

# Utopia, Dystopia and Disenchantment in three Eurocentric narratives of Africa: Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*



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The three novels I selected for this paper may be included in the category, or narrative subgenre, of “narratives of Africa”, whether we intend by that designation those stories, purportedly fictional or not, taking place in Africa, or those texts that, in addition to this, present Africa as their theme or as their object of representation. The simple label “narratives of Africa”, as well as “narratives of India”, presupposes a distancing that is geographical as well as ideological, where the objects of representation are posited as external and even outlandish. The subject, in its turn, is constituted “at home”, its location metropolitan even when the author lives or lived in the places he or she writes about. There are, of course, especially from mid-twentieth century onwards, those narratives usually labelled post-colonial, where representations are supposedly built from the standpoint of those cultures that imperialism overpowered and tried to suppress. Though this issue will be touched upon later, I am not especially concerned with it in this paper, as none of the novels to be dealt with falls within this category.

No one of the authors of the novels under consideration is effectively an African. On the contrary, “to be an African” is, in point of fact, a central problem of the representation embodied in these three novels. Immanuel Wallerstein quotes one of the Persians that visit Paris in Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, who

would be taken for a Parisian when he decided to dress like a European. When someone recognised him and told the others that he was a Persian, people would reply: “Oh, oh, is he a Persian? What a most extraordinary thing! How can one be a Persian?” And Wallerstein continues: “This is a famous question and one that has bedeviled the European mental world ever since. The most extraordinary thing about Montesquieu’s book is that it provides no answer whatsoever to this query.” (32). The setting of the novels under consideration is totally different from that of the Persian travellers, and the formulation of an equivalent query is thus not possible in the same terms. But though not overtly stated, the question “What is an African?”, and that more general one “What is Africa?”, are overall latent in those novels. Let us see how they manage to answer these questions.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards projects for the empire began to include the idea of replacing colonization with conversion, thus allowing for the possibility of an independence of the colonies once they were able to govern themselves. Though always located in an unforeseeable future, sometimes accompanied by such dismal prospects as those voiced by a character in one of Marryat’s novels when he apprehensively asks whether “England will ever fall, and be of no more importance than Portugal is now?” (quoted in Brantlinger 30), these ideas gave nevertheless expression to a historicisation of the empire that would gather impetus as the end of the century was approaching. According to Patrick Brantlinger in his influential study of the relations between literature and empire in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, the passage from mid-century to the late Victorian period would witness an increasingly ominous view of this change, as an optimistic fulfillment of the empire through the adoption of its values by the colonised gave way to different kinds of pessimistic fears, as the “invasion scare” or the fear of decadence or of going native. Or, to put it in a slightly different

perspective, the myth of the “civilising mission” gave way to the myth of the “white man’s burden”.

Though published within the period defined by Brantlinger as that of “late Victorian and Edwardian pessimism” (32), Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* is a good example of what might be labelled as utopian optimism of the empire. The novel follows the archetypal narrative pattern of the quest, which has been recurrently adopted (and adapted) in this subgenre and is likewise the pattern for Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and for Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*. The narrator is a British elephant hunter, Allan Quatermain, who accepts to act as a guide to Sir Henry Curtis and his friend Captain John Good in the search for Curtis’s brother who disappeared somewhere in Africa. Following some hints that seem to associate Curtis’s brother with the legendary mines of King Solomon, the three men depart in search of the mines with the help of a map that had been drawn by a sixteenth-century Portuguese traveller and had come into the hands of Quatermain.

The book is dedicated by the narrator “to all the big and little boys who read it”, and its quality as a masculine story seems to be reinforced by the announcement in the first pages that “there is no woman in [the story] – except Foulata. Stop, though! there is Gagoola, if she was a woman and not a fiend” (10). Foulata will be an almost ethereal virginal native beauty who falls in love with Captain Good and dies, as a good pupil of empire, to save the whites, and in the conviction that hers was an impossible love: “I am glad to die because I know that he cannot cumber his life with such as me, for the sun cannot mate with the darkness, nor the white with the black” (206). Gagoola, or Gagool, will be the old hag that serves as the master-witch and keeper of the secrets of Solomon’s Mines, the embodiment of evil who will be the last resistance to the white men’s invasion, and who will appropriately be crushed to death by the stone door that gives access to the mines. When the narrator announces that there are no

women in the story and only on second thought remembers those two, he is underlining the fact that neither Foulata nor Gagool are appropriate women for a masculine story, the one being too good and the other too bad.

