

CULTURAL LANDSCAPES AND POSTCOLONIAL REVISIONISM: V. S. NAIPAUL'S AFRICAN FICTION

Keywords: postcolonialism; Eurocentrism; revisionism; culture/nature; wilderness

Abstract: *A major concern in V. S. Naipaul's fiction is man's relationship with nature and the cultural and discursive construction of this relation. Most notably in his African novels (In a Free State and A Bend in the River) Naipaul engages critically with a discourse about nature that has its origins in the Romantic period. Nature as wilderness (which the romantic discourse advocated as man's only retreat in the face of ugly civilization) appears in Naipaul's prose as bush, a source of both superhuman beauty and primeval cruelty and fear. The bush, as a cultural construction of nature that remains unaffected by man and his labour, is perceived as alien and destructive, and as threatening to civilized life. Yet civilization itself as an exclusively human construction comes often to be criticized. Naipaul's conception of the relation between the human and the natural can be understood only through his history and his position as a colonial and postcolonial writer. The Romantic concept of wild nature was part and parcel of the colonizing project and its imperialist discourse – as William Cronon remarks (“The Trouble with Wilderness”), this discourse led to the massive genocide and the extermination of Native Americans in the United States, as also happened in Naipaul's native Trinidad. Consequently, Naipaul's critique derives from a postcolonial revisionist project, while his representations of nature tamed by human cultivation reflect his growing concern for finding a way to negotiate between the binary opposites of the human and the natural. My paper intends to circumscribe the ways in which African landscape becomes, in Naipaul's African fiction and non-fiction (The Mask of Africa), a carrier of the traces of colonization and an imaginative exploration of the potential for both evil and good that resides in human-nature interaction.*

Introduction

As one of the major concerns in V. S. Naipaul's postcolonial fiction, the relationship man/nature and the nature/culture divide provide an angle from which the writer, engaging with the issues of colonialism and postcolonialism, proceeds to criticize a certain Eurocentric discourse about nature involved in the practice of colonization. My paper will throw light both on Naipaul's critique, which ties in with his postcolonial revisionist project and on his attempts at negotiating between the seemingly polar opposites of the human and the natural.

* University of Bucharest, Romania

Two Ideas of Nature

When speaking about nature, a provision might seem necessary in order to differentiate between the great mass of substance that envelops human lives and our conceptualization of it. Neil Evernden uses for this purpose a somewhat Lacanian distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘Nature’. While the first represents a real presence, an abstruse and sometimes incomprehensible otherness, the second refers to a “system or model of nature which arose in the West several centuries ago” (xi). This model, as Evernden sets out to demonstrate in his seminal study is a socio-cultural one, in which nature is constructed differently in various historical discourses.

To be speaking about nature in a literary text means to be dealing with just such a social or cultural construction, and with its often conflicting and heterogeneous history. The shift from ‘nature’ to ‘Nature’, from ambiguous and infinite matter to conceptual generalization and abstraction is made possible by a socio-cultural organization of nature in human terms, according to systems of values that are normative or at least prescriptive and that introduce divisions into nature. Contemporary ecological discourse on pollution, argues Evernden, is a telling example of the social creation of nature through inclusion/exclusion of matter and its organization into a system. Organized Nature then becomes the guiding norm for proper human behaviour, divided into natural and unnatural. The natural (which is of course a ‘naturalized’ social construction) serves as an important concept in much ethical and political debate and thus nature finds itself a major actor at the heart of human concerns. Programs for social and political action tend to mobilize discourses on Nature to support them or to create alternative ecological discourses, more attuned to their objectives.

