



## SPATIAL WRITING IN V. S. NAIPAUL'S *A BEND IN THE RIVER*

HUI LIU<sup>1</sup>, CHENFENG TUO<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>MA Supervisor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Changping District, Beijing, China

<sup>2</sup>MA Candidate, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Changping District, Beijing, China



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### ABSTRACT

V. S. Naipaul is an Indian descendant, born in Trinidad, who subsequently settled in England. Due to his migration experiences, Naipaul attaches great importance to space. In addition, Naipaul's works mostly reflect the constant change of space and its profound influence on the social relations and mental representation of the characters. What is more, Naipaul shows his concern for the change of space, the fate of people and the reconstruction of nation in the Third world. Based on Henry Lefebvre's space theory, this paper will analyze the protagonist Salim's social spaces and mental places in the three physical places, the town at a bend in the river, the Domian, and London in Naipaul's *A bend in the River*, so as to explore Salim's complex social relationships and dynamic mental representations in different physical spaces in the post-colonial context.

**Keywords:** V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, Space

### 1. Introduction

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is an Indian descendant, born in Trinidad in 1932, who subsequently immigrated into England in 1955. In addition, Naipaul has won the Booker Prize, Maugham prize, Nobel Prize for literature and other awards, known as the "three male immigrants in the British literary world together with Ishiguro and Rushdie. He is considered as the writer who lived in our time and who only lived by his works" (Hughes 10). With qualified sanctification, the editors of *the New York Times* recently called him perhaps the most talented novelist alive.

Naipaul's dual immigration status and the change of spaces have in-depth influence on his dynamic change of social and mental states. During his 50-year writing career, V. S. Naipaul published over thirty books, including novels, essays, collected letters, travels and some historical researches. Space consciousness has been running through his works, and space is the core power of Naipaul to construct his cultural experience. From the naming of his works, it can be fully demonstrated that Naipaul attaches great importance to space. Furthermore, Naipaul's works mainly reflect the constant change of space and its profound influence on the social relations and mental representations of the characters in the Third World.

*A Bend in the River* was published in 1979, which is not only known as the “last modernist epic” (King 122), but also selected as the best English novel in the 20th century by Random House in the United States. In addition, *A Bend in the River* chronicles the protagonist Salim’s physical trek, social communication and mental journey into the town at a bend in the river, the Domain and London, as it explores the physical space, the social space and mental space. At the same time, it expresses Naipaul’s concerns about the complex social relationships and dynamic mental representations in different physical spaces in the post-colonial context. Furthermore, *A Bend in the River* is about the first person narrator Salim’s experience of seeking development from his hometown at the east coast of Africa to the town at a bend in the river, the Domain in Africa, and London. During his eight years of business in the town, Salim witnessed the process of the town from decline after the independence movement to recovery, and then to chaos. The changes of the town in the river bend generally reflect the development of this country after independence, and also show the difficulties and problems faced by many African countries in the post-colonial period. Naipaul, taking space as the carrier, stands on the marginal side to express his deep thinking about race, gender and class, showing the plight of the protagonist Salim in physical, social and mental spaces.

Since its publication, *A Bend in the River* has evoked extensive studies all over the world. Many a scholar abroad analyzes it from a post-colonial perspective. According to Ranu Samantrai, Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* provides a fictional documentation of the political shift from colonial to post-colonial Africa and constructs a logic that enables an expression of imperialism to appear reasonable (50). In addition, Yang and Ren also discussed the crisis of national identity and its construction by means of premordialism and modernism from the post-colonial perspective (131). What is more, Christopher Wise explores the novel from the perspective of culture study, concentrating on the conflict between African culture and modern civilization in *A Bend in the River* (Wise 58-72). Moreover, based on new historicism, some scholars expound the relationship between textual construction and historical narration in it (Zheng 223). Furthermore, literary ethics is also one of the important perspectives in the study of the novel. Xu Bin deeply reveals the political and ethical implication of escape in the novel (Xu 70). Next then, some scholars focus on the narrative and linguistic effects of the novels from the perspective of narrative style (Huang III).

As is discussed above, however, few scholars analyze the novel *A Bend in the River* from the perspective of spatial writing. Based on Henry Lefebvre’s space theory, this paper will explore the protagonist Salim’s characteristics of social space and mental space in the three physical spaces, the town, the Domain and London in Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*, so as to explore the different physical spaces and their far-reaching influence on the social relations and mental representations in the post-colonial context.

In the process of globalization in the 20th century, the acceleration of urbanization, the scientific and technological revolution, and the development of transportation and communication tools have brought about the disappearance of distance, which has a profound impact on the process of social development, and has also changed people’s way of spatial cognition and practice.

