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A Bend in the River
V.S. Naipaul

Critical Response Essay

2050 Words.

“The world is what it is” (Naipaul, 2011: 3): this bitter sophism persists throughout *A Bend in the River*, and yet the nature of the ‘world’ in a postcolonial context is, according to the novel, barely discernible. In his 1979 work, V.S. Naipaul grapples with the complexity of history and identity in a world that is bereft of the old semiotics of order.

The independent Africa that the protagonist Salim describes is intermittently anarchic. Periods of peace are interrupted by the breakdown and reinvention of institutionalized order; a pattern has been established, whereby the new ‘new order’ periodically culminates in a cyclical reversion to chaos. As Salim comes to understand, in the globalized, fractious world of postcolonial Africa, the notion of stability is archaic: whereas his family lived in ignorance, peacefully – “...as they had always done...” (Naipaul, 2011: 12) – on the coast for centuries, Salim is confronted with the knowledge that the balance of power is intrinsically fragile – “it could be blown away at any time” (Naipaul, 2011: 15). Old ways of knowing and being in the world no longer apply to the environment in which the characters find themselves living. Consequently, they are compelled to redefine the terms of an existence that has been nullified by a crisis of faith – “My own pessimism, my own insecurity, was a more terrestrial affair... The insecurity I felt was due to my lack of true religion... the pessimism that can drive men on to do wonders” (Naipaul, 2011: 16). The novel’s karyotype is forbidding, self-negating and at times misanthropic. As far as the reader is concerned, it never resolves into any kind of decisive prognosis; there is very little to assuage despair.

Edward Said described Naipaul’s bestseller as “pernicious” (Harrow, 1991: 322). He regarded Naipaul in terms of a “...third worlder denouncing his own people...” (Wise, 1996: 60), and accused the novel of uncritically reproducing racialized binaries. Whereas some critics have defended Naipaul as a commendably neutral commentator – that is, as a “disinterested truth-seeker” (1996: 60) – others have censured the novel as a continuation of Conrad’s Manichean rhetoric, doubly foul in the hands of the colonized subject.

Certainly, a number of representations in *A Bend in the River* are markedly troubling. Salim, the protagonist-narrator, inhabits a position of racial and social liminality which theoretically poises him for impartiality ; he is simultaneously far removed from his Arabian predecessors, and unable or unwilling to identify as an African proper: “...the man not of Africa lost in Africa, no longer with any strength or purpose to hold his own, and with less claim to anything than the ragged, half-starved old drunks from the villages who wandered about...” (Naipaul, 2011: 79). His apparent ‘detachment’ is deeply problematic, given that he unequivocally essentializes African identities. He is, for example, at pains to distinguish himself from Ferdinand, his incongruous local ward: “I knew there was something that separated me from Ferdinand and the life of the bush around me” (Naipaul, 2011: 42). It is little wonder then that critics are skeptical: “pseudo-scientific racism” (Harrow, 1991: 323) has, after all, historically depended on a display of scholarly distance for its legitimacy.

Of course, the idea of detachment is, to use Salim’s term, “bogus” (Naipaul, 2011: 19). As Naipaul would no doubt himself agree, the idea of impartiality is farcical in postcolonial Africa. Salim, no less than his black African counterparts, is the product of a highly stratified society. Nobody exists in a vacuum, and Salim’s peripheral positionality does not detract from his unconsciously Eurocentric outlook – he “... had become what the world outside had made [him]...” (Naipaul, 2011: 244). The only exposure he has had to representations of Africa has come from European stamps and books, which necessarily inform his conception of value: “It was as though... a foreigner had said, ‘This is what is most striking about this place’” (Naipaul, 2011: 15).

