

Minding the Gap: Traversing the literary – the literary as methodology and epistemology

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Introduction: The problem

To begin, the problematic we are engaged in, in both the Humanities and the Social Sciences is: what yields knowledge about existence and experience? Does philosophy, history, psychology, sociology or anthropology tell us more about the world we live in and our experiences in this world, experiences felt through the body; the body located as subject according to race/class/gender/ethnicity/nationality? My second question is to what extent can the literary be used, as methodology and epistemology, to yield knowledge of the social, cultural and the political?

Theorising the literary text

The context out of which this essay emerges addresses the theme of ‘Travelling Knowledges’ that forms part of a workshop on African and African Diasporic Knowledges. To talk about how knowledge travels and in particular, focussing on Africa and African diasporic knowledges, I seek recourse to the writer, V.S. Naipaul and his portrayal of Africa in *A Bend in the River* (1979). Naipaul is of Trinidadian-Indian descent and has, in the main, adopted a metropolitan identity (having lived in England for more than twenty years). He spent a large part of 1965-1966 in East Africa and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) and returned to both places in the 1970s. In 1975, he published a report, ‘Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa’, based on his observations in Africa. Many of the details of this report are included in his novel, *A Bend in the River*, which was written in his English home in Wiltshire.

Naipaul’s intertextual references, I believe, support my assertion: that the literary can be used as an epistemology and a methodology to yield knowledge in the domains of culture and subjectivity. Pronouncements of Naipaul as ‘the Postcolonial Mandarin’ do not fully comprehend the partial and fragmented perspective that attends Naipaul’s formulations. While Naipaul’s formulations give pretence to imperiousness, his use of irony deconstructs the text itself: foregrounding his role as author of the text as well as foregrounding the aesthetic constructions of the textual form. Thus, it is not only the subject matter within the text but the form in which the text is written that is open to methodological and epistemological interrogation; moreover the text lends itself to this line of critical inquiry.

On one level the text addresses discourse and representation: what discourses are employed to talk about Africa, how are Africans represented, who is African? These are theoretical or scholarly questions, which the text yields. From these lines of questioning, in the text, theories of hybridity, mimicry, cosmopolitanism and communalism have emerged, theories specific to culture and subjectivity. However, as a writer Naipaul is aware, and foregrounds this point in the novel that the way in which words are used in political slogans and/or theoretical arguments, (retorically), the meaning has been

emptied; instead words have become empty echoes used to evoke emotional and intellectual responses. Discourse and representation have *materiality*; it has a sensory dimension that is experienced by the body and therefore becomes real. Discursive practices reify these terms, forgetting that the body *experiences* these concepts.

In *A Bend in the River* Naipaul explores the multiplicities of place (geographical, cultural and psychic) within in a diasporic space. The novel is a re-visioning Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which, like the canonical text, is an imperial fiction set in Africa written by a non-African. Both texts make use of the river as a trope to convey movement and flux: the river Thames and the Congo River. Unlike Conrad, Naipaul does not fix his gaze only on English colonisation but proposes an anti-essentialist view of all cultures in a global diaspora. Naipaul uses the trope of the river to show the *seepage* of disciplines and cultures and its concomitant influence on subjectivity that prevent a view of cultures as that which is *pre-given* or part of a received tradition progressing in a teleological fashion. Within a diasporic space, the points of contact between cultures (intra- and inter-cultural exchange) it is clear that cultures are a *performative act*. In other words, culture and subjectivities are constructed. It is through the law (*pedagogy*) that the artifice of culture and subjectivities is made absolute. What the diaspora illuminates is that these cultural temporalities are never fixed or clearly delineated. Cultural practices and rituals are slippery: they overlap and produce conflictual subjectivities. In the context of migrant communities, the re-construction of cultural practices and identities are reliant on fragile memories and partial histories to re-construct their dislocated homes and cultural practices. In Africa, there is, on the one hand, contact with outside (foreign) cultures and peoples that produce hybrid cultural practices and identities for both the foreigners and the indigenous African people. But also, the impact of slavery and colonisation has dislocated the indigenous African people in their own country.