The French social theorist Henri Lefebvre’s important thinking on the sociality of space further defines the subject status of space and highlights the sociological significance of space. In 1974, Lefebvre’s masterpiece *The Production of Space* was published, which triggered a “spatial turn” in cultural research, arousing more people’s attention to the expression of space in literary texts. Lefebvre points out that space is not an isolated and static simple container, but a field in which multiple factors blend and collide. Lefebvre then introduces Marx’s production theory into his space theory, emphasizing that capitalism and modernity take place in the production of social space, which involves production relations including the differentiation of labor and its organization. In addition, space is supported and produced by social relations.

Furthermore, Lefebvre divides the space into three levels: physical space (nature), social space and mental space (abstraction of logic and form) in his analysis of space theory. According to Lefebvre, physical space is the place where the text story takes place, including the geographical landscape. The description of geographical landscape in the novel reflects the meaning and relevance of space in the text. “Social space is a social product” (Lefebvre 26), which is full of various social relations. For Lefebvre, social space is “not a thing

among other things, nor the product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity”(73). Social space contains the synchronic and coexisting relationships of things showing the strong social attribute of space. Mental space is the space of fictional characters’ psychological and conscious activities in the novel reflecting the relationship between individuals in moving time and space. It can be said that Lefebvre’s space theory plays an important role in the opening of “space turn”, and also promotes the in-depth development of space theory.

In Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*, space has a huge power, which covers the life of the protagonist Salim as an individual. The change of physical spaces has a profound impact on Salim’s social and mental spaces.

## 2. Social and Mental Spaces of Salim in the Town

The town at a bend in the river is one of the most important physical spaces for the protagonist Salim’s self development in which he attempts to adjust himself to the complex social space and mental space. In order to take control of his own destiny, Salim came to the town at a bend in the river, with the anxiety about life at the east coast of Africa and the hope of the town. However, with his integration into the spatial life of the town, Salim’s social space and mental space have a great change.

On the one hand, as a newcomer in the town, Salim’s life in the social space is limited because of the indifference of the other foreigners and his strangeness about the town, under the joint influence of external and internal factors. As for the external environment factor, Salim is not given a welcome by the expatriates with tension and anxiety. For instance, “the Belgians, especially the younger ones, were full of resentments and a sense of injustice. The Greeks, great family men, with the aggressiveness and frustrations of family men, kept to their families and their immediate friends” (Naipaul 17-18). The Belgians and the Greeks in the town are unsatisfied with and hostile to the people in the town, which deepens Salim’s sense of strangeness. Furthermore, as for the internal factor, Salim has visited an Indian couple only “for the sake of having somewhere to go” (18) with negative social attitude, but cannot be integrated into them because of differences in cuisine culture and family relationships.

On the other hand, the town, as for the mental space of Salim, serves only as a temporary camp from the way he calls the town, “Nazruddin’s town” (17), in which Salim fails to obtain the sense of belonging and stability. Salim stayed at a distance when he first arrived the town. “With its ruins and its deprivations, Nazruddin’s town was a ghost town” (ibid). According to Salim, the town was economically backward and socially uninteresting with a high sense of strangeness.

I thought: Nothing stands still. Everything changes. I will inherit no house, and no house that I build will now pass to my children. That way of life has gone. I have lost my twenties, and what I have been looking for since I left home hasn’t come to me. I have only been waiting. I will wait for the rest of my life. When I came here, this flat was still the Belgian lady’s flat. It wasn’t my home; it was like a camp. Then that camp became mine. Now it has changed again. (65-66)

Salim takes the house as an example, anxiety and insecurity are always haunting his heart. Everything in the town is temporary without the sense of security.

What is more, Salim gradually adjusted to life in the town in the midst of economic boom. However, Salim remained anxious and insecure. As Salim said in the novel, “so in the midst of the boom I had my anxieties and became almost as dissatisfied and restless as I had been at the beginning. It also had to do with the place itself, the way it had altered with the peace” (59). From this, it is believed that the economic space does not always give a positive influence on mental space and Salim is haunted by anxiety all the time.

## 3. Social and Mental Spaces of Salim on the Domain

The space of the Domain has a huge impact on Salim’s social and mental spaces. As “Europe in Africa”, the Domain, constructed by the Big Man, represents a more open and privileged life with the symbol of modernism under the profound influence of British culture. In the early stage of construction, the Domain showed the development of industrialization and urbanization, and strengthened the recognition of the

technical elements of modern construction. Therefore, European engineers, architects and technicians have come to the Domain to build infrastructure such as airports and hydropower stations. For instance, "Africans had become modern men who built in concrete and glass and sat in cushioned chairs covered in imitation velvet" (Naipaul 62), which shows the modernization of Africa through the change in architecture and furniture style. At the same time, the photos of the Domain were published in a European magazine funded by the African government to demonstrate the success of European transplantation in the Domain. The advantages of the Domain space leads to the beautification of the people living in this space.

