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

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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.*

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