The effects of the diaspora on the (post)-colonial subject has formed part of Naipaul's oeuvre. Naipaul, through his narrators, often expresses a longing to return to a time that precedes 'the unnatural bringing together of people... which this great upheaval has brought about.' But, the author/narrator is sadly aware that this virtual longing has no place in society. It is a virtual longing to return to a mythic Edenic place.

Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* has largely distilled the formulations and theorisations I have thus far proposed. What Bhabha explores conceptually and discursively, Naipaul explores materially and sensorily. Bhabha's discursive theorisations on the fraught subjectivities and cultural locations of the (post)-colonial subject, has derived from a number of resources that include the historical, the anthropological, the visual and the literary. Similarly, Naipaul's protean ability is reflective of the hybrid, (post)-colonial space in and of which he writes. Each of Naipaul's texts, fiction and non-fiction, seep into each other and thus his entire oeuvre is one continuous plot.

In both Bhabha and Naipaul's work there is a strong sense of a struggle with locality – cultural, social, political and aesthetic – which I will refer to as a *nonposition*. While Bhabha's nonposition is conceptual in nature; Naipaul's nonposition is reflected through the characters he creates. As an epistemology, this position, or rather *nonposition*, yields

interesting questions. Is it possible to not have a position? Is this not another reified ideological concept? Is it reflective of an inert society or apathetic individuals? I propose that the *nonposition* is to occupy an 'in-between *space*'. The *nonposition* also allows for *critical* engagement with ideas and concepts. Like Edward Said's exilic condition (which he terms, 'willed homelessness'), the condition of homelessness allows a degree of distance, *critical distance*, in which to observe and critique and interrogate cultural and political operations. Said's theory implies that one is able to choose who or what one supports or belongs to. The *nonposition* is definitive of a restlessness and does not aim to belong anywhere.

Africa's canonised writers, such as Chinua Achebe or Ngugi wa'Thiongo, have been educated in England. Their work is also reflective of the deep embattlement between empire and colony: psychically, culturally and economically. While in England, they viewed their societies from outside of its dominant cultural practices and a lens that was shaped by a Western episteme. They are African writers – nationalistically – both Achebe and wa'Thiongo have shown a deep commitment to Africa even though disillusioned with African leaders, but they are also travellers and this makes them something 'in-between'. Naipaul, on the other hand, shows no allegiances to Africa, India, the Caribbean and his position in England is haunted by his own restlessness and anxiety. Naipaul's authorial stance echoes that of his narrator, Salim, 'I was unprotected. I had no family, no flag, no fetish'. Naipaul pushes his exilic condition to the point where he occupies a no-mans-land: an ethnically/racially/nationalistically free zone.

While, it is important to unearth the rich and diverse African epistemologies, it is equally important not to essentialise Africanness – an ideological trap that ensnared the Negritude and nativist movements in twentieth century African discourse. *A Bend in the River* was written at a time in Africa when the decolonising missions, incited by the Negritude movement and followed by nativism and Afro-radicalism, which had become very seductive to the social and cultural processes of African unity and African self worth. Yet, as Naipaul shows these epistemologies tend towards a homogenisation of African people and African knowledge systems that are in fact diverse and multifarious not only within their own indigenous tribal practices but also through the diaspora: such as the Arab and European empires which colonised Africa and the large Asian population that migrated to the east coast of Africa.

My recourse to Naipaul's depiction of Africa is subject to criticism based on the fact that he is not from Africa. He came to Africa as a visitor and thus his observations may misrepresent Africans. To claim that only Africans can write about Africa is to create a national and ethnic bias that stymies growth and flux. In fact, it perpetuates a form of thinking that is absolutist and exclusionary. The novel is written from a migrant's perspective of Africa, which, I believe, enables the partiality of knowledge and experience his novels attempts to address.