But a masculine story, especially if it is expressly intended, as this one, to address a wide and popular readership (as it happens, for instance, with so-called masculine magazines), is not expected to do without women. Or, to put it more bluntly -- is not expected to do without female bodies. *King Solomon's Mines* is no exception to this rule, as has been repeatedly pointed by critical readings of this novel. The mountainous gate that gives access to the mysterious path leading to the mines is called "Sheba's breasts" (Queen of Sheba – the legendary queen that felt attracted to King Solomon), and the sixteenth-century Portuguese traveller who thus named these mounts is considerably expressive in the instructions he left for reaching the mines: "Let him who comes follow the map, and climb the snow of Sheba's left breast till he comes to the nipple, on the north side of which is the great road Solomon made, from whence three days journey to the King's Palace" (25). When at last the three adventurers have a view of the mountains it is to confirm their sexualised form:

These mountains standing thus, like the pillars of a gigantic gateway, are shaped exactly like a woman's breasts. Their bases swelled gently up from the plain, looking, at that distance, perfectly round and smooth; and on the top of each was a vast round hillock covered with snow, exactly corresponding to the nipple on the female breast.  
(66)

Once they reach Sheba's Breasts it is a paradisiacal view that opens before and below them, "league on league of the most lovely champaign country" (79). And there, in the middle of that pleasurable and delightful landscape, runs the long Solomon's Road, an engineering stonework that certainly bears witness to the arts that in ancient times had been learned from white people, as Quatermain had been told by a man called Evans who first

informed him about the story of the mines. Haggard has in mind the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, that though reported on by Portuguese travellers in the sixteenth century had only very recently been rediscovered and identified with the biblical Ophir, as the high quality of its stonework wouldn't be acknowledged as being of native African origin. This imagined African landscape, thus partaking of an age-old tradition of representing nature "as a pseudogeographic site of male pleasure" (Lewes 2), is the ideal setting for an image of Paradise easily revealed by Haggard's tell-tale symbolism:

The brook, of which the banks were clothed with dense masses of a gigantic species of maidenhair fern interspersed with feathery tufts of wild asparagus, babbled away merrily at our side, the soft air murmured through the leaves of the silver trees, doves cooed around, and bright-winged birds flashed like living gems from bough to bough. It was like Paradise. (82)

Paradise is thus this fruition of the female body, all the more so if we consider its place in the map that had been drawn by the sixteenth-century traveller. As several critics have pointed out, if put upside down this map seems to evoke a female body, maybe appropriately headless. Whether this be considered as an "unconscious sexual allegory" (David Bunn, quoted in Scheick 30) or more straightforwardly as another expression in the novel of "male adolescent pornographic fantasies" (Scheick 20), what is of especial interest here is the fact that, both in its narrative and in its graphic components, Africa is represented in this novel as a female body. Rebecca Scott establishes this link in terms that look forward to the final climactic moment in the novel, when the adventurers are entrapped in the mine and run the risk of dying there: "The horror at the centre of Africa, the horror that is persistently associated with woman, the horror at the centre of the text threatens to release itself" (75). Though there seems to be here a retrospective reading of Conrad into Haggard,

Rebecca Scott's argument is important inasmuch as it stresses this connection between Africa, woman and the text.

The representation of empire implies thus, in *King Solomon's Mines*, this tripartite connection, which takes place in the discourse. But more than the threat posed by that horror mentioned by Rebecca Scott, what seems to assume narrative dominance, both about the middle as well as at the end of the novel, is a sense of harmony expressed in the already indicated view of Africa as a paradise, and also in the utopian final presentation of African society. As they approach the place of the mines, they find that the territory is dominated by a sanguinary and iniquitous tribal chief, Twala, who happens to be a usurper. After an adequate peripety the rightful king will be put into place by the *ex-machina* intervention of the British travellers, who act thus as main agents in initiating a new era of peace. But in order to help the rightful king they make him promise them that "If it be in my power to hold them back, the witch-finders shall hunt no more, nor shall any man die the death without trial or judgment" (130). The civilising mission of empire is thus accomplished, through the rejection of superstition by the natives and by their abiding by the rule of law. The parting words that the new king addresses to the three of them constitute an emblem for a utopian imperialist project, which would be a sort of a non-colonialist imperialist utopia: "But listen, and let all the white men know my words. No other white man shall cross the mountains, even if any may live to come so far. I will see no traders with their guns and rum. My people shall fight with the spear, and drink water, like their forefathers before them" (223).

