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The "Non-Native Native" in V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River**

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The community of migrants that V.S. Naipaul focuses on in *A Bend in the River* constitutes an element of post-colonial society that requires close examination. It occupies a highly unstable position in the colonial situation described in the book, torn as it is in so many competing directions: its Indian ancestry; its present location in East and Central Africa; its relatively powerful economic status; its political weaknesses due to its numerical inferiority vis-à-vis the indigenous Africans; its desire for refuge in Britain, the former colonial power; and the pressure to remain in the post-independence country subsequent to the assumption of internal self-government by the local Africans, among other contradictions. Traditionally, such groups are referred to in post-colonial studies as "migrants" in order to denote the problematic space they occupy in their host countries as a result of their foreign ancestry.[1] However, the term appears limited when it is applied to immigrant groups that occupy more powerful racial and economic statuses than the local peoples but that are colonized along with them by imperialist powers, such as those that form the central focus of Naipaul's book. It does not fully account for the problematic role they play in the colony as a locus at which so many

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[1] Since the 1980s or thereabouts, there has been a growing interest in migrant literature, i.e. literature about the lives and creative writings of people residing in regions to which they do not directly trace their ancestry or heritages. The literature in question encompasses all genres and involves all of the world's peoples. The following sample of critical and creative works reflect the concerns that commentators have directed at the creative productions of such migrant communities: Margareta Peterson's *Unending Metaphors: Myth, Satire, and Religion in Salman Rushdie's Novels*; Edward Said's *Orientalism*; E.R. San Juan Jr.'s "Beyond Postcolonial Theory: The Mass line in C.L.R. James's Imagination"; George J. Sanchez's "Race, Nation, and Culture in Recent Immigrant Studies"; Susheila Nasta's *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia*; and Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991*.

contradictory forces intersect. It would appear that such groups are best understood as "non-native natives," in the sense that they are neither fully native (i.e. colonial subjects) nor fully colonial.

In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul suggests a way out of that problematic situation for the immigrant groups of Indian origin that settled in East Africa more than a thousand years ago, or that were brought there by the region's British colonizers at the turn of the nineteenth century to work on the Kenya-Uganda Railway. He implies that the solution to the problem lies in their relocation to globally powerful nations like Britain (within the context of globalization), from which they can acquire more influential and internationally relevant identities. Salim, the novel's first-person narrator, who is trapped in a seemingly intractable identity crisis as a result of his confinement in the pre-and post-independence situation of East and Central Africa, achieves the sense of liberation for which he longs throughout his life only after he experiences British culture on its home ground. From within British culture, whose influence is global, he is infused with considerable satisfaction as a result of his conviction that he now possesses the power to carry out his merchandise business on an international scale (Naipaul 258).[2]

In *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays: 1965-1987*, Chinua Achebe accuses Joseph Conrad and Naipaul of racism on the grounds that, in certain respects, they use their remarkably powerful creative capabilities to perpetuate the myth of the African as pathologically primitive. He objects to *Heart of Darkness* on the grounds that its organizing principle is the desire on the part of the author to reinforce the traditional separation of Europe from Africa on the basis of their supposed respective civilization and barbarism (Achebe 2-6). In so far as Naipaul is concerned, Achebe terms him a "purveyor of the old comforting myths" of Africa's former colonizers, in the sense that one of Naipaul's most cherished literary objectives is his determination to use his creative works to prove that the supposed validity of Conrad's observations regarding Africa in *Heart of Darkness* remains despite the departure of Africa's former colonizers (*Hopes* 18-19). Achebe further wonders whether an author who arguably possesses great abilities to craft works of art, but who uses those abilities to champion the cause for the dehumanization of an entire race, can reasonably be termed "great."

An evaluation of *A Bend in the River* that seeks to clarify its ideological origins shows that Achebe does have a point when he accuses Naipaul of racism against Africans. Throughout the book, Salim, the narrator, functions primarily as a conduit for Naipaul's apparent belief that Africans are incapable of negotiating the transition from underdevelopment to modernity because their faults in that regard are inherent. Achebe's criticisms of Naipaul can be contested on two grounds. First, Naipaul cannot be accused of the faults of his narrator, a constructed identity; the concrete and creative (fictional) realms of existence are

[2] All further references to *A Bend in the River* are to the same edition.

wholly independent of each other, with their own respective social formations, historical trajectories, and therefore reference points.[3] Secondly, Naipaul does not employ the medium of the book to endorse neo-colonialism; in fact, he does the complete opposite, subjecting neo-colonialism to considerable criticism by employing Salim's constricted frame of reference, and Salim's futile struggle to break beyond those boundaries, primarily to underscore the extent to which a particularly repressive form of colonialism can oppress a member of a minority group beyond measure—by incorporating him within the prevailing framework.

When these objections against Achebe are subjected to critical review on the basis of the interpretive criteria developed within contemporary literary criticism, particularly post-structuralism, however, they are found to be wanting in a number of respects. To begin with, the supposed separation between the respective concrete and fictional realities of the author and the text disappears when Naipaul, as the author of the book, is examined in terms of the manifestations of aspects of his social-cultural context in his general frame of reference.[4] It becomes clear that Naipaul, as author, is best understood as a valued member of what we may want to term the discourse community of neo-colonial Europe,[5] whose primary

[3] The distinction between concrete and textual (fictional) reality can be discerned in the theoretical positions responsible for the development of, for example, the traditional humanistic theoretical positions of new Criticism and of Formalism. For example, humanistic approaches to literary theory, as Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer show in their introduction to *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, perceive literary objects of criticism (the novel, the poem, the essay, etc.) as "unique events that occurred only once" and, consequently, assess literary practices "historically," that is, in terms of their chronological development. In so doing, they disregard the important role that the social context plays in the construction of subjectivity and therefore in the texts the author produces (1-17). New Critics based their observations on the synchronic understanding of language provided by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*, but they did not break beyond Saussure's conception of language as a "closed and stable" system. It was not until post-structuralists like Jacques Derrida (see, for example, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"), Michel Foucault (see, for example, *The Archeology of Knowledge; Discipline and Punish*, *History of Sexuality;* and *The Order of Things*), and Louis Althusser (see, for example, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses") came along that the concept of "structure," in so far as it applies to language, was fully demystified .

[4] In general, contemporary literary theory evaluates literary practices within the theoretical boundaries provided by non-literary cultural practices to produce literary theories such as post-structuralism (which is rooted in linguistics), psychoanalytic analysis (which is rooted in psychology), Marxist analysis (which is rooted in economics and sociology), and so on. These theories obliterate the divide inserted between concrete and textual (fictional) realities by humanistic theoretical positions by generally tracing the various identities relating to discourse (authorship, subjectivity, otherness, etc.) to their social origins in the cultural contexts in which they were constructed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Shleifer do a good job of exploring these issues in the introductory passages of their book.