A Bend in the River is set in a fictionalised portrait of the Congo at a time of transition from colonial to postcolonial. The narrative presents a grim reality of the radical instability, grotesque violence and tyrannical rule that grips and ensnares this African

country. The narrator of the story is Salim, an East African of Asiatic origin who migrates to a newly independent country in central (Francophone) Africa. The narrative is imparted through Salim's perspective and his conversations and observations with the range of characters that seamlessly float in and out of the story. Early in the novel, Salim is located among his Indian community at the east coast. It is at this coastal rim that Salim makes the observation that the source of his historical knowledge of Africa and India, he has learnt from European books. Those in the nativist camp would argue that this is the source of Africa's falsification by the outside world. Salim does not share this view. He realises that language and representation are powerful tools towards self-preservation. In other words, it is the act of writing that preserves knowledge.

But what epistemologies and methodologies are used to write about Africa? The novel uses the image of 'the Domain' to show the multiple and conflictual locales of Africa and African knowledge systems. 'The Domain' refers to a polytechnic/university built on the periphery of the unnamed African town, 'at the bend in the river'. The tertiary education centre is built on 'reclaimed' land, what had formerly been a wealthy European suburb. 'The Domain' is the locus of modernity. It is a place of prestige and status and the only tertiary institution economically enabled to cultivate a young group of African students. The lecturers are predominantly European or have been educated in Europe, all with special interests in Africa. But what kind of knowledge centre is this? What and whose domains of knowledge are taught? For what purpose? Salim observes that when he enters 'the Domain' he becomes enthralled with the new romance of Africa and the possibilities of change and growth. But, Salim observes, the lecturers and scholars at 'the Domain' only believe in their words of an African Renaissance while inside the walls of 'the Domain'. Outside of 'the Domain' Africa is impenetrable. This is made evident through a conversation Salim and Indar have as they are leaving 'the Domain':

[Indar:] 'It's different from what we used to know. To people like us it's very seductive. Europe in Africa, post-colonial Africa. But it isn't Europe or Africa. And it looks different from the inside, I can tell you.'

[Salim:] 'You mean people [the lecturers] don't believe in it? They don't believe in what they say and do?'

[Indar:] 'No one is as crude as that. We believe and we don't believe. We believe because that way everything becomes simpler and makes more sense. We don't believe... because of this.' And Indar waved his hand at the fishermen's village, the bush and the moonlit river.

This conversation elucidates two points. Firstly, Africa seems impenetrable to the foreigners who have come to Africa. It would seem that the novel is saying that there is a part of Africa that remains resistant to the modernising aims represented by 'the Domain'. It is not the students at 'the Domain', fed on lofty ideas of Africa, that are resisting change or the modernisation of Africa, it is the silent rural Africans who show a resistance. It is not possible to ascertain whether or not this 'resistance' to the outside world is performed consciously or not.

Secondly, 'the Domain' aims to invent a tradition of African learning. We are told in the novel that there is no place like it in central Africa. Indar's remark, '... it's very seductive. Europe in Africa' is somewhat unsettling. What the novel begins to interrogate is to what extent is Africa autonomous, both culturally and economically, from Europe? 'The Domain' is a symbol of the modern Africa but at the same time, the President, decrees that a statue of a black Madonna and child be erected throughout the country as a symbol of 'Africa's soul'. In relation to the modernising (and secularising) aims engendered by 'the Domain' the statue seems anachronistic. Why choose an image from the Christian pantheon? Why a *black* Madonna? Is Christianity part of an African religion/culture? Are Africa's attempts at decolonisation masking a repetition of the Manichean Aesthetics of European colonisation in reverse? It begs the question what should be included as part of an African culture/custom/religion? What does it reveal about the President or African leaders on the whole? 'The Domain' is a place of immense 'incommensurabilities'. On the one hand, 'the Domain' is attempting to create a decolonised African mind but it is also reliant on foreign funding. What these conflicting images represent is testament to the thematic in Naipaul's oeuvre: that of ambivalence, difference, hybridity, mimicry and psychic discord symptomatic of cultural dislocations and displacements.

Through the figure of Metty, who is part African and part Arab, Naipaul foregrounds the presence of Arab occupation in Africa. The image of the black Madonna and child represent the assimilation of the Judeo-Christian faith in Africa. Nativism argues that contact with the exterior world has falsified Africa. What these discordant and disparate religious symbols and identities reveal is the inability to locate culture in a singular, originary way. There are no roots of culture or religion. These are performances. Africans no longer inhabit a singular, indigenous world but several worlds simultaneously. Africa should be considered no longer as a composed noun, but rather as an embattled verb undergoing re-vision and contestation.