On the one hand, Salim's frequent interactions with the historian Raymond, the president's consultant, reveal his ambitions for political power and privilege on the Domain. Introduced by friend Indar to Raymond, Salim begins his interactions with Raymond and his family with the envy of the former's social status and temperament. Salim "saw the security of Raymond's manner, remembered his job and position, and took in the distinction of his appearance. It was the distinction of intelligence and intellectual labours" (79). When they first met, Salim was impressed by Raymond's social status and temperament on the Domain, and noticed the huge advantages and attractions of the physical space.

On the other hand, due to the absence of genuine affection and the beautification of the people on the Domain, Salim begins a love affair with Yvette under the attraction of her superiority and grace.

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, when she had worn her black Margit Brandt blouse and had been lighted by the reading lamps placed on the floor, and every kind of yearning had been stirred in me by the voice of Joan Baez. (112)

Salim was attracted to Yvette's European qualities. By hooking up with Yvette, Salim is trying to escape from his current dreary, meaningless life.

In addition, the place of the Domain has a huge mental impact on Salim. Salim is full of envy and longing for everything in the Domain.

But now, being with them in the Domain, which in every way was their resort, and being admitted so easily to their life, their world of bungalows and air conditioners and holiday ease, catching in their educated talk the names of famous cities, I swung the other way and began to see how shut in and shabby and stagnant we in the town would have seemed to them. (72)

With the help of his friend Indar, Salim begins to get some sense of the social excitements of life on the Domain, where he experiences the advantages of modern hardware, the new ways of communication and the open mind. Seeing the luxury of the Domain, Salim feels its irresistible external charm and the poverty, occlusion and stagnation of their own life in the town. In such stark contrast, Salim sees life in the town as closed, shabby and stagnant, which reflects the contradiction between the ideal and reality of ordinary people. In the space of vanity, Salim has found his ideal place, a paradise for admiration and catharsis.

#### **4. Social and Mental Spaces of Salim in London**

Salim discovered the nature of the Domain, that is, "Europe in Africa" (85) only belonged to "words and ideas" (76). In the end, neither Salim's business in the town nor his relationship on the Domain gave him a sense of belonging. Rather dramatically, he followed Nazruddin's plan for his life, moving to London.

Salim is attracted to the physical space of London, a city that symbolizes modernization and development with "bustling shops, magnificent buildings and stately universities" (139), where only the privileged or the gifted journeyed. However, when Salim arrived in London after a while, he found that London was an artificial space permeated with ideologies and different spatial barriers, which is actually very difficult for people to cross.

In the streets of London I saw these people, who were like myself, as from a distance. I saw the young girls selling packets of cigarettes at midnight, seemingly imprisoned in their kiosks, like puppets in a puppet theatre. They were cut off from the life of the great city where they had come to live, and I

wondered about the pointlessness of their own hard life, the point-lessness of their difficult journey (140).

Salim, like all street traders without developmental space in London, was cut off from the cosmopolitan life. Said once said that "Salim, the main character of V. S. Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River*, is an affecting instance of the modern intellectual in exile..." (Said 69). Salim came to London with expectations, but was lost in London. Furthermore, Salim, with the state of indifference and irresponsibility, was like the confused people Nazanuddin describes on Gloucester Road.

The physical space of London deeply influences Salim's social relations and mental representations. In order to plunge into the wider and more difficult world, Salim got engaged to Nazanuddin's daughter, Kareisha, relishing her affection in the unfamiliar city of London. However, loneliness caused Salim endless anxiety when he came back to the hotel.

It made me feel I was nowhere. It forced old anxieties on me and added new ones, about London, about this bigger world where I would have to make my way. Where would I start? When I turned the television on, it wasn't to marvel. It was to become aware of the great strangeness outside, and to wonder how those men on the screen had had themselves picked out from the crowd... I could say that I was in London, but I didn't really know where I was. I had no means of grasping the city. I knew only that I was in the Gloucester Road. (140-141)

Staying in the hotel in London, Salim was reminded of his past, which increased his anxiety about London, a city he fails to integrate into. Furthermore, due to his strangeness about the outside world, Salim lost his determination and joy when he first came to London.

What is more, Salim desperately sought the meaning of home, but he had no place to return to. "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" (4). Salim knew the pain of homelessness and was stuck in it. In this case, Salim decided to leave London and Kareisha, ready to start afresh in other places and continue his wandering.

## 5. Conclusion

As the famous writer and the winner of Nobel Prize, V. S. Naipaul concerns for the constant change of physical spaces and its profound influence on the social relations and mental representations. In Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River*, the protagonist Salim experiences the changes of physical spaces from the town at a bend in the river, to the Domain and London, which deeply influences his complex social relationships with other people. In addition, the frequent spatial migration gradually numbs Salim's sense of familiarity and dependence on physical space, which inevitably leads to the loss and anxiety of his identity.

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