[5] It should be noted that the term "neo-colonial Europe," here, does not necessarily apply to Europe generally. Rather, as will become clearer momentarily, it refers primarily to discourse communities within contemporary European society that seek to advance European interests in the global arena on the basis of the ideological orientations

organizing principle consists of the construction, reproduction, and dissemination of forms of knowledge that seek specifically to advance neo-colonial European interests in Africa within the context of the unequal economic relationship that characterizes the prevailing form of globalization.

To put it differently, *A Bend in the River* consists of an intellectual medium that marks the confluence of Naipaul's frame of reference and the value-systems of neo-colonial Europe that he has adopted and internalized over the years in so far as they manifest themselves in textual form.[6] As the author of the text, Naipaul operates within the boundaries of the interpretive criteria for good literature imposed by that discourse community on its members through its ideological demands, especially the separation of Europeans from non-Europeans on the basis of the traditional opposition between civilization and barbarism. He takes advantage of the malleability of language in general, and English in particular, to mix up the available signs such that he reproduces, repackages, or develops the commonplaces of that discourse community in so far as they apply to relations between Europe and Africa. He combines the elements that constitute the novel as a form (the circumstances, characters, conflicts, resolutions, points of view, and themes) in so far as they manifest themselves in *A Bend in the River* in ways that serve to advance the idea that the primary distinguishing factor in relations between Europe and Africa consists of their supposed civilization and primitivism. The intertextuality of the book consists of traces or quotations drawn from the intellectual traditions that constitute the web of neo-colonial European culture that link the images associated with Africa (the African person, the African environment, the African physical landscape, etc.) with concepts that underscore Africa's supposed primitivism. As a result, the prevailing idea that underlies the book is the

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responsible for the unequal social, economic, and political relationships the former European empires established with much of the rest of the world during the colonial era—despite the assumption of internal self-rule by most of those other worlds. The term "discourse community," for its part, was developed by Michel Foucault in his many theoretical works, to represent the critical role that cultural institutions such as the family, the school, the nation, etc., play as the primary medium through which knowledge is constructed and disseminated, and consequently how power is appropriated and exercised by individuals and groups of individuals in the struggle over available resources. James E. Porter, in his essay "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community," for example, provides an interesting general understanding of Foucault's conception of the discourse community and the influence it has on the construction of texts in that regard.

[6] As will become clear from examinations of available critical evaluations of Naipaul's cultural, personal, and intellectual background such as Paul Theroux's autobiographical examination of his long relationship with Naipaul in *Sir Vidia's Shadow: A Friendship across Five Continents*, the trajectory of Naipaul's relocation from his native Trinidad to Britain was concomitant with his incorporation within British culture, from which, and on behalf of which, he appears to have drafted most of his subsequent books, the central focus (with respect to those relating to the underdeveloped world) of which is the supposed degeneracy of non-European cultures in comparison to their European counterparts.

problematic notion that Africa has no hope in terms of its future economic development precisely because Africans are inherently incapable of resolving the crises that bedevil their environment.

Achebe's criticism of Naipaul's racist theories camouflaged as fiction can be authenticated through critical examinations of parallels that bring together Naipaul and his narrator in *A Bend in the River* (Salim), in so far as their perceptions of relations between Europe and Africa are concerned. These parallels can be unearthed not only through close examinations of Salim's relationships with his African circumstances in *A Bend in the River* but also through reviews of prevailing critical responses to Naipaul's work that link his fiction to his cultural, personal, and intellectual backgrounds in ideological terms.

In an attempt to achieve the foregoing objectives, the following examination of *A Bend in the River* is divided into six sections: a general review of theoretical conceptions of subjectivity, authorship, and textuality as understood by contemporary literary theory, especially post-structuralism (section 2); an overview of the relationship between the non-native native of Indian origin and his East African circumstances (section 3); a close study of Salim's gradual incorporation into the boundaries of the prevailing form of globalization (sections 4 and 5); and an examination of representative critical responses to Naipaul's perception of Africa based on his cultural, personal, and intellectual backgrounds (section 6).

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The ideological origins of a creative work that confronts a particular community from within the culture of another community can be identified and analyzed within the context of what Foucault termed the discursive (or discourse) community. When *A Bend in the River* is scrutinized from that perspective, it becomes clear that its primary value is the role it plays as a forum through which Naipaul reproduces the value systems of the discourse community of neo-colonial Europe through the medium of literature as a way of making sense out of his problematic cultural background. The term "discourse community," as James E. Porter observes in his assessment of Foucault's contribution to our understanding of textuality, is used to refer to a "group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated" (38-39). Essentially, the term applies to all cultural institutions, whether the family, the school, the church, the tribe, the nation, or even the regional block, because every cultural institution constitutes a medium through which individuals who are bound by a common ideology construct various forms of knowledge for the purpose of advancing their common interests, whatever those interests are.

The importance of writing is that it works as a "forum" through which the discourse community, in its determination to advance its material interests, constructs, stores, and disseminates appropriate forms of knowledge. The primary criterion by which individuals are either accepted or rejected as members of a given discourse community consists of their ability—or the lack thereof—to advance the ideology of the

discourse community through their rhetoric. By themselves, individuals are oftentimes incapable of fulfilling their social, economic, or political interests to their complete satisfaction. Therefore, through the medium of consensus, they align themselves with like-minded individuals in order to advance their interests from positions of power. But the fact that they now belong to communities, and therefore regulated systems of perception and behavior, creates conflicts between their individual interests and those of others (within the context of the communities) that require mediation. They are consequently compelled by the dynamics of the groups to resolve the problem by relinquishing all their interests except those that the groups consider the most crucial. Therefore, their interests coincide with those of their communities, so that by advancing the common interests of the communities they in effect advance their own interests. The importance of writing lies in the fact that it constitutes perhaps the most effective medium through which individuals seek to fulfill those objectives. In so far as the interests of particular discourse communities are concerned, the most valued writers are those who possess the capability to use their written work to advance the ideological interests of their communities through the medium of literature (Porter 38-39).

In his evaluation of the textual characteristics that differentiate "experienced" from "basic" writers in "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae underscores the function of writing in that respect. He identifies the "commonplace" of the discourse community, as represented in the work of a given author, as the context that brings together the ideology of the community and the process of knowledge-production in society as manifested in the frame of reference of the author. The commonplace constitutes "the culturally or institutionally authorized concept that carries with it its own necessary elaboration" (7). In other words, the commonplace of the community encapsulates the sum total of the values of the discourse community.