As Achille Mbembe points out, Marxism and Nationalism, as practiced in Africa during the twentieth century, is the genesis to two discourses on African identity: Afro-radicalism and nativism. Mbembe lucidly explains these discourses 'intended to disclose... the 'truth' about the identity of Africa and Africans' to establish a set of praxis that would affirm a sense of African selfhood. However, these discourses became dogmatic practices and doctrines limiting, instead of opening up, African epistemologies. Nativism seeks to return to a 'mythic Africanness' preoccupied by questions of identity and authenticity.

The character, Ferdinand, portrays the current shift in African diasporic identities. Ferdinand forms part of a new African elite educated at 'the Domain' who will eventually take a position as a government official. His education, however, distances him from his mother, a rural woman, who lives on the outskirts of the town in one of the African villages. In her view, his education will give him a 'better' (read modern) life. However, it also places mother and son in two conflicting realities. The modern and the rural do not easily co-exist. Often, the modern encroaches upon the rural eventually destroying the lands, to make way for buildings, that the indigenous people depend on for their survival.

The indigenous African villagers and the African elite who attend 'the Domain' occupy the same geographical space but inhabit completely different worlds. This is not to suggest that there is a fixed dualism between rural Africa and modern Africa. Existing between these seeming dualisms are other transcultural influences such as tribal disparities, language diversities and religious practices. How, then, is Africa to define itself out of these tensions?

Though Naipaul is nihilistic about the future of Africa, his restrictive view should not be too quickly judged. His observation, however acerbic, remains rhetorically compelling. Naipaul interrogates the 'in-between spaces' that result from cross-cultural contact. But Naipaul is conservatively sceptical about embracing a new liberatory discourse. Instead, he commits his voice to teasing out the problems and complexities societies are faced with while negotiating their identities and culture. Theoretically, Homi Bhabha, offers a way of viewing cultural production and subjectivities that enable a way out of the deadlock of linear, historical consciousness in which, pedagogically, pre-scribed identities and traditions are asserted. Bhabha offers:

... the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining society itself.

The risk in this exposition is that difference can become essentialised. This is often the problem with the language available in discursive arguments. The mobility and flux that has shaped Africa over the centuries from slavery, to Islamicisation and English colonisation present Africa with an amalgam of discordant and conflictual cultural temporalities. Naipaul locates his characters in these complex worlds – and worlds within worlds – that shows the 'incommensurable' positions, contingencies and localities in the world of the novel. Theoretically, to explore these immensely complex and conflictual locales, one has to ignore so much. The literary, in this regard, has more autonomy over the information and how that information is imparted in the text. Naipaul's narrators are highly self-reflexive characters: the reader is immediately drawn into their consciousness and sees the world through their eyes. The reader is imbued with a sense of transparency of the consciousness of the narrator. It is the particularities of experience that yield knowledge about our existence; each person is different, so how can these complexities that characterise our existence become something formulaic and generalised?

Theory versus the literary

My use of the term 'incommensurable' derives from Homi Bhabha who has cited Naipaul as his source that led to his subject. In the Routledge Classic edition of Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, he pays tribute to the literary as yielding knowledge to his study of the complexities and ambivalences around culture, language and identity. Bhabha makes this point himself:

It was the Indo-Caribbean world of V.S. Naipaul's fiction that was to become the diversionary, exilic route that led me to the historical themes and theoretical questions that were to form the core of my thinking. For reasons still obscure to me, the detour through Naipaul's milieu brought back the world, and the words, of my Bombay life, even as Naipaul's journey from Trinidad to his ancestral home in India passed through his English experiences. You could say that our paths crossed somewhere between Oxford and London, although we belonged to different generations and social geographies.

