

V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A BEND IN THE RIVER*

A TRAGIC VISION OF EVIL

Jeffrey Folks

A Bend in the River opens with a forthright statement of a sobering truth: "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it."¹ To be nothing, both in material terms and in terms of liberty, and to have no place of one's own in the world have been the cruel lot of most human beings over the course of history. As V. S. Naipaul conceives it, it is only by way of an uncommon effort of mind, will, and faith—the commitment required to create and sustain a higher civilization—that one can truly exist. Indeed, it is only under the fortunate conditions of democratic capitalism, with its respect for personal liberty and property rights, that this effort is likely to succeed. In much of the world, however, these freedoms have been and remain limited at best.

Among Naipaul's finest novels, *A Bend in the River* most directly addresses this, perhaps the most important moral concern

of our times: the widespread failure to acknowledge and support freedom and the rule of law in the context of an increasingly ideological conception of politics and society. While tyranny has always threatened and often overwhelmed liberty, perhaps only in our time has the assault on freedom been so persistently and energetically carried out in the name of progress. While in a broader sense the tyranny of the modern state may be viewed as simply a manifestation of the enduring problem of human evil, those who promise a utopian future in return for the loss of freedom are especially dangerous because of the seductiveness of their appeal. What progressivism does share with the more blatant tyrannies of the past is the impulse to secure power over a vast number of subjects at whatever cost to human happiness.

Within Naipaul's oeuvre, *A Bend in the River* marks a new turn toward a focus on the nature of evil and a greater seriousness

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in its representation. Unlike a number of Naipaul's earlier works of fiction that employed the concept of mimicry to probe the tragicomic failure of postcolonial island nations, including *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *Miguel Street* (1959), *A Bend in the River* offers an unrelenting vision of human evil, unalleviated by humor or irony. Published nearly two decades after his celebrated early work *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), *A Bend in the River* is the first of Naipaul's novels to offer an expansive, fully articulated, and unflinching treatment of his newfound sense of human vulnerability.

Set largely in an unnamed African country in a settlement at the bend of a great river, the novel centers on the character of Salim, an ethnically Indian Muslim from the east African coast who has decided to seek his fortune in central Africa. Salim is unfortunate enough to have purchased his shop at a moment of civil unrest, and though he arrives with buoyant hopes and enjoys success for a time, his business is increasingly undermined by events beyond his control. Eventually, as the country's president consolidates power, Salim's business is confiscated and his very life is threatened by the ever more chaotic and violent course of events. Though the president is unnamed in the novel, he would seem to be based largely on Mobutu Sese Seko, the longtime ruler of the Congo whose creation of a personality cult portraying his mother as the "African Madonna" and himself as the savior of African culture helped secure his rule. The personality cult was bad enough, but worse followed. As conditions degenerated, the result of mismanagement and corruption, Mobutu ordered the Zairianization of the economy, including the nationalization of foreign businesses.

In the novel Salim finds himself caught up in just such a course of events. With his shop

seized and its title transferred to Théotime, the overbearing new owner for whom he is forced to work, Salim attempts to raise funds to flee the country by trading in illegal ivory. This effort at self-preservation only leads to greater danger, however, as Salim is betrayed by his house servant, is jailed, and faces the possibility of execution. He escapes but only as a result of the fortuitous intervention of Ferdinand, the son of a river trader whom he has assisted in the past.

To understand the author's intentions in *A Bend in the River*, it is necessary to delve beyond the details of the plot and to appreciate the connotations of Naipaul's use of the word "civilization," the word that grounds every aspect of the novel. In his essay "The Universal Civilization," the 1990 Wriston Lecture presented at the Manhattan Institute, Naipaul singled out the right to "the pursuit of happiness" from the American Declaration of Independence along with the Christian doctrine of "do unto others" as prominent elements of what he meant by a redemptive universal civilization. Naipaul might as well have included in his definition the Declaration's other two rights, "life" and "liberty," and it is "life" in particular, that most fundamental of human rights, with which he is most concerned in *A Bend in the River*. At the center of the novel is Naipaul's newfound grasp of the terrifying fragility of human existence in the absence of civilization and his deepening comprehension of the implications for moral action that such awareness entails.

As a vehicle for exploring this awareness, Naipaul's choice of a susceptible protagonist adrift in an unstable corner of central Africa was an inspired artistic decision. Cast into the political anarchy of a fictionalized central African republic, Salim finds his assumptions of individual autonomy challenged, especially as he grasps the possibility of his

own imminent demise. Everywhere he looks, Salim encounters the specter of death. Significantly, however, it is not simply human mortality, death as the natural end of existence, that unsettles him, but another sort of death altogether. What this young man faces in the unraveling of civilized norms is the likelihood of a sordid, utterly banal end at the hands of an unfeeling minor official. Stripped of the most fundamental of human rights, he finds himself in the clutches of a police state, and an unstable one at that, in which the execution of anyone caught in officialdom's net becomes purely a matter of routine.