In so far as colonialism (or neo-colonialism) is concerned, the Empire (or the former Empire), on the one hand, and the colony (or the post-independence state), on the other, can be said to be two distinct discourse communities. The program of colonialism (or neo-colonialism) revolves around the production of forms of knowledge designed to advance the interests of the Empire beyond its borders within the context of international capitalism. The programs of independence and nation-building, for their part, center on knowledge intended to recuperate the humanity of the colonized (or formerly colonized) person as the foundation for his social, economic, and political development.[7]

[7] Texts that focus on post-colonial issues are too numerous to cite, but for examples see the following. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* addresses wide-ranging literary concerns within the context of interesting definitions of the concepts of post-coloniality, nation, post-independence, and so on. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* provides Marxist cum psychoanalytic analyses of the social, economic, and political crises introduced into the African context by the former colonial powers and for the most part

Examined from this perspective, the true nature of globalization becomes readily understandable. Proponents of the phenomenon routinely represent it as the outcome of global realignments that are manifesting themselves in an emerging "global village," a utopian environment where everyone puts in their fair share and all are rewarded accordingly. But the reality of globalization makes one wonder whether globalization might be nothing more than the ongoing substitution of the more economically powerful European (and particularly American) cultures for their less hegemonic counterparts in the developing world. Could this in part be the explanation behind the increasing uniformity among the world's peoples in terms of their appearances, tastes, and general world-views? It could be argued that perhaps the common denominator here is their increasing proximity to European culture.[8]

The value of *A Bend in the River* is that it is a forum for neo-colonialist interests in so far as relations between Europe and Africa are concerned. As Roland Barthes would put it (146-148), the book as a text consists of "quotations drawn from the innumerable centers" of neo-colonial Europe that manifest themselves in the form of commonplaces about Europe and Africa that authenticate the traditional separation of Europe from Africa on the basis of their supposed civilization and barbarism. Naipaul's ideal reader (who is constructed by the book as a member of the discourse community of neo-colonial Europe, that is, as a person who has an interest in the advancement of European neo-colonialism in Africa) constitutes "the space on which all the quotations [or traces] that make up [the] writing are inscribed without any of them being lost" (Barthes 148). And as the author of the book, Naipaul (through his frame of reference) "holds together all those quotations [or traces] in a single field" (Barthes 148).

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In post-colonial studies, the relationship between the colonizer and the native is given a great deal of attention. The colonizer is represented as the embodiment of the values of the Empire responsible for the invention

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perpetuated by post-independence regimes. Abdul JanMohamed's *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* uses the Fanonian conception of the capitalist colonial situation as pathologically divisive to undertake exhaustive examinations of the place of the post-colonial African subject as depicted in various creative works. Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* provides broad explanations of the nature of postcolonial literatures and of transformations that they have undergone in the course of history.

[8] Since the early 1990s (when the debate regarding the nature of globalization began to gather momentum), observers have increasingly questioned the concept of globalization as an unfolding democratic "global village." Among the most interesting of these observers is Joseph Stigliz in his book *Globalization and Its Discontents.* In it, he provides wide-ranging forms of evidence to show generally that what we have come to know as globalization is in fact the same age-old process whereby the world's industrialized societies (led by America) are advancing their specific interests, for the most part at the expense of their less developed counterparts, through prevailing unequal social, economic, and political global mechanisms.

of the colony. The native is represented as the physical and psychological manifestation of the scars inflicted on the colony by the Empire. For the most part, these discussions are carried out at the expense of another important participant in the development of the colony: the immigrant communities who either come to the colony of their own volition or are imported into the region from another part of the world by the colonial regime are generally overlooked. Yet they play an important role in shaping the nature and direction of colonial rule and therefore contribute considerably to the evolution of the colonial situation.

These groups of immigrants are best understood collectively as "non-native native" communities. This is because they occupy positions in the relationships established in the colony that both identify and separate them from the colonizers, on the one hand, and the natives on the other. In general, they are positioned between the colonizers and the natives in the hierarchical relationships of communities, races, and classes established by the colonial situation.[9] They are non-natives because they trace their heritage to another part of the world. But they are natives because, like the indigenous groups, they are subjected to the power of the colonizer. Secondly, they are non-natives because they are less threatening to the colonizer than the natives, on the basis of which they enjoy privileges that the colonizer denies the native proper. But they are natives because they are excluded from certain economic and political privileges that are reserved for the colonizer. In response to these forces, they exist as closed societies in the colonies. Apart from their participation in the life of the colony as workers, they are cut off socially, economically, and politically from both the colonizers and the natives.

In East and Central Africa in the colonial era, there were two prominent non-native native groups: Arabs and Indians. Arabs arrived on the East African coast about two thousand years ago. They came in dhows driven by the seasonal monsoon winds. Initially, they confined themselves to trade, exchanging goods originating from their home countries for African goods. But as time went on, they settled along the East African coast. Some among them intermarried with Africans, producing what we have come to know as Swahili culture. Still later, they established colonies on the coast either on behalf of their home governments or on their own behalves. During the trans-Atlantic slave

[9] The hierarchy in question was in part established by Social Darwinism, the theory that was developed on the foundation of evolution established by Charles Darwin and his followers from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. The hierarchy was based on supposed differences in the biological and corresponding intellectual attributes of the various races. It placed the European at the top of the rung, followed by the Asian, the Arab, and the African in that order, within a comprehensive understanding of the attributes of all of the world's living creatures. In "Britain, Race, and Africa: Racial Imagery and the Motives for British Imperialism," Michael S. Coray offers an exhaustive explanation for the role of the theory in the advancement of Britain's colonization of Africa. He shows that Social Darwinism constituted the common denominator that informed the thinking of the various theoretical positions that underlay much of Europe's colonization of Africa.

trade, they participated actively as middlemen in the transportation of Africans to the Middle East. They raided villages in the interior of the continent, captured Africans, and transported them to the coast for sale to Europeans and Americans.[10]

Similarly, Indian migrants arrived on the East African coast around 1000 AD. Like the Arabs, they were traders who traveled to and fro between their home country and Africa in accordance with the direction of the Monsoon winds. But unlike the Arabs, they did not settle on the coast in large numbers until quite recently. The majority of them were brought to East Africa at the turn of the nineteenth century by the British colonial government to assist in the building of the Kenya-Uganda Railway. As time went on, they were gradually integrated into the colonial system. They graduated from providing manual labor to British engineers to running small-scale shops and cottage industries throughout East and Central Africa. Eventually, they became so powerful that they began to play a determinant role in the life of the region's European colonies.[11]

The communities represented in *A Bend in the River*—the Indian, Persian, and Arab communities—are non-native native communities. They are characterized by an ambiguous and ambivalent relationship with their ancestral origins in India and the Middle East and their presence in East and Central Africa. They look back to their glorious contributions to human civilization with a great deal of nostalgia and pride, but they are trapped in Africa on the basis of the cultural roots they have sunk on the east coast and the economic power base they have developed over the years. When they are examined within the context of the prevailing neo-colonial framework, they are viewed as inferior to Africa's former colonizers in terms of their racial attributes and their economic power, but they are considered superior to the indigenous communities in both respects. Furthermore, they are non-native natives because, due to their numerical inferiority vis-à-vis the local peoples, they cannot contribute significantly to the *political* destiny of the region despite their economic power. The result is that they exist in the region more or less as enclaves of Asian and Middle Eastern cultures in an overwhelmingly African cultural context. During the colonial era, they strove to avoid political confrontation with Africa's European colonizers, on the one hand, and the local peoples, on the other, concentrating their energies on the economic and cultural aspects of their lives and for the most part interacting with

[10] For information on the history of the Arab communities in East Africa, see, for example, John Middledon's "The Immigrant Communities of the East African Coast" in D.A. Low and Alison Smith's book *History of East Africa*; Gideon S. Were and Derek A. Wilson's *East Africa Through a Thousand Years*; and Paul E. Lovejoy's *Transformation in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*.