While I agree that the onus is on modern writers to represent historically marginalized populations responsibly, to simply dismiss the novel as ‘racist’ is, I think, reductionist and simplistic. After all, it is unnecessary to conflate Naipaul’s views with those of Salim. Doing so prevents one from reflecting on the implications of the protagonist’s racialized views, and eclipses the novel’s preoccupation with the crucial interplay of history and identity. One could expend a great deal of energy evaluating the balance of racism and self-reflection

in the novel, as indeed many scholars have done, exhaustively. However, I think that it is more worthwhile to examine the narrator's reliance on archetypes as an invalid but historically derived means of interpreting his profound sense of alienation. The narrator's reliance on Eurocentric ideologies to contextualize his existence reveals the perilous nature of history itself, history as deeply pervasive European construct, a potent colonial import, the "...lies of white men" (Naipaul, 2011: 17).

Superficially, one could regard Indar's vindication of London— his suggestion that "London, or a place like it" constitutes the "only...[worthwhile]...civilization" ... – (Naipaul, 2011: 151) as nothing more significant than further evidence of Naipaul's apparent glorification of Europe. However, the significance of London for Indar, and subsequently for Salim, surpasses its associations as a contemporary European metropolis. Indar describes his allegiance to the place of his birth in terms of a kind of historical castration, a powerless submission to a predetermined, marginal identity: "Here, take my manhood and invest it for me. Take my manhood and be a greater man yourself, for my sake!' No! I want to be a man myself" (Naipaul, 2011: 152). For Indar, London offers to facilitate the kind of personal autonomy that ennobles individual endeavor, and prevents one from being entangled "... in the attitudes...[and]...the lives and jobs that other people have laid out for...[one]" (Naipaul, 2011: 144). In such a city, it might be possible to transcend history, and nationalist ideology and factionalism: "After all, we all make ourselves according to the ideas we have of our possibilities" (Naipaul, 2011: 152). London's splendor represents a kind of dynamism – "...men are in movement, the world is in movement..." (Naipaul, 2011: 141) – that, for Indar, has the potential to nullify the bonds of the past.

A Bend in the River dramatizes the ways in which individuals endure the destruction of their "...faith in the way the world...[is]... ordered" (Naipaul, 2011: 148). The characters have distinct approaches to survival; they are rendered almost allegorical in their respective allegiances to particular strategies. Father Huismans, the principal of the decaying colonial lycée, accords with "...the stupendous idea of civilization..." (Naipaul, 2011: 65) associated with the

professed aims of the colonial project. Huismans is fascinated by the polytheistic mysticism of Africa's past; he is emblematic of the colonialist conception of history (Vincent, 1991: 340), as the cumulative (appropriative) progression towards utopian modernity. It is telling, then, that he is murdered: his gruesome death signifies the systematic annihilation of European models of understanding. Nevertheless, until his gory fatality – the symbolic just deserts of voyeuristic anthropologist-types – he adheres to the idea that from “... simple events beside that wide muddy river, out of the mingling of peoples, great things were to come one day” (Naipaul, 2011: 64).

Conversely, Indar advocates completely dissociating oneself from one's cultural, national and historical connections, in order to survive: “You stop grieving for the past. You see that the past is something in your mind alone, that it doesn't exist in real life. You trample on the past, you crush it. In the beginning it is like trampling a garden. In the end you are just walking on ground” (Naipaul, 2011: 112). I am inclined to believe that Naipaul is largely sympathetic to this approach, in spite of its dubious applicability. Indar is seemingly liberated by his recognition that ‘home’, and ‘history’ are themselves nothing more than constrictive constructs, Western intellectual devices that have been propagated to keep him in his sociopolitical place: “...all men live in constructs. Civilization is a construct... You can be sentimental and embrace the idea of your own defeat... We've been clinging to the idea of defeat and forgetting that we are men like everybody else” (Naipaul, 2011: 155).