Come to this point, perhaps we do already have Haggard's answers to those questions posed earlier: "What is Africa?" and "What is an African?" Though at a certain moment it almost makes them die of thirst, as if it were a trial to be overcome, Africa in its most intimate and secluded and mysterious is at last figured as a delightful and welcoming female body, with some perils and

snarers that will however be removed once the introduction of the British values helps restoring the lost primeval order. The British adventurers were necessary agents for attaining that order, and once this is done they may return home with some diamonds in their pockets and a clean conscience of mission accomplished. Up to a point they are naive heroes, that in the course of their adventures happened to restore universalised British values, that as such were also taken as universalised European values and that would in due time become universalised Western values: only less naive, sometimes overtly not so, James Bond and Indiana Jones at one level, the masterminds of the invasion of Iraq at another, were to be the children and the children's children of Allan Quatermain and his friends. In all of them there is this projection of imperial values in the figure of the other, not any more giving him a name and therefore an identity as did Robinson Crusoe with Friday, but believing that the more he will preserve his identity the more he will assume the colonialist's values as if they were his, a process that in theoretical terms corresponds to what is described by Althusser as the interpellation of the subject by ideology. Within this discursive genealogy utopia becomes a central piece in empire's legitimisation move, and has as such an archetypical instance in *King Solomon's Mines*.

When he started writing, Joseph Conrad had a genuine interest in narratives of adventure, and the novels of Rider Haggard, barely one year his elder, were at the time the most well-known example of the genre. Conrad must have read them and, according to Edward Garnett, found them "too horrible for words" (quoted in Dryden 48). *Heart of Darkness* has been repeatedly considered as a kind of anti-Haggard, though those Haggard's novels that have been pointed out as references for this comparison are usually *Allan Quatermain*, a novel written in the wake of *King Solomon's Mines* success, and *She*, a novel where the penetration in Africa is done by a river, as in Conrad's

novel. However, I am not particularly interested in motive or incidental comparisons but rather in the mythical constructions of Africa offered in these novels, and I think that under this heading *King Solomon's Mines* is the right term for comparison.

In both cases the place that becomes the end of the quest is the centre of Africa. Both journeys tend roughly to locate this place at a geographical centre, but this is above all a symbolic centrality. *Heart of Darkness* is a well-known story: its narrator, Marlow, is an experienced sailor who engages on a voyage along a big river in order to enquire about an official named Kurtz, who used to be a paragon of reason and rectitude and enlightenment but had in the meantime become strangely irresponsible to the Company that employed him. The river is supposedly the Congo River, as the place is supposed to be the Congo, later the Belgian Congo and at the time the acknowledged personal property of King Leopold of Belgium, and the Company seems to represent the Belgian Society that explored the natural resources of Congo, namely ivory. It is though important to stress that none of these is named in the novel: neither the river, nor the region, nor the company, not even the continent, Africa (I'll return to that later). The symbolic centrality of the location is marked from the beginning, when Marlow mentions the reason that led him to look for a job in that Company:

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. . . . At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, 'When I grow up I will go there.' . . . But there was one yet—the biggest, the most blank, so to speak—that I had a hankering after. (8-9)

True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see



on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. (8-9)

The river leads into “the depths of the land,” and it is somewhere in that “place of darkness” that Marlow will find Kurtz who, cut from European civilization, had made of himself a despot and a demigod among the natives, fallen to the greed for ivory and resorting to unnameable practices, among which faintly suggested cannibalism might be the worst. Kurtz had succumbed to that risk of going native stated by Brantlinger as characteristic of late Victorian narratives of Empire, and the usual interpretation of this voyage to the depths of the land as a descent into the abyss of the soul only corroborates the symbolic location of that centre. In Conrad as in Haggard, that centre is the last stronghold against the advancement of cartography, be it that one that since Marlow’s boyhood had filled the blanks with names, or be it that rudimentary map to the mines that the Portuguese traveller drew with his own blood. A last stronghold that represents the unknown, the mystery, the occult centre, and that by the simple fact of its narration ceases to be all that, accessed by that cartography that means “filling the blanks with names”, as when the mountains that give entrance to the delights of Africa are named Sheba’s Breasts. Narrating Africa becomes, in a sense, a way of appropriating it.