[11] For information on the history and experiences of Asians in East Africa, see the following publications that focus on the issues concerned: J. S. Mangat's "The Immigrant Communities (2): The Asians" in D.A. Low and Alison Smith's book *History of East Africa*; Michael Banton's *Racial Theories*; and M.F. Hill's *Permanent Way: The Story of the Kenya and Uganda Railway*.

indigenous groups only within the context of the workplace. But in the course of the transition from colonial to independence rule, their middle-ground social status was disturbed by the departure of the former colonizers and the increasing political power of the indigenous groups. They found themselves in a situation whereby they had to decide whether to remain in the region—this time as subjects of a people they had learned to consider inferior to themselves—to relocate to their ancestral homes, which were manifested in their lives only as memories of distant pasts, or to relocate to the geographical locations of their former European colonizers, whose passports they continued to possess despite the dawn of indigenous independence.

The story of Salim in *A Bend in the River* is the story of the process through which he comes to resolve that the best option for him, under the circumstances, is to relocate to Britain, East Africa's former colonizer, whose global reach provides him with the opportunity to break beyond the constrictions he discerns in his former African environment. The story is important because it reflects, and consequently opens up an interesting window through which to examine, Naipaul's own relationship with his circumstances in the course of his upbringing and childhood education in Trinidad, his relocation to Britain first as a student and later as a naturalized citizen, and finally his determined struggle to unravel the dilemmas confronting non-native natives the world over through the medium of literature. The reason is that, in many respects, Naipaul is Salim and Salim is Naipaul.

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Salim's experience with the colonial government stamps, to which he is exposed while a small boy growing up on the east African coast (15), plays an important role in the development of his biased frame of reference and his subsequent estrangement from his coastal people. The stamps expose him to an important aspect of his culture—the "adventure-spirit" of his people symbolized by the dhow painted on one of the stamps—but the message is mediated through the point of view of the European artists who painted the "local scenes" on the stamps. From the stamps he learns about his culture, but he does so exclusively from the point of view of the colonial master, through whose conceptual framework the message they carry is mediated to viewers. Therefore, in the course of appreciating the paintings, Salim is introduced to the hierarchical relationship established by the colonial situation between Europe and the rest of the world, particularly between Europe and non-native native peoples. In comparison to the "liners and cargo ships" that routinely call at the harbor, the dhows on the stamps are "quaint" but reflect a relatively underdeveloped culture (15).

Salim encounters the stamps at a time in his life when he is relatively gullible, not yet having become exposed to an ideology that would have forestalled the devastating impact that colonialism will have upon his life. Hence, his response to the stamps (and, through them, to the power of colonialism) is quite naïve. "It was as though, in those stamps, a foreigner

had said, 'This is what is most striking about this place,'" he informs us. The emphasis is placed on the word "foreigner." The stamps derive their importance from their association with the "foreigner."

The stamp bearing the image of the dhow leaves a particularly deep impression upon Salim's mind because it addresses an aspect of non-native native culture that he admires above all else—their love for the sea symbolized by the dhow. He recalls:

> Without that stamp of the dhow I might have taken the dhows for granted. As it was, I learned to look at them. Whenever I saw them tied up at the waterfront I thought of them as something peculiar to our region, quaint, something the foreigner would remark on, something not quite modern, and certainly nothing like the liners and cargo ships that berthed in our own modern docks. (15)

The encounter with the stamps is crucial, again, because it establishes the foundation for his subsequent indoctrination into the prevailing neo-colonial framework in its totality: for his prejudices toward Africans, for his estrangement from his coastal community, and for his struggle for escape through absorption within "European civilization." His childhood fascination with the dhows and other "local scenes" depicted on the stamps matures into concern for his culture generally, while the frame of reference demarcated by the colonial artists who painted the scenes grows to incorporate the overall neo-colonial frame of reference. The result is that his subsequent education is wholly informed by the prevailing framework: his interest in his own culture grows, but his attempts to account for it are invariably hijacked by the medium of neo-colonialism; in the end, he is transformed into no more than a medium for colonialism. The problem is highlighted in the following passage:

> All that I know about our history and the history of the Indian Ocean I have got from books written by Europeans. If I say that our Arabs in their time were great adventurers and writers; that our sailors gave the Mediterranean the lateen sail that made the discovery of the Americas possible; that an Indian pilot led Vasco da Gama from East Africa to Calicut; that the very word *cheque* was first used by our Persian merchants—if I say these things it is because I have got them from European books. They formed no part of our knowledge or pride. Without Europeans, I feel, all our past would have been washed away, like the scuff marks of fishermen on the beach outside our town. (12)

He sees his people exactly as the colonizer sees them. He brings to his culture exactly the same prejudices that the colonizer disseminates through the literature he produces regarding Arabia, India, and Africa. He derives a sense of pride from knowing that his people have done great things in the past. But because he perceives his environment exclusively through the prejudiced perspective of the colonizer he is invariably discontented with his culture. The innovations and "adventure-spirit" of non-native natives, though an important contribution to "civilization," are miniscule in comparison to those of the Europeans. The civilization of Europeans belongs to the present, while that of non-native natives belongs to the past.

Through Salim's recollections, we acquire access to much of the history of his people as he understands it. We learn that Arabs, Persians, and Indians were once "masters" of East Africa, but that they have now lost their power to Europeans who have subsequently taken control of the region. In the distant past, we are told, Arabs, Persians, and Indians were among the most "civilized" communities in the world (11-12). Before the coming of the Europeans to East Africa, they ruled over much of the region: "They had pushed far into the interior and had built towns and planted orchards in the forest" (14). In addition, they played a crucial role in the development of the slave trade during that era. Unlike the slaves of the West Coast, the slaves of the east coast "were not shipped off to plantations" but were either retained by local Arabs, Persians, and Indians or sent "to Arabian homes as domestic servants" (12). In fact, as recently as the turn of the nineteenth century (long after the official banning of slavery), many among the Arabs and Indians on the east coast were still practicing the trade. For instance, Salim's grandfather "once shipped a boatful of slaves as a cargo of rubber" (11), implying that the incident occurred in the Congo in the 1880s, when King Leopold II of Belgium ran the country as a personal plantation intended to meet the demand for rubber for bicycle wheels.[12] With the eradication of slavery, some former slaves "became members of the family they had joined" (12). For example, "there were two slave families [who had lived in Salim's family] for at least three generations," first as slaves and later as domestic servants (13). In this way, non-native natives acquired enormous wealth and power and held considerable sway over Africans.