In the essay “Ideas of Nature in the European Imagination,” Tim Cloudsley identifies two main strands of conceptualizing nature in the history of Western thought: while the first sees nature as comprising ‘everything’, including humanity and conceives the human and the natural in a relation of interdependence, the second introduces a division between humanity and nature, between the subjectivity of the first and the objectification of the latter:

For the first, man and other animals and plants (and sometimes non-living objects), have a purpose within existence, in their own right [...]cf. Aristotle's teleology; the Biblical theme of man as keeper or steward of God's garden; the mediaeval vision of nature as wondrous and beautiful, testimony to God's marvellous Creation; or in modern times belief in the harmony of man in nature, their unity, understood biologically and ecologically in terms of symbiotic interdependence, or poetically as a unitary cosmic web.[...] In the second of the two visions, animals and plants, and the non-living world, only exist for man's purpose. Thus thought countless ancient philosophers: there is the Biblical theme that God made other living things for man; there is the other mediaeval vision of nature as a fallen, despiritualized, evil source of temptation, [...] and in modern times Francis Bacon believed in the natural domination of man over nature, as did Descartes. Darwinism was and still is predominantly understood [...]one-sidedly in terms of struggle, conflict, and competition in which human society must win over and control

the rest of nature. A scientific instrumental vision of domination, control, and exploitation of all nature, living and non-living, as normal, inevitable, and correct, came to dominate the European idea of nature. (335)

Evernden contends that the second instrumental vision of control and domination over nature is the historical product of modernity, more specifically of Renaissance, when a new mode of knowledge, based on reason and experimentation replaced the medieval search for knowledge as contemplation and wisdom. While the medieval way to knowing nature was through a kind of empathy which implied a similarity between the human and the natural world (as humanity was seen as part of nature), the Renaissance effected a revolution in the mode of knowledge separating subject from object, the human from the non-human world and postulating the rational/empirical paradigms as the only ways to truth. Modernity is thus responsible for creating Nature by abstracting from nature, and with it a whole history of conquest and domination comes to be enacted. In the words of C. S. Lewis: “We reduce things to mere Nature in order that we may “conquer” them. We are always conquering Nature because “Nature” is the name for what we have, to some extent, conquered” (43).

The critique of colonization and instrumental rationality

The transformation in the mode of knowing which Evernden traces back to the Renaissance can account for the subsequent Enlightenment project of domination and control of nature through instrumental reason and the development of technologies in the age of the Industrial Revolution. The wide scale exploitation of nature is closely connected with European colonization, as it was in the colonies that the first extensive agricultural projects came to be developed and implemented. It should be no surprise, therefore, that after de-colonization and the achievement of independence, a number of voices were raised in protest against the perceived Eurocentric discourse of nature/culture division and the understanding of nature as subordinated to man’s purposes. This discourse was a particularly sensitive spot for the formerly colonized, as the distinction nature/culture (where nature was perceived as inferior and subordinated) had been overlapping that of colonized/colonizer in the hierarchical binaries employed by the imperialistic discourse of colonization. V. S. Naipaul postcolonial fiction engages critically with the Eurocentric vision of nature, tracing parallels between the effects of colonization on humans as well as nature. The relationships of subordination and domination that transform colonial subjects into mimic men with hollow personalities desiccate nature and raise plunder to the status of normal interaction between human beings and the land they inhabit. In Naipaul’s masterpiece *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the mercantilism of the colonial society, coupled with the rush for profit and ever-increasing greed unleashed by the circumstances of WWII lead to the physical devastation of the land. Naipaul documents the spoliation of the earthly paradise at Shorthills (the very

picture of bountiful pristine nature that had attracted the early conquistadors) by the Tulsis, who make a fortune from devastating the natural riches of the land, cutting down cedar trees and selling lorryloads of tropical fruit.