Naipaul's recognition of the flagrant insecurity of life in the absence of the rule of law was spurred by a frightening happenstance the year before he began work on *A Bend in the River*. In his essay "Argentina and the Ghost of Eva Peron," the author presents a vivid account of his detention by policemen in the northern Argentinian region of Jujuy. It was only his possession of a distinctively shaped tobacco pipe that saved him from further detention and possible execution: the pipe's odd appearance, more British than European and certainly not Argentinian, convinced local officials that Naipaul was in fact a foreigner and so "*por no interesar su detención*."² Naipaul was released, but having come so near to torture if not death, he found it impossible to complete the journalistic account of Argentina he had intended to write. That same year he began work on *A Bend in the River* and so, as he noted, "transferred...the emotion of Argentina, and even the isolated police building in the bush of Jujuy, to my Central African setting."³

Some idea of what Salim undergoes can be gleaned from historian Michela Wrong's vivid account of Mobutu's rule at the time,

In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo. This was the period in which Mobutu attempted to transform the Congo into a revolutionary society of *citoyens* and *citoyennes* modeled on a number of dictatorial regimes, including that of Mao Zedong. This was the tense phase in which, having rejected the remaining vestiges of colonial rule, Mobutu led his country in a socialist experiment in which much of the nation's private property was confiscated and redistributed by the state and, subsequently, the country descended into poverty and authoritarianism. Though not intended as a historical account per se, and certainly not limited to central Africa in its implications, *A Bend in the River* offers a detailed depiction of a similarly unraveling state in which individual lives are at the mercy of corrupt civil servants who terrorize the population with the president's assent. In Naipaul's fictionalized account, even the system of river commerce, from time immemorial the primary means of distribution for food and goods, is foreclosed as travel becomes perilous. With the photograph of the president displayed everywhere, "getting bigger and bigger, and the quality of the prints finer" (168), the ruler attempts to govern by the force of his personality, but failing that he soon resorts to mere force. Inevitably, this process is accompanied by a declining standard of living as resources are confiscated to prop up the regime.

Still, as several critics have noted,⁴ the setting and depiction of African society, including the business of the "Big Man," the expat enclave, and the images of a rapidly disintegrating order, are not the primary concern of the novel. The moral focus is on what transpires within Salim himself. Everything in the book builds toward the moment when Naipaul's Everyman grasps the reality of his vulnerable condition in the

absence of civilized rule. Having lived with the heedless confidence of youth, his life centered on monetary gain and physical gratification, Salim is suddenly transformed by his recognition of his own helplessness and that of all men in absence of the redemptive structures of order and belief. All the rest is now unimportant, including his disturbing and ultimately inconsequential affair with Yvette. To his credit, Salim is unable to sustain the pretense of the meaningfulness of this intensely erotic relationship as conditions around him deteriorate. The affair ends abruptly as Yvette flees the country without notifying her lover, evidence of the shallowness of the relationship from her point of view as well.

The singular focus of Salim's remaining years, one suspects, will be his reflection on human vulnerability and the means of its assuagement. Paradoxically, this recognition of human frailty affords strength or, as Salim conceives it, the "way out." Ancient wisdom understood this paradox perfectly, but initially Salim does not. At the beginning, he is no different in essentials than those other expats who have arrived to plunder the surplus wealth of the continent, nor is he really that much different from the rapacious president and his followers. None of these, neither the expats nor the Congolese elite, appear to realize the Faustian bargain they have made in trading the security of civilization for fleeting advantage. Indeed, Salim enters the novel as the epitome of the half-formed and willfully ignorant modern man: transient, rootless, faithless, and entirely confident in his own powers. Having traveled from his home on the coast in search of easy gain, Salim enters a society that is subject to the arbitrary rule of those in power. With his plan of cashing out at just the right moment and believing himself immune to all risks, Salim is not just willfully blind:

he is a participant as well in the enormous scheme of evil that engulfs the country. Eventually, having lost his livelihood and his personal security amid the general disorder, Salim becomes "the man not of Africa lost in Africa" (179)—a man, in other words, who has "become nothing," in Naipaul's brutally honest assessment.⁵

This novel's central theme, the necessity of a redemptive civilization, is dramatized not just through Salim but also through the story of his childhood friend, Indar. An African of Indian descent who studies at a British university and who, as a result of his experiences in the larger world, gains perspective on himself as a man "of two worlds" (145), Indar resembles Naipaul himself in many respects. Indeed, Naipaul once stated that in his plan for the novel, Indar "will be me,"⁶ and in terms of Indar's British education, analytical skills, and self-awareness, this is certainly the case.