Bhabha's theorisations in *The Location of Culture* have been criticised as ahistorical and apolitical. That critique is embedded in the fact that Bhabha uses the literary to forge his formulations and theorisations in the domains of culture, society and politics. From the anecdote it is clear that Bhabha 'discovered' his subject through the writing and ideas contained in Naipaul's writing, but he has sought recourse to a body of literary works to formulate and support his theorisations on culture and subjectivity. Here, we must ask ourselves, can the literary as a methodology be used to establish a set of praxis? For example, can the literary be used to explore issues around culture and subjectivity? As James Clifford states in his essay, 'Travelling Cultures', 'there is no politically innocent methodology for intercultural interpretation'. As Clifford recognises in his anthropological studies, the discursive framework in which he works is limited. He cites the methodological and epistemological questions of the 'the informant'.

The 'informant' as Clifford argues is often a mixture between native and traveller, therefore what kind of knowledge is he/she bringing into the discussion. Often, the 'informant' is a metonymic representation of the whole. The particularities of experience of the 'informant' that makes him or her distinct from the group is not always included in the anthropological study. Unlike the literary, the theoretical discursive framework is unable to be transparent. Epistemologies are never whole or complete but are always subject to partiality and mediated contingent. In order for theoretical discursive arguments to be persuasive, these methodologies need to narrow their scope possibly excluding crucial information to make the argument more coherent and cogent. In theory, it is very difficult to consciously portray the partiality of knowledge because one is limited by the discipline of the methodology.

Within the literary, the plot structure of the novel enables the writer to situate his/her characters in a very particular socio-political and cultural milieu. In Naipaul's oeuvre, his characters are located in complex subject-positions. In *A Bend in the River* the immigrant narrator is born in Africa yet identifies, conceptually, with his ancestral home in India. Metty is a half caste, and though part African he is still a marginal figure in the central African town. Ferdinand is also something of an outsider in the town. His father comes from a different African tribe and in physical appearance Ferdinand differs from the African villagers living around the town. The Indian communities in Africa straddle two worlds showing difficulties in finding allegiances to any group or nationality. Through this multifarious cast of characters the reader is able to interrogate questions of African identity. Who is African? What constitutes African identity? What is included and excluded from African diasporic knowledges? Does it include indigenous African

knowledge systems and only indigenous African writers? Or does it allow a space in 'travelling' knowledges for outsiders to write about Africa? What further presents a complexity in this study is that the narrator of the novel is of Indian descent.

His narrative opens up a rare space within literature that documents an East African Asiatic experience of Africa. Yet, the writer, Naipaul, is not from Africa and has only visited Africa. Is his a reliable vision of postcolonial Africa? Historically, many Indians were forced to leave East Africa and move to Canada or London. How are we to understand the position of the Indian settlers in Africa? The novel by no means portrays the Indian population as innocent, they exploited the land and its people, but as an established immigrant population can they be considered African? Does Africa show a tendency towards intolerance of outsiders?

Salim finds it difficult to understand or to locate Ferdinand. Ferdinand remains elusive to Salim precisely because his subjectivity does not fit the stereotypical role Salim has assigned to the African characters in the novel. The President is stereotypically represented as a tyrannical and corrupt leader, like so many African leaders; the officials who were work for the State are equally as corrupt because that the system which rules the country. These are the 'neat' and 'tidy' representations that fall into a stereotype and can therefore be packaged and comprehended. But, as Naipaul illustrates through Salim, the characters that do fit the pedagogical categories, these characters are harder to pin down, to represent. However, they can still be accommodated within the novel form. These are kinds of 'incommensurabilities' which the novel is able to foreground without, necessarily, providing the answers to. As Bhabha espouses,

As literary creatures and political animals we ought to concern ourselves with the understanding of human action and the social world as a moment when *something is beyond control but it is not beyond accommodation*.