The systematic plunder of the land has its origin in the absence of close ties between the individual and that land. The dislocation occasioned by migration is conducive to a sense of deracination, which coupled with the capitalist drive for profit severs the individual from any responsibility he might acknowledge towards his native surroundings. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is Naipaul's first novel that dwells on the importance of a sense of belonging, of an organic relationship between the human being and its natural environment, a theme later developed in *The Enigma of Arrival*. The writer aligns himself with the critique of instrumental rationality (the type of rationality Enlightenment and later imperialism promoted) that sees man as master of nature, showing that the discourse of mastery and control is in reality just a ruse meant to justify plunder, and that in the end instrumental rationality leads to a natural holocaust. The first victims of human-made, colonial and postcolonial wars are the animals, capable of forging relationships with the humans, yet unable to defend themselves against their technology: "in times of national emergency, it was the zoo and the animals that were the first to suffer. Just a little weakening of the central authority here, and all the elaborate support of the chimpanzee sanctuary would wither away. The chimpanzees had skills [...], they were close to human beings; but against guns, they, like all the world's animals, were helpless"¹ (*Mask* 27). Man is ennobled by the relationship with the environment, by his power to make things grow and watch over their growth, but the reverse also holds true: devastation returns man to his primitive condition, to the "bush," Naipaul's favourite term.

The meanings of 'bush'

This term occurs mainly in Naipaul's African fiction, being often associated with the African landscape, with devastation, the ruins of civilization, with brutality and tribal wars. In both *A Bend in the River* and *In a Free State* this word figures extensively. In the first, bush is used as an antithesis to civilization: while the latter institutes a sense of order, bush is responsible for its degradation: "more unnerving than anything else was the ruined suburb [...] now bush again, common ground, according to African practice. [...] sun and rain and bush had made the site look old, like the site of a dead civilization" (30). More than forty years after his first travel through Africa, in his latest book *The Mask of Africa* Naipaul regards the reverse, the transformation from bush to town as a change for the better and a sign of political stability:

¹ The subject of human cruelty towards animals is largely discussed in an interview for *The Atlantic*, where Naipaul acknowledges that the expression of his feelings for animals is a product of the attempt to overcome his colonial past, the cruelty and brutality present everywhere in native Trinidad. (www.theatlantic.com)

The drive from Kampala to Entebbe was a drive through country; that was part of its restfulness in 1966. It was different now. You could see from the air, as the plane landed, how Entebbe itself had grown, with more than a scattering of villages or settlements far and wide on the damp green ground below the heavy grey clouds of the rainy season; and you understood that what was once bush in an unimportant area of a small colony had become valuable building land. (7)

Moreover, Naipaul sees in the bountiful African forest and vegetation the very reason for the backwardness of the people: “In [the] dependence on bush meat, the easy bounty of the forest, might perhaps be found a reason for the failure of the people here to develop a serious agriculture, which might have created another kind of civilization, another kind of man” (*Mask* 90).

Naipaul construes “the bush” as something innately inimical to human flourishing. *In a Free State* documents Linda and Bobby’s journey through an unsettled African tribal area, where the description of bush and scrub (a desert landscape with only a few traces of vegetation) serves as a reflection and comment on the characters’ increasing sense of insecurity as they have to cross various African settlements. Depictions of scrub and rocky mountains alternate with descriptions of bush, lush green forests, cloudy skies and trees rotting in the swamps created by heavy rains. The African landscape thus oscillates between the extremes of bush and scrub, construed as antithetical and yet equal in their damaging effects on human beings. A sense of impending misfortune is given by the tense dialogues that betray the characters’ uneasiness, interspersed with minute descriptions of the threatening African landscape. In *A Bend in the River* the terror and insecurity felt by Salim the narrator is similarly reflected in his meditations upon African landscape, this time divided in the ecosystems of the river and the floating water hyacinths, on the one side, and the bush, on the other. While the bush stands for everything that is outside civilization, the river allows human civilization (the town built at a bend in the great river) but is ambiguous towards it. Father Huysmans, the European missionary with a strange love for Africa and its religious beliefs is killed and the body with its severed head is discovered on the river. The river acts as an intermediary between the civilization/order upstream and the wilderness/disorder downstream, but its mediating ability is restricted by the water hyacinths, rootless plants that periodically clog it up.