In time, we are informed further, the Arabs, Persians, and Indians developed a unique culture on the east coast, one that distinguished them from Arabs, Persians, and Indians in their ancestral homes and from Africans in "the interior." Their separation from Arabia, Persia, and India estranged them from their roots, while their foreignness prevented them from identifying fully with Africa. They became "non-native natives" in the true sense of the phrase:

> Africa was my home, had been the home of my family for centuries. But we came from the east coast, and that made the difference. The coast was not truly African. It was an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place, and we who lived there were really people of the Indian Ocean. True Africa was at our back. Many miles of scrub or desert separated us from the upcountry people; we looked east to the lands with which we traded—Arabia, India, Persia. These were also the lands of our ancestors. But we

[12] In his book *King Leopold's Ghost* Adam Hochschild provides fascinating, though depressing, information on Leopold's exploits in the Congo. In chapters six through nine of the book, he chronicles, among other things, the process that led to Leopold's appropriation of the Congo for personal use as well as the oppression and horror to which he subjected the local inhabitants of the region in his determination to amass personal wealth from the region's rubber trees. The book provides appropriate introductory information for those interested in the genesis of the political catastrophes that have dogged the Democratic Republic of the Congo up to the present.

> could no longer say that we were Arabians or Indians or Persians; when we compared ourselves with these people, we felt like people of Africa. (10-11).

As time passed, the power of non-native natives gradually waned as other groups took control of the region. "First the Arabs had ruled here," recalls Salim: "now the Europeans were about to go away" (12). The Europeans, through their program of colonization, conquered the region, carved it up, and shared it among themselves as extensions of their respective empires. The Arabs, Persians, and Indians (who were numerically and militarily weak in comparison to the Europeans) could not stand up to them. They opted to co-exist with them—to pay homage to their power. The Europeans ruled relatively peacefully until around World War II (the time Salim appears to have been born), when their power began to weaken in the face of the growing political strength of Africans. It thus became inevitable that Africans would eventually take power away from Europeans—and Salim, reviewing the events through his adopted point of view, becomes increasingly worried. "I was worried for the Arabs," he informs us. "I was also worried for us. Because, so far as power went, there was no difference between the Arabs and ourselves. We were both small groups living under a European flag at the edge of the continent" (15).

Therefore, it is not surprising that Salim becomes increasingly disillusioned with his African circumstances on the east coast. When he says that he was "worried for the Arabs" and for Indians (15), he is expressing his fear that the region's non-native natives could have no future because of the growing power of the Africans of "the interior." From within his pseudo-European world, he feels somewhat secure: "Because they could assess themselves, the Europeans were better equipped to cope with the changes than we were," he reports (17). But because he is physically alienated from Europeans (who have not settled at the coast in substantial numbers), his identification with them is but an illusion. It is possible to argue, in Lacanian terms, that he develops a "split identity": physically, he remains trapped among non-native natives, but psychologically he resides among Europeans.[13] His decision to relocate from the coast to the interior can, therefore, be said to arise from his need to reconcile the two halves of his self. When he leaves the coast for the "bend in the river" he is inadvertently seeking to recuperate his humanity, which has been severely undermined by colonialist ideology.

When Nazruddin, the uncle who serves as a sort of role model for him, offers Salim the opportunity to buy his shop at the bend in the river

[13] In his version of psychoanalysis, Lacan re-reads Freud within the context of post-structuralism, re-writing the stages of sexuality in terms of a combination of Saussure's diachronic conception of language and his own concept of the imaginary. In the process, he shows that the individual generally develops his or her ego on the basis of persistent attempts on his or her part to approximate his sense of self via external objects that he or she idealizes as coherent and stable. In *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Eagleton provides an insightful overview of Lacan's thinking in this regard (163-174).

following Nazruddin's decision to relocate to Britain, Salim seizes the chance, not necessarily because he intends to use it to advance his business interests, but because it constitutes a stepping stone toward the proximity with European culture —which is represented at the bend in the river in the form of a large presence of European settlers—that he intends to establish (24).

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Salim's recollections regarding his journey to the bend in the river and the experiences he has there with the Africans of the interior are informed primarily by Conrad, whose *Heart of Darkness* appears to have featured prominently among the European books he tells us constitute the primary medium of his access to knowledge concerning his people and their environment (Naipaul 11-12).

Conrad would like us to read *Heart of Darkness* as an allegory of civilization as defined by colonialist ideology. Given that Europeans monopolize civilization and that Africans embody primitivism, it follows that these qualities are reflected in the geographical locations occupied by the two races, i.e. Europe and Africa. In other words, just as Europeans can impart their will upon their environment, so Africans cannot achieve that feat; hence, Europe symbolizes civilization while Africa mirrors barbarism. For Marlow, therefore, traveling from Europe to Africa (and particularly sailing up the river Congo in his steamer) is equivalent to traveling from the present to the very beginning of time. Behind him is Europe with its highways and skyscrapers, its democratic institutions, and its excellent intellectual achievements, embodied in its gentlemen and its ladies. In front of him is Africa with its jungles, bushes, and savages (Conrad 182-183).

When Marlow encounters Africans, he sees them primarily from afar. They are "black savages," either peeping at him from behind bushes, producing distant, unintelligible noises in the dark of the night, or cannibalistically hungering after human flesh (Conrad 190-193). At no point in the narrative are we allowed to enter into the minds of the Africans—to get to know who they are, where they came from, or what they feel about their circumstances. Instead, we are pressured to equate them with animals or to see them as children rather than adults. The African headman on Marlow's barge, much like a bull or buffalo, has fierce nostrils rather than a nose. The language he employs in his conversation with Marlow is fragmented, like that of a child struggling to articulate a thought that is intellectually beyond him; Marlow's attitude toward him is condescending, like that of a father toward a child whose behavior he disapproves of.

Reflecting on the problem, Achebe concludes that the narrative is intended primarily to dehumanize Africa in order to authenticate the traditional conception of Europe as civilized. Because of the nature of the hierarchy erected between Europeans and Africans by the colonial relationship, Europeans cannot explain their civilization without reference to Africa's supposed degeneracy. Africa is the primary objectionable

Other to which Europeans must oppose their circumstances in order for them to articulate their collective identity as civilized most effectively. Without barbaric Africa, there can be no civilized Europe. Thus the conception of Africa as the Dark Continent in European colonialist literature reflects a deeply rooted psychological problem:

> Quite simply it is the desire—one might indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set up Africa as a foil for Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be made manifest. (Achebe 2)

Naipaul, a close disciple of Conrad, employs the same strategies as Conrad in his review of the relationship between his hero and his African environment. Although Salim is disillusioned with the non-native native communities of the coast, he believes that they are more civilized than the interior. Like Marlow, therefore, Salim, while traveling from the coast to the town at the bend in the river in his Peugeot, imagines himself traveling from the present to the past. The African environment, including its trees, its animals, and its climate, symbolizes the African's supposed primitivism and barbarism:

> As I got deeper into Africa—the scrub, the desert, the rocky climb up the mountains, the lakes, the rain in the afternoon, the mud, and then, on the other, wetter side of the mountains, the fern forests and the gorilla forests—as I got deeper I thought; But this is madness. I am going in the wrong direction. There can't be a new life at the end of this. (Naipaul 4)

The passage is an obvious allusion to Marlow's reactions to the African environment, the supposed reservoir of the African's primitivism, as he journeys up the Congo in his barge in *Heart of Darkness*.