The text, as Edward Said, argues is part of the world; it is not some reified object. Following Said's expositions in the essay, 'Travelling Theory', he makes some valuable points, which are worthy of discussion here. Said rightly asserts that theories can become totalising and reified. Ideas, especially if they are clear and effective, become popular, however it also runs the risk of becoming 'reduced, codified and institutionalised'. As I have, in a rather limited way illustrated with Naipaul's images from *A Bend in the River*, people, ideas and events do not always fit into 'tidy' packages. Literature is able to accommodate what is 'untidy' or 'unanswerable' in historical and social situations. Bhabha, in a similar vein, incites the acategorical in his work. His theories of ambivalence, alterity, hybridity and cosmopolitanism are seductive. So too is Said's call to awaken critical consciousness so that the aporias of thought be made transparent, that reification and calcification of ideas and ideals be critiqued so that fluidity and flux prevails. These are the current codes of methodological and epistemological thought that characterise our scholarly thinking in the twentieth century. Yet there is a problem.

The problematic is evident in my work – for my thought is part of the totalising consciousness of the society I am situated in. Both Bhabha and Said's methodologies

strive to be *non-totalising*. The aporia within this is that their ideas are seductive, engendered with great possibilities but through over-use they are veering close to becoming institutionalised. Said has always been a vitriolic critic of Naipaul's identification and sympathising with the western prosecution. Said's close analysis of Naipaul's work presents cogent problematics with Naipaul's position but simultaneously Naipaul's writing carries the complexities of experience and existence that cannot be easily package. In this regard, Said falls into his own 'ideological trap'. The problem we are faced with as scholars who use theory to support our arguments is: at what point do these theories become totalising, used less critically, but rather to support our discursive theoretical positions?

Conclusion

What I am proposing through Naipaul's oeuvre is that here is an author who is perhaps presenting the literary as a methodology and an epistemology. The central trope throughout his novel *A Bend in the River* is the trope of the river: the river as symbolic of movement and flux. It seems that the current use of methodologies and praxis to yield knowledge of our existence and experience is their tendency to becoming static and institutionalised.

The river brings and takes knowledge systems along with the people who travel on those rivers but these systems are never static: that should be part of our ethos of thinking, that methodologies and epistemologies are always in a state of becoming. The river evoked in the novel is the same river evoked by Conrad. Thus, Naipaul brings the imperial theme into Africa and raises the question: can the postcolonial exist without an imperial theme?

The repetitive nature in Naipaul's work reflects that history: personal or political can be continuously re-visited because one's perspective and knowledge is forever changing. By not limiting himself to writing only fiction, but weaving the historical, autobiographical, journalistic essays and elements of travelogue, Naipaul's oeuvre reflects how the literary can be used to cross generic and cultural boundaries enabling new-ways-of-seeing and new-ways-of-creating knowledge.

Mbembe recognises that Africa is a 'moving object'. Part of existence in a global diaspora that shapes our existence and experience in the modern world is the uncertainty that ensues from multiple points of contact and the migrant experience of inhabiting several worlds simultaneously. Africa is a space and place that is in continuous negotiation and contestation. In the social sciences new avenues are being researched that will open up the epistemologies and methodologies one is able to use, but it is the language, within these disciplines, that ends up becoming its own prison. Mbembe, the historian, pushes the envelope on the current thoughts on Africa and what it is needed to open up an engaging and enabling discourse on and with Africa:

We must develop a technique of reading that is at the same time an aesthetics of overture and encounter, and that is not limited to the social sciences alone. This reading must be closely linked to the archive of the present, which, aside from philosophy, embraces history and politics, an entire body of visual, chanted,

painted, imaged and spoken texts. Arising from day-to-day experience and nourishing it in turn, these texts are part of the recent memory of African societies. In reading them we can grasp the power of falsification that exists within memory insofar as it bears witness to the experience that the contemporary African subject has of power, language and life.

Mbembe's vision of a future diasporic Africa is attainable, I believe, through traversing the literary. As I have illustrated with Naipaul as author and through his text *A Bend in the River*, the literary text is an archive, it is an epistemology that contains a corpus of the social, cultural and historical woven into the fabric of the novel. It opens up spaces for the fragile memory of an imagined place and space, the partial histories and fraught certainties that shape one's existence and experience in the world. The literary, in fact, is the 'archive of the present'.

These cross-disciplinary approaches suggest that methodologies and epistemologies are undergoing a shift in consciousness. There is a need to open up theoretical discursive arguments to the more contingent and partial aspects of culture, language, history, and politics that are constitutive of our social processes.