
Resurgence of Identity in V.S. Nainapaul's *A Bend in the River*

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The rise of the novel coincides with the birth of the nation. Africa has long been a part of the literature of imperialism beginning in the late eighteenth century and flourishing in the nineteenth century. The ideology of nationalism seeded out of imperialism and formulated its aspirations in the soil of foreign conquest. In order for British nationalism and nationhood to flourish, "Africa" becomes a necessary construct within those discourses. In other becomes words, Africa becomes a necessary object in relation to which the West can define itself, thereby affirming its own identity and implied authority. The physicality of the African subject in Heart of Darkness perpetuates the racial discourses employed by the West in their representation of the Africa subject; differences read as primordial, essential and natural. The textual histories constructing discourses of Africa and African identity are located in the disciplines and genres of colonial anthropologies, travel narratives locate and imagine the concept of Africa. Europe's sense of nationhood is inextricably linked

with its former colonial margins. The notion of modernity as a European invention becomes an essential trope in discourses within which Europe locates itself and constructs the difference of its racial and cultural others.

Walter Rodney's, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, an influential study on the asymmetrical power relationship between Europe and Africa and the necessary underdevelopment of Africa by Europe, considers the historic and colonial roots of Eurocentric perceptions of African anomy.

What A Bend in the River sets up, in this regard, through its liminally placed protagonist, is a dialogue between Western textual re-productions of Africa and the nationalist discourses adopted by the African nation-states. It is a late twentieth century literary text engaging in a range of discourses and histories, which gives shape to the meaning and idea of Africa. The range of interdisciplinary modes embedded in the text reveals the dense and significant impact between the political and imaginative

constructs of Africa. Naipaul's position in Africa is particular. He enters the Africa landscape as both a cultural other and as a British national from the colonial margins. His protagonist, Salim, is similarly positioned as a South Asian African who journeys from the east coast to the interior of Africa. Salim's consciousness as both native and settler allows the novel to explore the production of cultural knowledge in a liminal space between identities.

Naipaul's refusal characters are the villages or rivers – reveal the textual considerations in which the novel is invested. The problem of naming, of locating temporalities and cultures, and the uncertainty of authorial authority, signifies similar theoretical concerns in ethnographic studies. Naming includes ownership and possession, which the protagonist, like the author, feels he is barred from. Names are also signifiers of particular temporalities and cultures, which remaining unnamed, exhibit an uncertain locality in the transitional African state about which *A Bend in the River* is written.

What emerges in this Paper on *A Bend in the River* is how Africa, as a diasporic landscape, is entangled in a

number of discourses, temporalities and cultures that are antagonistic with the acculturative claims made on the subject. What the novel offers is a way of assessing Africa that does not ascribe to the unified or unitary but is reflective of the processes of hybridity that produce political antagonisms and unpredictable forces for political and cultural representation.

It is imperative, then, that the systems used to understand Africa must themselves be hybrid, since "Africa" as an object of knowledge is already irrevocably damaged, already entered and changed by Western influences. Thus, the challenge of reading texts which deal with African cultural material and its knowledge is caught up with the needs of reading other anthropological, literary and historical texts which deal with African cultural material and its knowledge is caught up with the needs of reading other anthropological, literary and historical texts which construct the codes and framework for this knowledge (Kanneh 29). What is being called upon is not simply a reversal to indigenous forms of knowledge systems in which Africa can locate a sense of its past preceding its painful history of invasion. In order to understand postcolonial Africa, It is

necessary to engage in a range of discourses on and about the idea and meaning of Africa that engages these various disciplines and critically analyze them in order to return a sense of agency and sovereignty to the African subject by deconstructing these myths of passivity and primitiveness.

The formation of postcolonial nation states and the genesis of national consciousness in colonial African countries are located within the discourses of Negritud.

The problem with these discourses is that African authenticity and identity appeals to an essentialized, homogenized African subject. African selfhood is located in a long, historical past reliant on fragile and partial memories in its reconstruction in the present. While the social and political contexts of these discourses are located in the decolonizing aims of the twentieth century. While the discursive arguments proposed by the Negritude and Pan-Africanist movements are seductive in returning a sense of agency to the African subject and authenticity of its African knowledge systems, the hybrid nature of these frameworks must be kept on the postcolonial agenda.

A Bend in the River offers a representation of a culture struggling with diverse values and with a breakdown of established traditions in its attempt at modernity. The unnamed African country modeled on Mobutu's Zaire is bloody, lawless and threatening: "the bush muffled the sound of murder, and the muddy rivers and lakes washed the blood away" (A Bend in the River 60). Concurring with Helen Hayward, influencing the novel is the traditional image of Africa in European literature, as the negation of European civilization, the site of a reversion to savagery, African atavism and the rawness of human brutality (A Bend in the River 172). With Europe's retreat from the African country, the author implies that a lost ideal of order has left the country with the imperial power. The novel focuses on the intense physicality of the African landscape, its secrecy and impenetrability to the repeated invocation of an African history without narrative structure.

The mystification of A Bend in the River lies in its constant engagement with cliché – the obscurity, the timelessness, the violence, the impenetrability of the African forest and the African native (Hayward, The

Enigma of V.S. Naipaul 173). The pointless violence, as in the futile murder of Father Huismans, whose head is spiked and then put on display, echoes an episode in *Heart of Darkness*. In *Heart of Darkness* it is Kurtz who orders the barbaric display; in *A Bend in the River*, the brutality is ascribed to the uncontrolled African rage (Hayward, *The Enigma of V.S. Naipaul* 172). The echoes of Conrad in *A Bend in the River* signify the trope of canonicity and a cultural reality that moors itself to Naipaul's oeuvre. Yet, at the same time, the novel insists on "re-examining and dismantling the origins and meaning of the cliché away from the dominating stance of 'foreign fantasy' that originates in the colonial metropolis" (Kanneh 2). In this way, the novel's aims are profoundly textual, exhibiting ethnographic concerns through a literary aesthetic. Using images of radical otherness Naipaul invests his novel with a reading around the ethics of otherness.

In the novel, the meaning of Africa is presented as lying behind the presence of the African landscape, protected by magic, the bush and the river: "the river and the forest were like presences, and much more powerful than you" (9). As Kadiatu Kanneh

elucidates, the "hidden" or "lost" meaning of Africa is projected as lying somewhere behind the presence of the African forest and makes African modernity seem impossible to imagine (8). To make "the land [...] part of the present" (9) "the deep forests" (10), "this land of rain and heat and big-leaved tress – always visible" (47), the visibility of the encroaching bush must be annihilated. The precarious temporality of modernity in Africa relies on European order and is perpetually threatened by violence and rage. The violence and rage, the novel intimates, is historically part of the country, "the accumulated anger of the colonial period and every kind of reawakened tribal fear" (75) but also emanates through "some old law of the forest something that came from Nature itself" (90). These intimations echo the familiar colonial rhetoric of the timelessness of Africa, the emptiness of village life and the primitive savagery that energizes the destruction of order (9).

The colonial rhetoric employed in the novel serves as a means by which to critique the authority of that rhetoric. Naipaul constructs a version of Africa and the West in a dialectical framework precisely to

reflect how these two (seeming) opposites are represented within colonial structures of knowledge. Unlike other African writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o Naipaul, in *A Bend in the River*, uses the dislocated and displaced narrative voice of Salim who is quite self-consciously situated within the preoccupations of European historical understanding.

References

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