This appropriation in *Heart of Darkness* is nevertheless totally different from the imperialist utopia of Haggard’s novel. Marlow begins his narrative by referring to the time when Britain was appropriated by the Roman Empire: “I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day. . . . We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday” (6). Conrad historicises the empire, thus making it lose all kind of innocence, if we call innocence that blind belief in the universalism of European values that seems to

animate those Victorian representations of empire that Brantlinger includes in the optimistic phase. Though he seems to be fond of the idea that the British case is different from the others, Conrad knows that the empire always means “brute force – nothing to boast of”, as Marlow says, and continues: “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much”. (7).

Edward Said observed of Conrad that he “*dates* imperialism [and] shows its contingency” (*Culture and Imperialism*, 26), thus differing from other previous representations of empire. But this historicising seems rather to be the expression of that late-Victorian mood that tends to think about the empire in terms of its transitoriness, as in the well-known “Recessional”, a poem written by Rudyard Kipling on the occasion of Queen Victoria’s jubilee in 1897:

Far-called our navies melt away;  
On dune and headland sinks the fire:  
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday  
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!  
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,  
Lest we forget – lest we forget! (140)

It should be remarked that the moment of exaltation of the British Empire that corresponded to the diamond jubilee was also the occasion of this sense of hubris in Kipling and of this dystopic feeling about the empire in Conrad. Among such contradictory feelings this dystopic image of the empire as rendered in *Heart of Darkness* distinguishes Conrad within that pessimistic mood that seems to filter through the end of the century in England. Though having for context the atrocities practiced in the Congo Free State, where Conrad stayed for six months in 1890 (that is, about eight years before writing this novel), *Heart of Darkness* is much more of a projection of a British and European sense of danger,

and even sense of failure, that at the time increasingly pervades the imperialist discourse, as Brantlinger has shown. The answer to that question, “What is Africa?” is given, once again, from inside the European consciousness, as a *discourse* in the sense that Said uses this Foucauldian term in his *Orientalism*. As Kossi Logan put it, “like Haggard, the narrative [*Heart of Darkness*] denies the people of the Congo adequate representation” (156). Only the word “adequate” seems to be in excess in this formulation.

The most devastating criticism of *Heart of Darkness* was produced by the Nigerian novelist and critic Chinua Achebe, who makes very clear this absence of Africa from Conrad’s novel:

Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. (12)

In the novels under scrutiny, “this age-long attitude” becomes a discourse that is constitutive of Africa as an image, or rather as a chain of images, where the mind of Europe (to use an Eliotian concept) has created a specific fiction of the other. Or, as Achebe puts it with some humour, “Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray” (17).

Achebe documents Conrad’s racism in several passages of the novel, being most of them related to descriptions of native bodies. One of these moments refers to the only description of a woman, supposedly Kurtz’s companion, or mistress, to use the term employed by Achebe, who simply mentions this character to highlight her unfavourable presentation when

compared to that other woman in the novel, Kurtz's white intended. But the importance given in the narrative to the lengthy description of this woman (there is none lengthier in the entire novel) deserves greater attention than has been given to it. Kurtz is ill and about to be removed to the steamer when Marlow perceives her on the shore, "a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman":

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul.

She came abreast of the steamer, stood still, and faced us. Her long shadow fell to the water's edge. Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose. A whole minute passed, and then she made a step forward. There was a low jingle, a glint of yellow metal, a sway of fringed draperies, and she stopped as if her heart had failed her. The young fellow by my side growled. The pilgrims murmured at my back. She looked at us all as if her life had depended upon the unswerving steadiness of her glance. Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer into a shadowy embrace. A formidable silence hung over the scene. (75-6)

This is worth quoting in full as it is probably the best discursive representation ever of that perennial Western representation of Africa as woman. She is wild and savage and magnificent; she is superb and proud and deliberate; she is ominous and inscrutable and tragic; and she also exhibits all that *National Geographic* stuff (to use Claude Rawson's apt icon of native stereotypes), being covered in barbarous ornaments, cloths, brass, necklaces, bizarre things that "glittered and trembled at every step", with loads of ivory upon her. That Conrad intends this figure as the image of Africa is also made clear by Marlow's remark that the "colossal body" of the land seemed to see in her the image of its own soul.

