Constructions of African History in V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*

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Abstract: The paper aims to analyze the manner in which Naipaul's novel highlights the ideological dimensions of the various constructions of colonial and postcolonial African history.
Key-words: colonial, postcolonial, history, decolonization, Africa.

A Bend in the River (1979) is one of Naipaul's darkest explorations of the complex problematic of decolonization in Africa with its ensuing disorientation and disorder. It is concerned with the dangerous upsurge of a violent African nationalism, whose excesses breed autocratic forms of government amounting to tyrannies far more forbidding than imperial rule. Naipaul's disillusion with the disorders of independence and the failure of self-government in the former West Indian colonies, voiced both in his non-fiction and in novels like The *Mimic Men* (1967) and *Guerillas* (1975), finds an exacerbated expression in the climactic dramatism of this African staging of the war of civilizations. What he sees as the historicized condemnation to disorder of the world's 'half-made societies' becomes the all-pervasive, obsessive theme of the novel, a new cautionary tale about the dawn of freedom turning into the twilight of reason, where the sleep of the nation breeds the monsters of historical hurt. Naipaul's increasing pessimism explodes with the piercing tones of a universal, existentialist despair which many critics have deemed as his 'apocalypticism'. The dystopian mood and atmosphere of the novel are described by Bruce King along these terms: 'It is perhaps Naipaul's most pessimistic novel, filled with a sense of apocalypse, of the futility and vanity of life, of an impending worldwide disaster' (King 120).

A Bend in the River draws on Naipaul's direct experience of the most fervent period of Africa's decolonization movement of the sixties and seventies. His knowledge of the local political developments was gleaned during one-year sojourn in East Africa and Zaire of 1965- 1966, and his subsequent return to East Africa in 1971 and to Zaire in 1975. His assessment of and reflections upon the political turmoil in Zaire are recorded in his article 'A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa' (1975), republished in the essay collection *The Return of Eva Peron* (1980), and in the historical-philosophical testimony of *A Congo Diary* (1980). According to the pattern established by Naipaul's interweaving of novelistic and documentary writing, the novel is sandwiched between two pieces of non-fiction, the former functioning as an overture and the latter as an adagio to the work of fiction. This is another assertion of Naipaul's belief in the inter-conditioning and interdependence between fact and fiction, history and invention, and their concurrence in the discovery and articulation of truth.

The narrative can be subsumed to Hutcheon's model of historiographic metafiction, in that the narrator refers self-consciously to his act of writing his life-story, while at the same time recording the history of his present and past, which takes precedence in the economy of the novel, often relegating the protagonist's destiny to a mere human background of an unfolding historical drama. Salim, a small businessman of Indian descent, flees his ethnic community on the East African coast, fearing persecution from the nationalist upheavals following independence. Intent on making a fresh start, he relocates further inland in a newly independent Central African state resembling the Zaire under the autocratic socialist regime of Mobutu. Like most of Naipaul's characters, he is both a refugee and an exile, an uprooted individual in search for a perpetually elusive home, for whom a sense of identity is conditional on a sense of belonging and existential meaningfulness.

But as it always happens with Naipaul's refugees from historicity, they are doomed to perpetual flight, and disabled by the arresting realization that disorder is ubiquitous and there is no place for them to go. However, Salim is different from Ralph Singh insofar as he does not share his obsession with historical origins and processes, or with the instrumentality of history in deciphering

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a vision of his or his community's destiny. Nor is he actuated by Singh's ambition to give shape to the consciousness of his race by attempting a historical 'opera magna' of the colonized mind. For him, history is not the key to the mystery of the eternal movement and mingling of peoples, he is merely concerned with the practicalities of the here and now. If he becomes entangled in historical reflections, it is because history seems to always catch up with him and to set him thinking about the bewildering chain of causes and consequences which influence his reality. He is not a visionary, a man given to grand designs of changing his world by helping it recover its identity.

Salim's avowed ordinariness and philosophical detachment may be a ploy by which Naipaul aims at a higher objectivity of notation. His condition of an outsider, of a man without a lofty cause or political allegiances, makes him the ideal, impartial recorder of a reality extraneous to the author himself, whose interest in the predicament with post colonial Africa is free from the emotional engagement and raw sensitivity of his West Indian chronicles. Salim replicates Naipaul's own position of writing from the outside, from the perspective of his ethnicity and his prevailing interest in the fate of the Indian Diaspora around the world. King draws attention to the necessity of the mediated perception of the novel:

The notation of Africa in *Bend* is not dissimilar from that found in the disillusioned postcolonial novels of Achebe, Armah, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Soyinka and others. Unlike the African novelists, however, he does not have a commitment to Africa. His deepest sympathies are with the Indians threatened by African nationalism and political disorder (King 119).