What does “bush” stand for in Naipaul’s fiction? The bush is Naipaul’ term for a cultural construction of nature defined in William Cronon’s article “The Trouble with Wilderness” as wilderness: pristine nature, nature untouched by the hand of man, no longer under his control. Cronon attempts to historicize wilderness and show that despite its understanding as transcendental nature that “can be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization” (7), wilderness is a specific cultural construct, whose meanings have changed significantly throughout the ages. Thus while in the Bible wilderness is constructed as a place that had “little or nothing to offer civilized men and women,” a place of temptations, trials and pain (the Jews wander through the wilderness,

Christ is tempted in the wilderness), with the advent of modernity its signification shifts considerably. The Romantic imagination initiates a sea change in the understanding of wildness, by reversing its meaning: “Wilderness had once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good- it had been the darkness [...] on the far side of the garden wall- and yet now it was frequently linked to Eden itself” (9). Cronon suggests that wilderness became loaded with sacredness, one of the core values of Western civilization (now displaced from the religious onto nature) and permeated with spiritual and religious meanings. In all its manifestations, Cronon contends, wilderness represents a flight from history.² The trouble with wilderness is that by seeking to escape history, the concept transforms Nature into an escape from reality and responsibility and fosters the illusion that “we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world” (16). Naipaul, coming from the formerly colonized West Indies, is acutely aware of the burdens that the colonial past sets on the shoulders of the newly – independent colonies. His early fiction bears testimony to his deeply-ingrained pessimism about real possibilities of change and an acknowledgement that the past must be dealt with responsibly before the construction of the present. For Naipaul the colonial past is hard to erase, and so the early post-independence enthusiasm is regarded with a critical eye, as sheer irresponsible idealism. The bush and the scrub, as alternate faces of wilderness, are conceived as opposites of civilization in a discourse that reflects Naipaul’s pessimism about the scope of political and social change in the post-colony. A significant part of postcolonial post-independence discourse (the so-called nativism, the Negritude movement) focused on the necessity of returning to the pre-colonial roots of the former colonized people and of beginning everything anew (Chrisman and Williams 14). Naipaul, in spite of being deeply affected by the destruction of natural wealth and the erasing of so many peoples from their native land, distrusts any attempt to discard colonial history too easily and return to some imaginary roots. To disregard and erase the colonial past means to make the same mistake that the colonists did when they tried to erase the native populations. At the same time, this construal of wilderness as inimical to human development is Naipaul’s response to the Western Eurocentric concept of wilderness as sacred and

² Here is Cronon’s entire argument: “Indeed, one of the most striking proofs of the cultural invention of wilderness is its thoroughgoing erasure of the history from which it sprang. In virtually all of its manifestations, wilderness represents a flight from history. Seen as the original garden, it is a place outside of time, from which human beings had to be ejected before the fallen world of history could properly begin. Seen as the frontier, it is a savage world at the dawn of civilization, whose transformation represents the very beginning of the national historical epic. Seen as the bold landscape of frontier heroism, it is the place of youth and childhood, into which men escape by abandoning their pasts and entering a world of freedom where the constraints of civilization fade into memory. Seen as the sacred sublime, it is the home of a God who transcends history by standing as the One who remains untouched and unchanged by time’s arrow. No matter what the angle from which we regard it, wilderness offers us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us” (16).

escapist. This whole notion of wild nature as sanctuary was part and parcel of the discourse of Western modernity and it led (if only indirectly, as Cronon demonstrates) to the massive genocide and the extermination of Native Americans in the United States, as also happened in Naipaul's native Trinidad.³ Naipaul's postcolonial revisionist project is thus realist and pragmatic, emphasizing the impossibility of erasing the traces of the past and returning to primitive innocence, while at the same time rejecting the division nature/culture contained in the Western discourse of wilderness as pristine nature. Nature is never pristine, it has always been touched and altered by human hand, and so people must learn to live in harmony with it. The relationship between the human and the natural is a necessary one, although threatened, in its turn, by the uses and abuses of nature justified through another Western discourse, that of instrumental rationality.