The contention that the presence of this woman is functionally related to her contrast with Kurtz's intended, whom Marlow is to meet at the end of the story, is incompatible with the detailed centrality that this female figure assumes in the novel. This is the figure of Africa, distant from Haggard's not only in artistic accomplishment (and *there* is an infinite distance) but chiefly in ontological terms. This wild and uncanny and exotic image of otherness is no more amenable to imperialist dreams of utopia. Worse still, the self is no more the moral block of Haggard's Victorian heroes but has become complex, contradictory and brittle, as documented in Kurtz and elsewhere in Conrad's main characters. In the confrontation of the self with the other as rehearsed here, Africa is as important as Kurtz, is his counterpart. But in this novel there is no Africa as there is no Congo: there is only a continent (there is that memorable view of a warship "incomprehensible, firing into a continent"), and a river, and a woman. Thence her importance.

That native woman will turn up in the novel once more, for a last goodbye to Kurtz, when, very ill, he is being taken down the river in the steamer. His last look at her has "a mingled expression of wistfulness and hate" (84). The enlightened Kurtz had fallen victim to the allurements of "going native", had

probed too deep inside his own soul, had searched under the frail envelope of civilisation and had found the other within himself, a sort of a Faustus in a modernist predicament. And that “other” within, that in the primeval Faustus was the devil, is now Africa in the figure of a female body.

In the precise moment that precedes the first appearance of Kurtz, Marlow, who is in his steamer, gives us his location as being “a stretch of the river . . . with a murky and overshadowed bend above and below” (73). I’ll take this passage, and this place, as the origin of V. S. Naipaul’s title for his 1979 novel, *A Bend in the River*. It is known that Naipaul is an admirer of Conrad, having even said or written somewhere that *Heart of Darkness* would be an appropriate title for his novel if it hadn’t been already taken. As a matter of fact Naipaul intends the unnamed place of the action of his novel as that same centre of Africa or, rather, as that same heart of darkness that had been discursively created by Conrad.

We are now in post-colonial times, when the old colonies of Conrad’s African cartography have achieved political independence. The traveller is not a European, though he doesn’t consider himself a true African:

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. *True Africa was at our back*. (12, my italics)

Salim comes from a Muslim family of Indian origin, and though his home is Africa he will always feel as an exile there. He senses that the old ways that had kept his family stable since immemorial times are over: “To stay with my community, to pretend that I had simply to travel along with them, was to be taken with them to destruction. I could be master of my fate only if I stood alone” (22).

From his friend Nazruddin, Salim buys a shop located somewhere in the centre of Africa, in a town by the great river that after the colonial times had entered into decline: “[t]he town in the interior, at the bend in the great river, had almost ceased to exist” (3). And thus we have again the journey to the centre of Africa, not on foot as in *King Solomon’s Mines*, not by boat as in *Heart of Darkness*, but by car this time: “I drove up from the coast in my Peugeot. That isn’t the kind of drive you can do nowadays in Africa – from the east coast *right through to the centre*. Too many of the places on the way have closed down or are full of blood” (3, my italics).

Neither the river nor the country is named, but their referents are usually considered as being the Congo River and Zaire, that is, the independent country that replaced the Belgian Congo. The plot of the novel cannot be briefly summarised, but those introductory words just quoted give an idea of what, generally speaking, is going to happen. *A Bend in the River* is the story of the degradation of Africa in post-colonial times, through tyranny, corruption, incompetence, tribalism and bloodshed. First a traveller in space in order to arrive at the centre of Africa, Salim becomes a traveller in time who watches, at first, the rise of imitated European patterns which prove untenable and are pulled down by a rising demand for an African identity bringing in its wake the utter collapse of society.

Contrary to the other two, the world in this novel is not seen from the point of view of a European. Quatermain and Marlow are agents of the empire, however critic of the system the latter may be, but Salim is not a European neither an agent of the empire. Though not truly African, Africa is his home, and, even if only for his economic and social interests, he is on the side of progress rather than of decline. His peculiar situation makes of his venture a search for an identity in Africa rather than a search for an African identity, even if the latter ever makes any sense. He is, as many Africans he deals with, trying to build a self

and a future, but in the end what is left is only the agency of power, discretionary power, and the dismal prospect of a country, or a continent, without any future.