The notion of ‘home’, for Indar and ultimately for Salim as well, is nothing more than an anachronism, critically outmoded ideological residue. The decay of the small town's physical infrastructure emphasizes the fragility of the existent social order, as it manifested in intimate, domestic microcosms like the family compounds of old. For the two perpetual immigrants, the idea that one's identity is inextricable from one's location cannot be taken seriously if they are to combat the existential terror associated with their tenuous roots in Central Africa: “I was homesick, and had been homesick for months. But home was hardly a place I could return to. Home was something in my head. It was something I had lost”

(Naipaul, 2011: 155). History and tradition, as Naipaul implies, are potentially destructive constructs: they are an attractively self-contained veneer, through which human beings are calamitously empowered to perpetuate institutions like slavery, "...in the service of an ideal" (Krishnan, 2012: 820). Consequently, for Indar and for Salim, the best approach to survival is one which eschews this kind of "make-believe" (Naipaul, 2011: 152).

History has failed in the postcolonial world as a medium of truth and connection. One trope follows another, without yielding social unity or alleviating misery. "Trampling on the garden" (Naipaul, 2011: 152) of the past amounts to the destruction of something beautiful and sacrosanct, but fundamentally artificial. Both Salim and Indar are reticent to submit to the kind of fatalism which prevented their families from adapting in time to preserve the fruits of their labor. Whereas in London, Indar can observe the works of men who have long been dead in mundane trivia like engravings on a metal bench, the works of his own family have been eradicated without ceremony: "In another country such effort and such talent would have made us millionaires... or at any rate secure for some generations. There it was all going up in smoke" (Naipaul, 2011: 259). Indar has elected to "withdraw from the whole business", to be "...himself everywhere" (2011: 158). In accordance with this studied cosmopolitanism, he renounces his allegiance to the past, and professes to have found a salve in this brand of qualified amnesia.

Although this approach is, in many respects, appealing, Naipaul appears to be cognizant of the fact that it constitutes, at best, an incomplete solution. There are too many flaws apparent in Indar's approach. Raymond, the expatriate historian from America, foils Indar's conception of Americans as "...individuals fighting to make their way..." (Naipaul, 2011: 153). Indeed, the supreme irony is that Raymond represents exactly the kind of compromised manhood that Indar revolts against, in spite of coming from the Developed World. He has sacrificed himself to the "Big Man" (2011: 101), and fallen from grace; his unfaithful wife reduces him to the definition of a cuckold. In fact, when it comes to the point, not even Indar is capable of casting off the shackles of history in a meaningful way –

when his identity as a man of the world is challenged, he relies on a homecoming fantasy to tide him over: “There is some dream village in his head” (Naipaul, 2011: 244).

Salim, influenced by Indar and by his experiences in the town, comes to agree with his philosophy, and to ostensibly disregard his past. But, on establishing himself in the new town, Salim reconstructs the dynamics of his family compound, on a smaller scale in the flat he shares with his unpaid servant, Metty. Metty belongs to the family of slaves that has lived on Salim’s family property for generations. In spite of his best intentions, Salim is unable to extricate himself from his past: it literally follows him, and it determines the essence of his outlook. History might be an imported construct, but it is nevertheless one which determines the quality of people’s lives in the present: the world is what it is, but only because of what it has been. At the end of the novel, Ferdinand rescues Salim because of his historical role as benefactor (Krishnan, 2012: 821). For men “adrift” (Naipaul, 2011: 151), like Salim and Indar, the only thing that anchors them is their relationships with other people, which are grounded in the past. The characters are necessarily a product of their social and historical locations – herein the tragic nature of the postcolonial African state inheres. In a sense, then, what Indar recommends is impossible, and the ramifications of this revelation are tremendously disheartening.

A Bend in the River is terrifying, precisely because it is bereft of viable alternatives to the “fear...[and]...shame” (Naipaul, 2011: 76) that characterize Salim’s experience. The novel successfully evades finite interpretation; indeed, Naipaul himself characterized it as “mysterious”, “...matter half realized, hardly understood, coming slowly to light and lucidity” (2011: 1). In spite of characters’ myriad approaches to contextualizing their experiences, no single ideology dominates as an assurance of ontological deliverance.

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