In an extended monologue, Indar relates how after graduation he found himself excluded from opportunities available to British citizens. Even Indar's interview for a job with the Indian High Commission devolves into farce as he is shifted about from the office of one minor official to another. He departs enraged and immediately slips into contemplation of a fantasized homeland, neither the African home he had known as a boy nor any other actual place, but a vision he himself conjures up. It is in this hour of despair that Indar experiences a great epiphany: "I understood that London wasn't simply a place that was there, as people say of mountains, but that it had been made by men" (151). In such a place he must make his way as others have before him. "For someone like me there was only one civilization and one place—London, or a place like it" (151–52).

The importance of this passage cannot be overstated, although its meaning is open to interpretation and has, I believe, often been misinterpreted, as has the novel as a whole.⁷ Naipaul certainly does not intend the parochial view that London is the cosmopolitan center of the universe or that participation in the universal civilization is limited to those who reside in a few leading international centers. What he does suggest is that a clear distinction exists between those societies in which individual rights and the rule of law are protected and those, like the Congo of the 1970s, in which they are not. In London and "place[s] like it," personal freedom and opportunity exist for all, while in much of the world the individual lives under the yoke of despotism, corruption, and repression.

This does not imply that success is easy or assured even in an ordered society such as Britain's. Indar realizes that he must make of life what he can and that he will be rewarded only roughly in proportion to his efforts. But the most important aspect of his epiphany is the recognition that in a state such as Britain, despite vestiges of privilege and bias, he can live as a free man, choosing his path in life without fear of intimidation. "I was going to surrender my manhood to nobody," he proudly proclaims (151). That declaration, which sounds very much like Naipaul's assessment of his own hard-won independence following graduation from Oxford and his fierce struggle to establish himself as a writer, depends on the existence of opportunities that are themselves conditioned by the perpetuation of civilized norms.

Through much of the novel, Salim is oblivious to the need for civilization of this sort. So too is Raymond, the resident Africanist who has bartered his academic reputation for a comfortable and seemingly undemanding role as adviser to the country's ruler. Unlike Indra, Raymond has not

chosen to make his way within the universal civilization: he has elected to serve tyranny instead, even if he does so under the illusion that he is assisting in a struggle for cultural liberation. During Naipaul's nine months of teaching at Makerere University in Uganda, he observed several expatriate academics similar to Raymond: intellectuals who had bought into the vision of a postindependence African renaissance despite the reality of corruption and impoverishment all around them. At Makerere, Naipaul came to believe "that many of his white colleagues...were playing out private fantasies of their own, and would be undone."⁸ Like Raymond in *Bend*, these academics had little actual contact with the people among whom they were living. Their reading of events was controlled and distorted by an ideological script. By contrast, Naipaul traveled extensively during his time in central Africa and studied local conditions in several countries. His pessimistic outlook at the time was based on close observation and careful study, as was his more optimistic assessment of the Ivory Coast.⁹

Naipaul is hardly blind to the damage wrought by colonialism, but he does not accept the left's argument that one cannot apply universal norms of conduct to newly independent states. Raymond, of course, is a strong proponent of that very argument: that non-Western societies must be allowed to develop according to their own cultural and ethical standards. As Salim comes to realize, however, Raymond is not so much an idealist as he is an opportunist: an academic whose research has been discredited and who resides in a kind of limbo, uncertain of his relation to the president but for the moment retaining his position and privileges. Having published only a few articles in general magazines and obscure journals, always

pretending to be at work on a “big book” on African history, Raymond is a failure in his career because of the inherent falsity of his approach. When Salim finally brings himself to read a few of Raymond’s pieces, he is “appalled” (180) by the way in which Raymond has constructed a self-serving fantasy of postcolonial self-sufficiency on the basis of highly selective data.

As Salim comes to realize, Raymond’s idolization of the president masks the reality of the tyrant’s true nature. Instead of the tyranny that actually exists, Raymond sees only “freedom” and “peace” (133), and he continues as a loyal supporter even as he and Yvette are swept up in the consequences of the leader’s reliance on violence. Still, Raymond never realizes that he and Yvette have become trapped as a result of their collaboration with evil. Eventually, the president creates an authoritarian regime complete with Mao-like forced marches of children holding up the president’s “little book” of *Maximes* and shouting the leader’s full “African” name, a reference to the real-life Mobutu’s adoption of “Mobutu Sese Seko Nkuku Ngbendu wa Za Banga” as his formal appellation. Like so many Western academics with unrealistic theories based on ideology rather than fact, Raymond is so blinded by his commitment that he finds it impossible to see the disturbing quality of this turn of events.