Notwithstanding those hints at some lost advantages, this novel needs not to be read as representative of a nostalgia of the empire. Sara Suleri sees Naipaul's narratives as "located . . . at the intersection of the colonial and the postcolonial worlds" (28), and considers that Naipaul's subject is "the anxiety of the empire" (32). When he talks of the anxiety of influence in poetry Harold Bloom says that in it "the shadow cast by the precursors" is dominant (11). If we apply Bloom's formulation to Suleri's account we have a definition of how the presence of the empire looms large over the image of Africa in this novel. The presence of the empire is not positive and absolute, as in the other novels, but remains there as a shadow, as an obstacle that though absent was not vanquished. This is not the reverse of Haggard's utopia that we found in Conrad; it is rather a post-imperial disenchantment.

The narrator is an African exile in Africa and though his perspective contains this double vision, it may be said that in him the distance of the outsider supersedes the intimacy of the native. His identity, as he himself asserts, is moulded by the European tradition in the form of European texts: "All that I know of our history and the history of the Indian Ocean I have got from books written by Europeans. . . . Without Europeans, I feel all our past would have been washed away" (13). On the one hand, he feels that his past, and thus his identity, wouldn't exist without the Europeans, while on the other hand these are always mentioned as "they" and thus felt as being "the other". If, as Sara Suleri suggests, there is in Naipaul an "uncanny ability to map the complicity between postcolonial history and its imperial past" (32), then the narrator of *A Bend in the River* is a good example of that ability. The stated disenchantment should



therefore be seen within the frame of this double perspective, or rather of this casting of Salim's identity in the European tradition.

The presence of the other in this novel partakes of this ambivalent perspective. Contrary to the imperialist novel of Haggard or Conrad, here the other is not the African, but the European. However, the imposing presence of the imperial past against which the current shambles are implicitly if not explicitly measured creates room for the Europeans, that can feel almost as if at home, at least up to a certain point. An example of this European presence is the couple formed by Raymond and Yvette. Raymond is a historian who is very near the president, or the Big Man, as is called this moderniser who becomes a tyrant and seems to have been composed from the historical figure of Mobutu Sese Seko. As is said by the friend of Salim's who introduced him to Raymond, "He's the Big Man's white man. - - - They say the President reads everything he writes" (145). Raymond represents that "complicity between postcolonial history and its imperial past", once again a textual presence of that past. It is in a party at Raymond's very European house, with the songs of Joan Baez in the background, that Salim meets Raymond's young wife, Yvette, shortly to become his lover. From the first moment Salim feels attracted by Yvette's body, first of all by her white feet: "she was barefooted, feet white and beautiful and finely made" (146). Much later, when Raymond seems already to be falling in disfavour with the president, Salim will recall this first meeting with Yvette mainly in terms of its European setting: "I often thought about the chance that had shown me Yvette for the first time that evening in her house, in that atmosphere of Europe in Africa" (215). In a curious inversion of roles as compared with novels of Africa in the imperialist tradition, Yvette is in this case the representation of the European other as a female body.

The love affair between Salim and Yvette will reach heights of extreme violence that is, above all, bodily violence. The following is the climactic

moment of the relationship of Salim with his European other, and takes place after an incident in which he thinks that he has been in some way undervalued or even mocked (the scene takes place at Salim's house; note the ironic, if not sarcastic, detail of the "Windsor chair"):

This time she was given no chance to reply. She was hit so hard and so often about the face, even through raised, protecting arms, that she staggered back and allowed herself to fall on the floor. I used my foot on her then, doing that for the sake of the beauty of her shoes, her ankles, the skirt I had watched her raise, the hump of her hip. She turned her face to the floor and remained still for a while; then with a deep breath such as a child draws before it screams, she began to cry, and that wail after a time broke into real, shocking sobs. And it was like that in the room for many minutes.

I was sitting, among the clothes I had taken off before going to bed, in the round-backed Windsor chair against the wall. The palm of my hand was stiff, swollen. The back of my hand, from little finger to wrist, was aching; bone had struck bone. Yvette raised herself up. Her eyes were slits between eyelids red and swollen with real tears. She sat on the edge of the foam mattress, at the corner of the bed, and looked at the floor, her hands resting palm outwards on her knees. I was wretched. (256-7)

Yvette, who in the beginning was about to leave, undresses and returns to the bed:

I went and sat on the bed beside her. Her body had a softness, a pliability, and a great warmth. Only once or twice before had I known her like that. At this moment I held her legs apart. She raised them slightly – smooth concavities of flesh on either side of the inner ridge – and then I spat on her between the legs until I had no more spit. All her softness vanished in outrage. She shouted, 'You can't do that!' Bone struck against bone again; my hand ached at every blow; until she rolled across the bed to the other side and, sitting up, began to dial on the telephone. (257-8)