In this light, the critic construes the novel as having a double thematic focus: firstly, Africa's own experience as a prominent locus of the worldwide postcolonial predicament; secondly, but no less importantly, the tracing of a pan-Indian history of dislocation and displaced identity, mapped out on the vast geography of European empires:

Bend creates a space in literature and therefore in history for the East African Asiatics, primarily the Indians, who were driven from Africa in the aftermath of African independence and who have, once more uprooted, sought refuge in such foreign lands as England and Canada. How are they to be seen and to see themselves? (King 123)

As a narrator with no particular loyalty or interpretive bias, Salim fulfils yet another function, that of a warrant of objectivity. He represents *l'homme moyen sensuel* who experiences the changing realities around him *sine ira et studio*, with the objectifying eye of the historian. In this respect, Salim is prone to function as a better historian than Singh could ever be, because he can observe his surroundings with the detachment of the outsider. This does not mean that he is consciously concerned with writing or interpreting history, or that he believes in its power to yield any meaningful answers, real knowledge or ultimate edification. He is an apostate whose very distrust of the usefulness of history turns him into a would-be historian.

Salim is far from being such an unseeing narrator, unable to interpret or reflect on the past and present plight of the continent. His penchant for living in the present does not mean that he is incapable of reading in the chaotic present the signs of past disorders. His inborn Indian trader's practicality, concentrated on the immediate concerns with daily survival does not preclude his propensity to reflect on the complexities beyond the surface of events. In fact, King observes a crucial contradiction in Salim's construction as character and narrator, in that the avowed simplicity of his single-mindedness of purpose is belied by the depth of his perceptions and power of diachronic analysis: 'Salim is not likeable and seems too knowing, too educated for the narrator, although we are told that he reads widely, especially encyclopaedias' (King 123). But maybe it is this very mixture of naïvete and perceptiveness that make him suited to Naipaul's ideological purpose, and also emblematic for the novelist's gallery of ordinary men whose existence can only be untangled by recourse to an inescapable, debilitating, half-comprehensible history.

Before giving the brief, yet essentially distilled synopsis of his family story, he starts *in medias re*s, in mid-journey, halfway between his departure from his natal East African coast and his arrival in the central African town at the bend of the Congo river, where he wants to reopen the shop he has bought from his friend Nazruddin, himself a refugee. Self-introduction is postponed as the introduction to the foreign place takes precedence. Arrival, which in Naipaul is always

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associated with enigmas and discoveries, is more emotionally charged and thus more suited to introduce the problematic of the novel. That is why the narrative inverts the natural sequentiality of departure and arrival. Arrival, with its disorienting impact, is more suggestive of the disorder which engulfs the character than the image of the idyllic, twilit order of his childhood. Beyond the simple plot revolving around the issue of survival amidst a constantly and dramatically changing reality, the novel's true substance resides in its penetrating meditation on history. In spite of Salim's avowed skepticism of the value of historical knowledge and his simple belief that the life of men and peoples amount to no more than unquestioningly surviving the present, his interrogation of the meaning of African history is astoundingly grasping. Nightingale is of the opinion that Salim's account foregrounds the concept of the death of history, of its futility as an epistemological and ontological compass in the wilderness of postcolonial disorder. But I would contend that what Salim does to try to understand and explain his present through the traumas of the past, by contrasting two different ways of experiencing history: the African and the European.

As he embarks on the presentation of the racial, ethnic and spiritual history of his native community, Salim reconstructs the sinuous tracks of his Africanness, as a composite identity, the sedimentation of centuries of a multiracial, multicultural mingling of people and traditions. His Indian Muslim ethnic group seems unconcerned with myths of origins, and accepts the identity of their present African home.

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…we looked east to the lands with which we traded – Arabia, India, Persia. These were also the lands of our ancestors. But we 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 (12).

He argues that his community lacks a sense of its own history not because they are ignorant of their identity, but because they are practical people whose self-consciousness is internalized in the continuity of living and doing, and the very continuity of their being is a kind of historical awareness. It is not the fragmented history of dates and events, but an ontological continuum whose very changelessness makes it an inexpugnable assertion of an ancestral epistemology.