An alternative envisioning of the relation man/nature

Against this instrumental vision of nature as radical otherness to be conquered and exploited Naipaul sets an African woman's understanding of nature as a living thing, close to humanity: "When I see a truck full of logs, I don't see trees or wood, I see murdered people. They are not logs for me, but dead people. The trees are creatures just like us" (*Mask* 86). For an African peasant, domestic animals are more than just resources, meat or milk- in a way typical for traditional pre-modern societies dependent on agriculture, peasants developed a close relationship with their livestock, individualizing and considering them almost part of their family: "Her grandfather kept cows. He loved those creatures in the African pastoral way. He knew them all by name and temperament; he knew their colour, the shape of their horns" (16). What these examples reveal is an idea of nature in which the human and the natural are intertwined, a relationship of interdependence that can prevent the objectification of the natural and its rationalization. Colonialism, through both practice and discourse, has separated man from his natural surroundings and has given him a false idea about the meaning of nature: on the contrary, nature is not there to be plundered, but to be cared for, tended and made to yield its produce. "For every tree we cut down," the woman goes on, "we should plant another one" (86). In *The Enigma of Arrival*, the narrator, a colonial living in exile in England, gradually learns that lesson through his relationship with Jack and especially Jack's garden. The garden is the symbol of the union between the human and the natural, and through watching it grow and change through the seasons, the narrator's colonial anxieties and his sense of insecurity gradually fade away, as he realizes that reality is always changing. He acknowledges that his ideal of a pristine, static world given by his colonial education is wrong – and consequently, Naipaul's fiction becomes concerned with exposing the falseness of this idea and revising the meaning of wilderness – of bush, in Naipalese. This revisionist project takes Naipaul back to the pre-modern understanding of nature, before the division nature/culture came into being, when man

³ Naipaul speaks about the genocide of the native inhabitants of Trinidad, the Chaguanes Indians, in his Nobel Prize lecture "Two Worlds" (www.nobelprize.org).

and nature shared the same essence, revealed through contemplation: “this pouring into the Nile [...] one of the majestic things in Nature [...] has that effect still, of encouraging the visitor simply to look, sending the mind back over centuries, perhaps even over the millennia” (*Mask* 26).

Conclusion

Throughout his fiction, Naipaul sets out to deconstruct the idea of wilderness. However one construes wilderness, be it as a dangerous and unpredictable realm, unruly and disorderly (the Enlightenment view) or as a pristine realm of divine inspiration (the Romantic view), the concept is doomed to lead one up a blind alley: the Eurocentric discourse of instrumental rationality or the postcolonial discourse of an imaginary return to unsullied pre-colonial roots. The first discourse is responsible, in Naipaul’s view, for the excesses of colonization, the plunder and destruction of natural environment, while the second, instead of fueling real change and offering a realist pragmatic alternative to the development of former colonies, engages them in the futile pursuit of a ‘pure nature’ and an irrecoverable pre-colonial past. The writer’s revisionist project includes a redefinition of the relationship between the human and the natural in terms of what Neil Evernden describes as a pre-modern understanding of the interdependence of the two.

Works Cited

- Chrisman, Laura and Patrick Williams. “Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: An Introduction.” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams. Edinburgh: Pearson Longman, 1994. 1–20. Print.
- Cloudsley, Tim. “Ideas of Nature in the European Imagination.” *History of European Ideas*. 20. 1–3 (1995). 333–40. Print.
- Cronon, William. “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” *Environmental History*. 1.1 (1996). 7–28. Print.
- Evernden, Neil. *The Social Creation of Nature*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1992. Print.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Abolition of Man*. London: Collins, 1978. Print.
- Naipaul, V. S. *A Bend in the River*. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.
- . *In a Free State*. London: Penguin, 1973. Print.
- . *The Mask of Africa*. London: Picador, 2012. Print.
- . “The Constant Critic, The Lover of Animals.” Interview by Anand Giridharadas. www.theatlantic.com. 4 Jan. 2011. Web. 7 May 2012.
- . “Two Worlds” (The Nobel Lecture). “The Nobel Prize in Literature 2001.” www.nobelprize.org. 7 Dec. 2001. Web. 9 Feb 2011.