The consternation that Salim exhibits when he finally arrives at the bend in the river reflects the same problem. Before he leaves the coast, he hears that "Nazruddin's adopted country" (presumably the Congo) has won its independence (presumably from Belgium) (22). In other words, the Africans he so much dreads are now in charge of the region. Yet he soldiers on. He is overwhelmed by the alluring stories he has heard from Nazruddin about the wines, the restaurants, and the food available at the European town located at the bend in the river (25). Therefore, when he discovers that the Europeans have abandoned the town— that Africans have taken it over, that the town is in ruins, that it has been looted, and that it is overrun by bushes— he is thunderstruck. He sees the event as Africa's final return to its erstwhile barbarism (27).

As Salim walks among the ruins of the town, furthermore, he comes across a dilapidated building bearing the following Latin message: *Miscerique probat populos et foedera jungi*. Because he does not speak Latin, he does not understand the words; but because they are written in Latin, he is convinced that they bear considerable meaning. "I knew the words by heart," he informs us. "I gave them my own pronunciation, and they ran like a nonsense jingle in my head" (26). The words are attractive

because the Latin language in which they are written symbolizes European civilization. In speaking them out loud despite his inability to speak Latin, Salim expresses the overwhelming extent of his desire to access that culture.

Later on in the course of the narrative (62-63), Father Huismans, the European evangelist and collector of African artifacts whom he subsequently befriends, explains their meaning to him. From what Huismans says, it becomes clear to us (though not to Salim or, apparently, Huismans himself) that the Latin words were inspired by Virgil's *The Aeneid*. It will be recalled that Virgil, in his attempts both to bolster the image of Augustus as well as to equate Roman culture to Greek culture, modeled *The Aeneid* after Homer's two epics: *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. As Jasper Griffin points out in his introduction to C. Day Lewis' translation of *The Aeneid*,

> *The Aeneid* is an eminently Homeric poem, and its plot can be seen to combine both the great Homeric epics. In the first half of the poem Aeneas wanders the Mediterranean, making his way from Troy to the Tiber; that recalls *The Odyssey*. In the second half he fights great battles in Italy; and that recalls *The Iliad*. (xvii)

During the first quarter of the book, Aeneas, while trying to reach Italy, is blown off course by bad weather and lands in Carthage in North Africa. He is welcomed by Dido, the widow-Queen of Carthage (Virgil Books 2-3). They fall in love, at the instigation of the goddesses Juno and Venus, but because of the intervention of the god Jupiter (who is determined to have him proceed to Italy to lay the foundation for the future Rome) he abandons Dido and resumes his journey to Italy while Dido, heart-broken, commits suicide (Virgil Book 4). Supposedly, Dido was an African queen, and Aeneas abandoned her because "the great Roman god" disapproved of "the intermingling of the blood" of Romans and Africans on the grounds that African blood would pollute Roman blood. The Europeans who once settled at the "bend in the river" were inspired by that message and sought to use it as their "motto"; but for unexplained reasons they turned the message upside down; instead of saying that the Roman god "disapproved of the intermingling of the blood" of the two races, they wrote: "He approves of the mingling of the peoples and their bonds of union":

> In the motto [. . .] three words were altered to reverse the meaning. According to the motto, the words carved in granite outside our dock gates, a settlement in Africa raises no doubts: The great Roman god approves of the mingling of peoples and the making of treaties in Africa: *Miscerique probat populos et foedera jungi.* (Naipaul 62-3)

To Salim, the European settlers committed sacrilege against their god and, therefore, their settlement at the river was "a hoax." The gods had decreed against any such relationship between Europeans and Africans, and it was wrong for them to turn the situation around. The separation between Europeans and Africans was "divinely" ordained and was therefore

beyond their control. Europeans were destined to rule Africans, not to intermingle with them biologically.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Salim's relationship with his circumstances at this point is his almost immediate identification with Europe. Although he has never lived among Europeans, having acquired access to "European civilization" primarily through books, he has so identified himself with Europe that he imagines himself to be a European. Thus, as he examines the ruins of the town, he behaves and thinks like a European who has come to the town from Europe. It is as though he has flown in "from the future" and is beholding his own destroyed handiwork. He is shocked, but he is also consoled by the fact that the same civilization exists elsewhere in more abundance (27).

It is within the context of Salim's struggle to overcome the perceived dangers he discerns in the upcoming indigenous African intelligentsia that Naipaul presents us with globalization, as we have come to know it, as the most appropriate solution to the prevailing African crises. Disillusioned beyond measure by his African circumstances, Salim visits Nazruddin in London hoping to acquire permanent residence there. "I decided to rejoin the world," he informs us, "to break out of the narrow geography of the town, to do my duty by those who depended on me. I wrote to Nazruddin that I was coming to London for a visit, leaving him to interpret that simple message." He is convinced that the young generation of Indians living under African rule, like their predecessors under European colonial rule, "have no place in the world." "[T]hey were empty in Africa," he tells us, "and unprotected, with nothing to fall back on. They had begun to rot. I was like them" (228).

But Salim does not find his Europe even in London. The Europe he encounters is by no means the Europe "that had defeated the Arabs in Africa and controlled the interior of the continent," nor the Europe "that gave [the non-native natives of the coast] the descriptive postage stamps that gave [them their] ideas of what was picturesque about [them]selves." It is a Europe that "still [feeds those peoples] in a hundred ways with its language and [sends them] its increasingly wonderful goods, things which, in the bush of Africa [add] year by year to [their] idea of who [they are]…." But it is not an ideal environment: "It [is] something shrunken and mean and forbidding" (229).

Walking around London, Salim is shocked. The city is saturated with non-native natives like him who have come to London in search of refuge from Africa but who have not found it. While the city gives them the opportunity to pursue their business objectives on a larger scale than Africa has done, it does not afford them complete freedom. The relationships the society establishes between them and the indigenous whites is much the same as the one the colonial situation maintained between them and Africans. They live on the margins of society, cut off from the center of political life (229-230).

And yet Salim does not evolve a revolutionary outlook toward life. He does not break beyond the confines of his neo-colonial framework. He

does not engage the system in any critical analysis. On the contrary, he embraces it further. He blames the victims for their problems, rather than their oppressors. Non-native natives, according to him, owe their predicaments to their adamant (and "unthinking") adherence to their cultural particularities. Were they to assimilate within European civilization, they would overcome their limitations. As "Europeans," they would operate at the center of European civilization rather than at its periphery. They would benefit from Europe's global markets, becoming lords over much of the world.