My family was Muslim. But we were a special group. We were distinct from the Arabs and other Muslims on the coast; in our customs and attitudes we were closer to the Hindus of north-western India, from which we had originally come. When we had come no one could tell me. We were not that kind of people. We simply lived; we did what was expected of us, what we had the previous generation do. We never asked why; we never recorded. We felt in our bones that we were a very old people; but we seemed to have no means of gauging the passing of time. Neither my father nor grandfather could put dates to their stories. Not because they had forgotten or were confused; the past was simply the past (12).

He contrasts this kind of unarticulated, unwritten, yet no less real self-consciousness of his people with the European pre-occupation with the textual recording of the past. The records of their explorations and mapping out of the world represent for Salim the only repository of world and self-knowledge. Salim understands that the existence of people like him has always constituted the object of the anthropological and ethnographic interest of a pre-eminently Eurocentric body of knowledge. On the other hand, he is conscious that without this mediation of the European book he would not have been able to piece together an image of his race and culture.

All that I know of 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;

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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 (13).

Salim is aware of and articulates the difference between the Europeans' teleological concept of history and the telescoped notion of heritage of his own culture, where the past can be read and in the changelessness of the present. Their self-image is constructed not through the European teleology of progress, but through the perenniality of their traditional way of life. If for Europeans history reflects the impermanence of all things in a world ruled by change, Salim defines his community's sense of history as the internalization of permanence, a transcendence of the factual reality of chronology and event into a metaphysical contemplation of the timelessness of their world. Rooted in the immutability of their reality, they seem unaware of the succession of ages, the rise and fall of empires, of the sweeping tides of change which are about to disrupt the uninterrupted flow of their existence.

Salim, however, fed on the European knowledge which mediates an interpretation of his reality as if through a screen of othering, grows up with a different world view, and is able to distinguish in the undifferentiated flow of the present the dire warnings for the future. Growing up with a foreign knowledge of beginnings and ends, he understands the inevitability of endings and change. 'But it came to me while I was still young, still at school, that our way of life was antiquated and almost at an end' (17). He recognizes in the beginning and ending of his community's history on the continent the fortuitous dislocations brought about by massive historic upheavals, which neither individuals nor societies can really control. 'One tide of history – forgotten by us, living only in books by Europeans that I was yet to read – had brought us here…Now…another tide of history was coming to wash us away' (22). But as he is to find out in the town at the bend in the river, he is yet to experience the successive shockwaves of other tides.

His arrival at the formerly prosperous trading outpost at the great meander in the Congo reveals to him the raw wounds of the violent upheaval of independence. The introductory reference to the recent postcolonial 'troubles' subsumes any specificity of the place to a metonymic illustration of a generalized African reality, and is intriguing in its casual, matter-of-fact assessment of a reality that seems almost normative. 'The country, like others in Africa, had had its troubles after independence. The town in the interior, at the bend in the great river, had almost ceased to exist' (3).

The epitome of the historic European deception, of their duplicitous claim to governing Africa, is identified by Salim in the Latin inscription still legible on the ruined monument to the steamer service: '*Miscerique probat populos et foedera jungi*. 'He approves of the mingling of the peoples and their bonds of union'' (70). This contrived 'motto of the town' comes from the corruption of a line in the Aeneid, in which the gods warn Aeneas of their disapproval of his settling in Africa and of the ensuing mingling of peoples. The resulting version consecrates the opposite ideology. Salim is astonished by the blasphemous slyness with which, by changing the original wording and meaning, the Europeans have tried to sanction the imperial edifice. He interprets such arrogance not only as a claim made under false pretences, but also as a blasphemy likely to provoke divine wrath and thus to court disaster. If the foundation of Rome was carried through by complying with the gods' will, the empire is seen to have been founded not only on the defiance of ancient natural laws, but also on the disobedience of divinely sanctioned myths of purity.

I was staggered. Twisting two-thousand-year-old words to celebrate sixty years of the steamer service to the capital! Rome was Rome. What was this place? To carve the words on a monument beside this African river was surely to invite the destruction of the town. Wasn't there some little anxiety, as in the original line in the poem? (71).

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Paradoxically, the propagandistic dishonesty of the town's sham motto, chanted obsessively at key points in the novel like an ominous spell, is contrasted to the commanding steadfastness which Salim finds in the figure of Father Huismans, a solitary, emblematic bearer of the imperial myth. The Belgian priest appears as an idealized icon of the white man's mission in Africa, combining in his personality several facets of the white civilization: the colonizer's confidence in the nobleness of his civilizing mission, and the true explorer's love of the mysterious Africa. A passionate anthropologist and ethnographer, he collects and classifies African masks and other artifacts, in a kind of *sui generis* museum of African art and spirituality. Salim is disconcerted by the irreconcilable contradictions at the heart of this man, whose firm belief in the imperial mission is in dissonance with his avowed dedication to Africa. By confronting the lie of the Latin inscription with father Huismans' unquestioning belief in the truth justifying his work and existence, Salim foregrounds the relativity of historical truths and myths of cultural identity.