Although he recognizes the fraudulence of Raymond’s life, Salim nevertheless is attracted to the romantic charade that “we all lived beautifully and bravely with injustice and imminent death and consoled ourselves with love” (129). That romantic conception may appeal to Salim’s youthful spirit, but soon enough it is undercut by the brutal reality around him as he watches dozens of fellow prisoners executed in the prison courtyard where he is being held. Imprisoned for a short time before being released

as a privileged foreigner, Salim observes the “unreachable” faces of doomed African prisoners, and he realizes that he “had never seen them so clearly before.” These doomed victims of the regime “had prepared themselves for death not because they were martyrs; but because what they were and what they know they were was all they had” (269). Separated by a single white wall from the busy, uncomprehending world of the town’s marketplace, in which life passes by almost with a sense of normalcy, these doomed souls are proof of the terrible fragility of life and of the necessity of a redemptive civilization that offers opportunity, protection, and order.

Once Salim has been arrested and carried past this wall, he can never recover the illusion that security is the natural condition of mankind. As the men around him await a specially orchestrated execution to be attended by the president himself, Salim feels “that almost nothing separated me from those men in the courtyard” (270). In other words, he has arrived at the recognition of the insecurity of life in the absence of civilized institutions and beliefs. After his release, Salim escapes on the last weekly river steamer leaving the city. He cheats death, but many others do not, and in the final analysis neither has he, since from now on Salim must live with the knowledge of the precariousness of civilization and of the protection it affords. In the society he is leaving, for the time being at least, the individual possesses no rights, not even that of life itself. As Salim’s rescuer, Ferdinand, tells him: “Nobody’s going anywhere. We’re all going to hell, and every man knows this in his bones. We’re being killed” (272).

At this point, as if to underline the message for the reader, Ferdinand relates a terrifying dream of being driven with a group of men to attend an execution. No one knows who it is that will die, but all know that it will be

one of them, and the truly horrifying part of the dream is that no one knows how he will behave at the end. Will he accompany the victim to the execution ground and attempt to render comfort, or will he abandon him and join in the satisfaction of seeing another die and not himself? Will he retain a measure of humanity, or will he accede to the general condition of violence? That choice, of course, is the dilemma faced by Salim as well. To descend into brutality, as Salim does for a time in his disturbing relationship with Yvette and as Raymond has in his unscrupulous service to the president, is one choice; to participate in the perpetuation of a redemptive civilization is another. In this regard, the “*bend* in the river,” the novel’s central metaphor, suggests the possibility of just such a choice: either an abandonment of civilization or its restoration and safeguarding.

The concluding paragraphs of the novel amplify the horror of the jail scene in which Salim has at last recognized the extent of human vulnerability. In this horrific denouement, the terror of the provincial jail and its casual violence both as Naipaul imagined it in central Africa and as he experienced it in Argentina is amplified as Salim witnesses the slaughter of an entire bargeful of fellow human beings who are attempting to escape the violence just as he is. After the barge carrying hundreds of passengers caged “behind bars and wire-guards” separates from the steamer, gunshots ring out. Detached from the barge, the steamer carries

Salim to safety but not before its searchlights reveal myriad numbers of insects—“moths and flying insects . . . white in the white light” (278). With its suggestion of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, in which whiteness conveys the horror of unconstrained evil, the final lines of Naipaul’s novel achieve a devastating recognition of moral vacuity and loss. Floating adrift, the fate of the barge victims evokes not just a single collapsed society but the potential collapse of the universal civilization everywhere at the hands of a myriad of assaults on order and faith.

The novel’s final scene returns to what Naipaul asserted at the beginning of the journey, that “men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in [the world]” (3). The terror of Naipaul’s flirtation with death in Argentina and his experience of and reflections on central Africa have come together in *A Bend in the River* to create a novel of great moral authority. *A Bend in the River* is not merely an indictment of African dictators and the corruption of Western intellectuals who enable and excuse their misrule but also a cautionary tale for those who would willfully reject the advantages of their own civilization. It is an evocation of the fragility of all human life and a plea for the recovery of the higher forms of civilization that comfort and console, and also restrain, men in the face of their own weakness. In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul achieves a brutally honest and insightful work of fiction and one of particular relevance for our time. †