Race and gender are very closely connected as power relations in the writing of empire: that's why the representation of Africa as female body

becomes central in novels like *King Solomon's Mines* or *Heart of Darkness*. But in *A Bend in the River* it looks like the tables are turned. It seems that in the couple formed by Salim and Yvette no one is certain about the role each one is playing. Salim wants to be the dominant figure, but he is afraid that Yvette is just using him, and that fear starts the aggression. Yvette, who is young, beautiful and white, besides being married to the president's protégée, feels as the centre of that small lettered coterie that gathers at their house. In political terms no one has any power, and sooner or later both will have to flee the country. But in symbolical terms the drama of race and gender continues to be enacted, this time with a twist, or perhaps not so. At one level of the representation there is an inversion of roles, Europe being now the female body, which makes of Salim's aggression a sort of revenge. The violence and the baseness of Salim's behaviour don't let him be far from Kurtz, and that "mingled expression of wistfulness and hate" that was in Kurtz's eyes the last time he saw his native woman companion could very well be put on the face the narrator of this novel. On the other side, the masochistic role assumed by Yvette, who after being thus savagely handled calls Salim as soon as she returns home, only to ask him "Do you want me to come back?" (259), makes this European cut a despicable figure that bears no comparison with the fiery and proud African woman on her farewell to Kurtz. At this level of significance *A Bend in the River* may be read as a mirrored inversion of *Heart of Darkness*.

But if we ask those initial questions suggested by Wallerstein, "What is Africa?" and "What is an African?" maybe the answers Naipaul gives us are not much more conclusive than those Montesquieu gave about the Persians. Though he wishes to be a non-native native, as someone has already called him, Salim is no African. A cultural exile, with a sense of his and his family's history learned from Europe, always taking his distance from everything African from an assumed point of vantage that is moulded on European values, finally attracted

by the white female body of an European, Salim is after all the type of a picaresque character, more of a continuing traveller than of a rooted native. As a literary figure he is a Western character through and through. The voices that are given to the Africans in this novel are the voices as heard by Salim, or, if we prefer to put it technically, as focalised through this character. Viewed from this perspective, Yvette becomes a representation of a European woman as imagined by the refracted representation of the African other that organises the universe of the narrative. That is to say that she is the other of an imagined quasi-African other. The imagined reversal of the imperial order linking race and gender that is shown in the figure of Yvette with eyes that “were slits between eyelids red and swollen”, “spat on between her legs”, is not so much the expression of Salim’s sadism (which it is), as it is above all an image of the empire’s sense of guilt in a post-modern hall of mirrors.

The place is the same for these three novels: it is the centre of Africa. In the first novel it is reached on foot, starting in the southernmost point of the continent, in the Cape; in the second the journey is by boat and starts on the west coast; the traveller in the third novel comes from the east coast and arrives by car. It is as if there was some sort of strange attraction from a point in the centre of the continent, a point that on the other hand is never named neither geographically located. It is an unknown country in an imaginary map in *King Solomon’s Mines*, a place far up the unnamed river in *Heart of Darkness*, and a town “at the bend in the great river”, equally unnamed, in *A Bend in the River*.

These are not just coincidences. Reaching the centre is a figure for knowledge as for appropriation and possession, and we do not need to resort to the psychoanalytic imaginary to see how gender plays a central role in the symbolism of such a figure as well as in its adoption in representations of Africa where the female body is object and metaphor of the quest for the centre.

Within the tradition of the European patriarchal society feminisation is a prevailing form for constituting the object of empire, and thus gendering it, as in the well-known early example of John Donne's naming of "his mistress" as America. Africa is the only continent for which a mythical centre has been created and it is thus no coincidence that it is at the same time the most feminised continent.

All the Africas in these novels are therefore Africas of the mind, and, to be more precise, of the European imperial mind. I'll end by quoting again Immanuel Wallerstein:

And when the dominant European masters of the modern world-system encountered the 'Persians,' they reacted first with amazement – How can one be a Persian? – and then with self-justification, seeing themselves as the sole bearers of the only universal values. (40)

This universalism of European values, says Wallerstein, is what happens in Orientalism that makes Said designate it as a "style of thought" (*Orientalism*, 2). I would say that the images of Africa in these novels, and their merging in the figure of the female body, bear all of them witness to such universalism as a style of thought, as much as they are part and parcel of a European discourse on Africa.

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