Hence we see Salim, as he walks around London "sympathizing" with the idea, originally propagated by his friend Indar, that it is necessary for non-native native Indians "to reject the ideas of home and ancestry piety." He thinks that he is engaged in a kind of "rebellion" when he is, in fact, a reactionary working against the interests of his own people on behalf of the prevailing international order. The situation is ironic, but in a pathetic sort of way:

> What illusions Africa gave to people who came from outside! In Africa I had thought of our instinct and capacity for work even in extreme conditions, as heroic and creative. I had contrasted it with the indifference and withdrawal of village Africa. But now in London, against a background of busyness, I saw this instinct purely as instinct, pointless, serving only itself. And a feeling of rebellion possessed me, stronger than any I had known in my childhood. To this was added a new sympathy for the rebellion Indar had spoken to me, the rebellion he had discovered when he had walked beside the river of London and had decided to reject the ideas of home and ancestral piety, the unthinking worship of his great men, the self-suppression that went with that worship and those ideas, and to throw himself consciously into the bigger, harder world. It was the only way I could live here, if I had to live here. (230)

In London, he reaches the apex, the culmination, of his long process of alienation from his non-native native community and his indoctrination into European civilization. He succumbs completely to the overwhelming power of Eurocentrism, and his physical self finally catches up with his psychological self.

Salim embraces what we may term "utopian globalization," the idealized concept of a future global order where all of the world's cultures co-equally relate with one other within a fully democratic international space. He forgets that the reality of globalization consists, essentially, of the ongoing substitution of European cultures for the cultures of the developing world within an economically unequal international order.

This explains Salim's decision to return to Africa rather than to remain in London. What matters to him now is only ideology, not geography or ancestry. In view of the ongoing international transformations, he concludes, one does not have to live in Europe or America in order for one to benefit from Western financial resources. All that one has to do is accept the prevailing ideology and try to take advantage of it from within. Even in Africa, with all its "backwardness," one can make money, provided only that one is part of a network of

international capitalists whose headquarters are in Europe or America (248).

Back in Africa, Salim gets down to business. He establishes an international company and commences to buy and export gold and ivory derived from the mines and forests of the Congo. He throws all moral cares to the wind. He becomes a capitalist to the bone. He informs us:

> And so I began to live dangerously. I began to deal in gold and ivory. I bought, stored and sold; or, acting for bigger operations (who paid directly to my bank in Europe), I stored and shipped on, for a percentage. My supplier, and sometimes poachers, were officials or army people, and these people were always dangerous to deal with. (258)

Convinced that he is now a "global man" and that the whole world is his stage, he evolves into no more than a conduit for international forces engaged in the systematic looting of the wealth of Africa. He colludes with corrupt elements within the government of "the Domain" to advance neo-colonialist interests in Africa.

But the most important point to note from Salim's appropriation of Eurocentrism, however, is the role he plays as a medium through whom Naipaul himself, as the author of the book, expresses his own prejudices toward Africa. As it will become clearer from the following examples of observers who have closely followed Naipaul's cultural, personal, and intellectual background in relation to his creative work, there are parallels in his thinking and Salim's that show that he intended Salim to serve, for the most part, primarily as a conduit for his own theoretical position on Africa.

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Anyone who has delved deeply into post-independence African issues, irrespective of the medium he or she has employed, will not have escaped confrontation with the complexity of African issues. In terms of its cultural origins, historical development, and economic and political organization, Africa could very well be the world's most diverse region. Besides being home to hundreds of tribal groupings, it has experimented with wide-ranging economic and political policies and institutions. It is clearly one of those social, economic, and political configurations that cannot be understood from a simplistic, one-dimensional perspective.

A Bend in the River is a problematic novel, in part, because it overlooks or otherwise fails to underscore that important aspect of African reality, despite the fact that it sets for itself the objective of accounting for Africa's origins and destiny. Throughout the book, we are not allowed to break beyond the ideological boundaries of Salim's conviction that the African is *inherently* incapable of surmounting the crises that bedevil his environment in his post-independence era.

Naipaul could have solved that problem by including characters in the novel who would have conceptualized Africa from alternative points of view and given them equally important roles in the novel. In that respect, he would have brought Salim into contact with a character who would have pressured him to re-evaluate his simplistic perception of Africa and

to respond to it accordingly. But Naipaul does not do so; we are introduced to Salim's biased mind with the first words he utters, and we are confined within that problematic frame of reference throughout the book. We are expected to receive Salim's prejudiced views regarding Africa as the most appropriate explanation behind Africa's crises.

That Salim is primarily a conduit for Naipaul's negative perceptions of Africa makes sense when Naipaul and Salim are examined in terms of parallels in their cultural backgrounds and their general conceptual frameworks in regard to Africa, as derived from available critical observations of Naipaul's life and writing. Like Salim, Naipaul is a non-native native who has sought to resolve the dilemmas arising from his constricted reality through accommodation in the culture of the former colonizer of his adopted country. He was born and brought up in Trinidad among communities of Hindu and Muslim migrants from India who arrived in the country, for the most part, between 1845 and 1917. He received much of his childhood and young adulthood education from Trinidadian schools, including Port-of-Spain's Queen's Royal College, before proceeding to Britain's Oxford University for further studies as an international student. But after Oxford, he chose to remain in Britain, the former colonial power from 1802 to 1962, as a naturalized citizen, rather than to return to Trinidad to participate in the process of nation-building from his original home. It is from within British culture in that respect that he has built up his career as one of the world's most accomplished writers.[14] From the observations of the comments of some of the observers who have closely followed his life and writing career in that regard, there is no doubt that he responded to the restricted space he occupied as a Trinidadian of Indian origin in much the same way as Salim does with respect to Africa—by seeking accommodation within British culture as a way of avoiding direct confrontation with his ambiguous cultural background.