To Father Huismans the words were not vainglorious. They were words that helped him to see himself in Africa. He didn't simply see himself in a place in the bush; he saw himself as part of an immense flow of history. He was of Europe; he took the Latin words to refer to himself. It didn't matter…that there was such a difference between what he stood for in his own life and what the ruined suburb near the rapids had stood for. He had his own idea of Europe, his own idea of civilization…And yet he stressed his Europeanness and his separateness from Africans less than those people did. In every way he was more secure (71).

The enviable security of Father Huismans and his serene capacity of getting the best of both worlds comes from the certainties of unflinching faith in Europe's grand civilizing design. Salim recognizes that this is what sets them apart. He is awed by the sturdiness of character and conviction, by the ingenuousness of his feeling of self-worth and pride instead of the shame or guilt others would expect.

For everything connected with European colonization, the opening up of the river, Father Huismans had a reverence which would have surprised those people in the town who gave him the reputation of being a lover of Africa and therefore, in their way of thinking, a man who rejected the colonial past. That past had been bitter, but father Huismans appeared to take the bitterness for granted; he saw beyond it (72).

Huismans is not only presented as the archetypal, illuminated and illuminating colonist, but as the embodiment of the European vision of its own, and implicitly, the world's history – the teleological concept of continual progress and evolution, which is the most cherished Western fetish since the Enlightenment. Such is his optimism about the beneficent mingling of peoples and the uninterrupted march of progress that, incapable of apportioning blame to either side, he can cast a lenient eye on the destructive African rage.

For him the destruction of the European town, the town that his countrymen had built, was only a temporary setback. Such things happened when something big and new was being set up, when the course of history was being altered…Out of simple events beside that wide muddy river, out of the mingling of peoples, great things were to come one day (72).

But as demonstrated by post-independence upheavals and disorders everywhere, the colonizer's truth rarely coincides with the truths of the colonized people. The white man's fantasy, however lofty, is given the lie by the reality of the African rage. It is the rage of people forcefully mingled together, whose traditional social formations, based on tribal identity, tribal enmities or alliances were shattered by the arbitrary boundaries traced after 'the parcelling out of the continent' (13). This meant either the separation of members of the same tribe or the bringing together of inimical tribes. Thus, the order in the colonizer's eye becomes the black men's disorder, which, after independence, they will always try to replace with their own order. The civil war, 'the semi-tribal war that had broken out at independence and shattered and emptied the town' (75) signifies

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such an attempt to set the historical records right, to recreate the black man's lost sense of order. Unfortunately, in its indiscriminate rage, the African 'trampling on the past' becomes self-destructive, almost suicidal. 'Even local Africans had begun to talk of that time as a time of madness. And madness was the word' (75). Salim's interpretation of African anger and disorientation is as profound as it is empathetic. Behind it we detect Naipaul's generalized compassion for postcolonial societies in search for their identity, which seems to go undetected by those who accuse him of perpetuating the myth of the African darkness. It is Naipaul's profound identification with the postcolonial plight everywhere that helps and entitles him to make 'darkness visible' for both sides. Without endorsing the irrationality of destruction, he highlights the reason behind it, and his revelation of the core of disorder is an implicit indictment of the ultimate unreasonableness of colonialism.

At independence the people of our region had gone mad with anger and fear – all the accumulated anger of the colonial period, and every kind of reawakened tribal fear. The people of our region had been much abused, not only by Europeans and Arabs, but also by other Africans. And at independence they had refused to be ruled by the new government in the capital. It was an instinctive uprising, without leaders or a manifesto. If the movement had been more reasoned, had been less a movement of simple rejection, the people of our region might have seen that the town at the bend in the river was theirs, the capital of any state they might set up. But they had hated the town for the intruders who had ruled in it and from it; and they had preferred to destroy the town rather than take it over (75-6).

Trying to rationalize the paradoxical, erratic working of the African mind, torn between the need for stability, the compulsion to annihilate the past, but also the dread of some externally imposed future, Salim is able to grasp and articulate the dialectic of a historical pain perpetuating itself into the drama of self-inflicted suffering. The horror of past disorder turns into the dread of any future order. The death of the past cannot sustain the life of the present.

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