparing the Mimic Civilization with the Traditional African Civilization**

The mimic civilization can’t help the African state but bring it destruction. It can be demonstrated by the example of the hunter’s hotel. The hunter’s hotel is a representation of the mimic of the western culture in the novel.

*They were at the Hunting Lodge: a separate little creosoted office-shed, marked with a board, a mock-pioneer, mock-Tudor hall [15].*

The Hunting Lodge in the hotel, is a mimic of the western style. It is apparent that the mock-pioneer, mock-Tudor hall mimics the style of the western buildings. Otherwise, the artificial garden also intimates the western building. However, the hotel built by mimicry becomes downhill.

Some of African tries to mimic the west to reconstruct their own civilization. And the hunter's hotel is one of their results. However, when western colonist abandons his colony, the mimic of the western civilization will lose their vigour. Naipaul states its failure by describing the decaying circumstance. For example, he describes the garden in the hunter's hotel. When the garden is new, it is decorated by artificial sight. However, with the retreat of the colonist, the garden is disordered without humankind's control. Some parts of the rivulet become backwater in which the Lily of the Nile withers. And the tree trunks become black. It turns out that reconstruction with the western way doesn't work.

Furthermore, because of the mimicry of western civilization, the nature is damaged. For example, when the garden of the hunter's hotel is built, many of trees are cut. When Bobby walks in the garden, he sees "the cut trees". The damage of the western civilization is not the only one in the novel. Before arriving at the Hunter's hotel, Bobby and Linda pass through a valley, which is covered by the bushes. They see the forest far away from them. In contrast, there exist mounds without plants as a result of the damage of western-style civilization. The trees along the road are cut for building road. When Naipaul honestly describes the negative influence of the mimicry of western civilization, it can be said that he criticized the western civilization. And its mimic in the African state doesn't work. So Naipaul opposes the mimicry by revealing the destructive influence of mimicry.

On the contrary, natural civilization is supported by Naipaul. Naipaul tries to find another solution to deal with the African issues. The writer thinks that, by Naipaul, natural civilization can help the Africans as the colorful patch fixes the clothing.

Most of Africans are oppressed. In the second part, this thesis has stated that the fat African symbolizes the anglicized African people, the violence and the oppression. The African soldiers oppresses the ordinary African people by violence. They maltreat them and burn their home.

When African people are oppressed, they can get protection from the forest. In the above text, it is discussed that the captives have no clothing. However, Naipaul provides them with clothing, which is made of the bush, the little tree and the lorry. He implies that nature can give the African protection when they are hurt by the violence and the oppression.

Naipaul's positive attitude also can be demonstrated by appreciating the traditional natural life in the forest.

*"Are they backward? I was thinking of the manyattas or whatever they are. Like the drawings in a geography book. You know, your little hut, your tall fence, and bringing home your cattle for the night to protect them against marauders."*

*"That's what I meant. Peter Pan in Africa."* [15]

Naipaul compares the Africans with a primitive life to Peter Pan, a gold in Greek myth. Peter Pan lives happily with freedom in the natural environment. Naipaul wants to imply that the primitive life for the Africans is the real free life. In conclusion, he criticizes the mimic of the western civilization but praises the natural African civilization.

### **Comparing the Hypocrisy of the White with the Purity of Africans in the Forest**

The hypocrisy is presented by Bobby. In *V. S. Naipaul's Third World: A Not So Free State*, John Thieme [16] suggests that Naipaul enlists our sympathy for Bobby, because Bobby is suffering two kinds of assaults: African aggression against him and Linda's verbal attack on his liberalism. However, although Bobby suffers much in the travel, he doesn't deserve to be sympathized for his own defects-his hypocrisy analyzed in the second part of this thesis.

In contrast with the hypocrisy of Bobby, Naipaul emphasizes the purity of those Africans. The conflict between Bobby and Carolus shows their individual characteristics. To have a close contact with Carolus, an African boy, Bobby pretends to help him to learn the French. However, what he does is for a sexual invitation. However, Carolus, who lives in city for short time and is consequently not influenced by the western culture, doesn't understand his invitation. Although Carolus sends the tea to Bobby's room for Bobby's five pennies, he refuses Bobby's requirement about sex. While Bobby tries to seduce the African boy, Carolus shows the readers his purity. While Naipaul criticizes Bobby's defect and praises Carolus, he shows the readers the great quality in the African traditional civilization.

### **CONCLUSION**

This thesis aims to prove Naipaul's positive attitude towards the traditional civilization in Africa by the analysis of image. As a great English novel, *In a Free state* deserves in-depth analysis about the textual form. The writer picks up three images in the novel and discusses their symbolic meanings. The fat Africans symbolizes the mimic of the western civilization, which brings the violence and the oppression. The native shirt is the symbol of the hypocrisy by which the white wants to cheat the Africans. And the third image, the colorful clothing of African people, shows us the natural civilization with which the Africans can live with freedom and keep their own advantages. These three

images stand for three different cultures and appears with three different kinds of characters. As Thieme [16] says, “the African freshly emerged from the bush must have other alternatives than to turn himself into a pathetic mimic of the European.” Naipaul holds a similar view. By comparing the mimic civilization and the traditional African civilization and comparing the hypocrisy of the white with the purity of Africans in the forest, Naipaul stands out the superiority of the natural civilization and the unaffected Africans by the western culture. In a word, he points out that traditional African civilization should be advocated in Africa.

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