In her article "Past and Present Darkness: Sources for V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*," for example, Linda Prescott identifies direct connections between Naipaul's conceptualization of Africa as the Dark Continent and comments that Naipaul has made in regard to Conrad's intellectual responses to Africa. It will be recalled that Conrad developed *Heart of Darkness* from experiences he himself had previously had in the Congo, particularly at Stanley Falls as a thirty-two-year-old army officer, and that his primary objective in so doing was to underscore the horrors that he believed the African embodied (Hochschild 140-149). Prescott observes that *A Bend in the River* originated from similar travels that Naipaul himself made to the Congo more or less as an intellectual disciple

[14] There are numerous biographical and critical works on Naipaul's life and writing. The following list is only a sample: Richard Kelly's *V.S. Naipaul*; Bruce King's *V.S. Naipaul*; Landeg White's *V.S. Naipaul: A Critical Introduction*; Paul Theroux's *V.S. Naipaul: An Introduction to His Work* and *Sir Vidia's Shadow: A Friendship across Five Continents;* Robert Hammer's *V.S. Naipaul*; Peter Hughes' *V.S. Naipaul*; and Timothy F. Weiss' *On the Margins: The Act of Exile in V. S. Naipaul.*

of Conrad in the mid-1960s. From close examinations of a number of essays that Naipaul wrote on his travels in the Congo subsequent to those visits—particularly "Conrad's Darkness" and "A New King for the Congo"—Prescott concludes that Naipaul modified the concept of Africa as the Dark Continent not only to make it more forceful but also to suit his own ideological interests as a Trinidadian of Indian origin who sought to overcome the ambiguousness of his cultural background through accommodation in the more powerful British culture. He was motivated primarily by his desire to prove "that Conrad's perception of Africa is still relevant today by drawing attention to things that have not changed," principally Africa's inability to overcome its social, economic, and political crises (Prescott 548). However, whereas Conrad's primary contention was that the African is trapped at the beginning of time on the basis of his primitivism, Naipaul's argument is basically that this primitivism consists of a nihilism that renders the African unable to cope with modernity as manifested in the colonial rule imposed on Africa by Europe. In "A New King for the Congo," for example, Naipaul argues that the basis of the brutality that Mobutu Sese Seko exhibited during his rule in the Congo (from 1965 to 1997) was the momentary nature of the African's exposure to civilization through the rather brief period of European colonial rule in Africa. Thus the problem with post-independence Africa is primarily about "African nihilism, the rage of primitive men coming to themselves and finding that they have been fooled and affronted," and Mobutu embodied the values of the primitive man who is transformed into a nihilist by his contact with a civilization which he is incapable of utilizing properly (Prescott 548-549). The argument constitutes the foundation upon which Naipaul seeks to resolve the problematic nature of his cultural background and, in so doing, underscores the critical intellectual difference separating him from Conrad. In *Heart of* Darkness, Conrad, in line with the prevailing colonial ideology, refuses to situate the African within Africa's own historical trajectory, contending that the African's history begins precisely at the point of his encounter with his European colonizer. But in *A Bend in the River* Naipaul demonstrates a keen consciousness of African history by documenting the historical backgrounds of his characters, most notably Salim's. This is due to the dilemma that Naipaul has had to endure as a person whose cultural background is not secure and therefore his desire to reconstruct a more appropriate (and stable) historical background for himself. As Prescott puts it, "[h]is personal sense of rootlessness, derived from the experience of growing up in an immigrant community in Trinidad and then living in a rather restless exile in England, gives a sharp edge to his emphasis on the social necessity of history" (549-550). It is that determination to rewrite history to suit his own ideological orientation that generally informs Naipaul's problematic perception of relations between Europe and Africa.

In *Sir Vidia's Shadow: A Friendship across Five Continents*, Theroux evaluates *A Bend in the River* within the context of a general review of the

events that led to the famous break-up of his long relationship with Naipaul (Sir Vidia) in the 1990s. Until the separation Theroux was, as he puts it, Naipaul's "shadow," in the sense that he was essentially a student of Naipaul who followed his writing closely and matured as a writer within his shadow. The bone of contention that caused the break-up between the two authors was Theroux's increasing conviction that Naipaul was a racist as well as a male chauvinist and that he used much of his writing, especially where Africa and India were concerned, to exhibit those negative attitudes toward other people. Theroux recalls that while he and Naipaul were teaching at Kampala's Makerere University, he noticed repeatedly that Naipaul "had a fear of being swallowed by the bush, a fear of people of the bush," implying that Naipaul, like Salim, presumed that the departure of Africa's former colonizers meant that Africa was destined for its erstwhile former primitivism. Theroux also recalls that Naipaul used his writing, in general, to denigrate women on the basis of their supposed inferiority to men. Naipaul, Theroux recalls, "was forever finding women leaky and damp, in sadly wrinkled clothes, creases at the crotch [and] stains at the armpit" (*Sir Vidia's* 300-301). Theroux, for example, was so outraged by Naipaul's denigration of women in *A Bend in the River* through the character of Yvette—the young Indian woman with whom Salim interacts in the course of his experiences at the bend in the river—that as a panelist charged with recommending the book for the Booker Prize he rejected it with the deciding vote (*Sir Vidia's* 301-303).

In *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays: 1965-1987*, Achebe identifies *A Bend in the River* as an example of a work that is meant primarily "to impede cultural dialogue between North and South, in this case of Europe and Africa" in order to perpetuate the unequal economic relationship prevailing between the two parts of the world. He traces the problem to what he sees as the general reluctance on the part of Europeans to accept Africans as equal human beings and therefore to listen to their views regarding their relationships with their circumstances as equals. He writes: "Because of the myths created by white men to dehumanize the Negro in the course of the last four hundred years—myths which have yielded perhaps psychological, certainly economic, comfort for Europe—the white man has been talking and talking and never listening because he imagines he has been talking to a dumb beast" (15). He criticizes the Western media on the grounds that they have played a significant role in perpetuating those myths, thereby hindering dialogue between the West and Africa. He gives the example of a review of *A Bend in the River* written by Elizabeth Hardwick, once published in *The New York Times* together with an interview she had conducted with the author. In one of Naipaul's 1960s essays on the Congo, Achebe recalls, Naipaul "reports on 'Native people camping in the ruins of civilization' and the 'bush creeping back as you watched.'" He points out that Hardwick, reflecting on Naipaul's sentiments about Africa as expressed in those essays in her interview with Naipaul, wonders loudly whether "Africa has no future," to which the author bluntly retorts that "Africa has no future" (18-19).

In view of the foregoing, the questions that Achebe poses in *Hopes and Impediments* regarding Naipaul's status as a writer cannot be overlooked, especially in so far as they relate to his perceptions of relations between imperialist powers and underdeveloped societies like those of Africa. Despite the important role that purely literary criteria play in differentiating good from bad literature, they do not by themselves constitute the foundation for greatness. In a world overloaded with crises such as the ones in which we currently live, it would appear that the concept of "art for art's sake" does not make much sense at all. Indeed, one of the most important values of literature is the ability it offers the author to acquire access to the value-systems of a particular people at a particular moment in time, diagnose some of the causes of the prevailing crises, and consequently offer an alternative vision. It follows, therefore, that the most important distinguishing factor for greatness in literature is the ideological position that informs the work under examination. The most important authors are those who use their work to assist humanity to take one or more steps forward in terms of its social, economic, and political advancement as a people. An author who uses his work to advocate the oppression of a given people on the basis of no more than the stereotypical and racist attributes that inform their identity does not deserve the tag of greatness at all; in fact, it could be argued that he is no different from a person who picks up and uses a gun to massacre a whole people in order to advance sectarian interests. In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul fails the test of greatness precisely because he seeks to accomplish that objective with respect to the African race.

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