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Squash as Signifier in V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*

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Abstract

Title: *Sports and Empire: Squash as Signifier in V.S. Naipaul's A Bend in the River*

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Abstract: The protagonist of V.S. Naipaul's 1979 novel *A Bend in the River* is an ethnic Indian living in Africa as part of an expatriate community of traders in the city at the bend in the river. He sympathises with the Western world, listens to BBC Radio, and tries very hard to distance himself and show himself as different from the native Africans. He plays the English sport of squash in a Belgian ex-colony in the heart of Africa in the expatriate Hellenic Club. This thesis explores squash in the context of the novel and argues that squash fills functions of signifying that Salim, the name of said protagonist, is different from the natives and contributes to him establishing himself as a foreigner who "knows the ways of the outside world". The foci of the arguments are based in the imperial and colonial history of squash, particulars of the game, and the tools with which the game is played. The analysis is postcolonial and focuses on Salim's displacement within Empire and his attempts to achieve "place" through the analogously displaced sport of squash.

Keywords: Squash, V.S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, postcolonial literature, postcolonial sports, Africa, sports in literature, sports and empire, English sports.

“So admirable is your choice of sport and so approved among all men.”¹

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¹ Demosthenes, Erotic Essay, section 26.

In the novel *A Bend in the River* by Sir V.S. Naipaul, the protagonist Salim regularly plays the English sport of squash. As a teenager on the East-African coast he plays with his friend Indar and in the city at the bend in the river he plays at the Hellenic Club. What is an English sport consisting of a hollow rubber ball played against a wall with racket by men dressed in white, in custom-built white box-like courts roughly 360 cubic metres in size, doing in the heart of Africa? Naipaul does not write or narrate a single match of squash and only once places a scene in the immediate presence of a match. Twice he writes scenes where Salim is about to go play. The game is mentioned approximately six times in the novel but forms a sort of backbeat to Salim's life and the reader is aware that he plays it often: on the coast, twice a week and later in the city at the river's bend on a daily basis, usually in the late afternoon.² This thesis will argue that the function of the English book, e.g. in *Heart of Darkness* according to Bhabha, as a signifier of European power and culture can be translated in *A Bend in the River* to the English sport of squash, and that it is used in the novel as a civilizational/cultural signifier to anchor Salim within colonialist, Western European, culture, despite being surrounded by the dark and inscrutable great river and its surrounding bush. Echoing the question of Conrad's Marlow: is squash "a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act?"

What is Empire? The Swedish Academy in their announcement of his winning their famed prize laud Naipaul as the "annalist of the destinies of empires in the moral sense: what they do to human beings." Empire is in this thesis used to refer to the collection of cultural, scientific, industrial, military, and social institutions to support and enable the structural exploitation of the world by a certain actor. A historical example of this is the British Empire which at its height dominated the world and paved the way for modern global capitalism as we know it today. The thesis has no political alignment and will focus on the cultural dominance of Empire and the use of the game of squash to signify alignment with Empire culturally. Essential in understanding Empire and its "effect on human beings" is that seemingly insignificant parts of a dominating culture can achieve importance in cultures not part of the dominating, Imperial, culture but rather dominated by and subject to it. I will argue that, in line with Marlow's question, squash functions as Salim's badge, ornament, charm, and

² Counting all scenes where the game is present and / or mentioned but not counting the narrator's references to said scenes. The word squashed is used once to not refer to the game but as a verb (269).

propitiatory act, to show alignment with Empire—a powerful signifier and fetish in face of the powerful presences of the forest, the river, and the bush.

The present thesis begins with a short summary of *A Bend in the River*, continues with contrasting it to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* while we enter into conversation with Homi Bhabha who establishes the theoretical connection between the two novels. The thesis then deepens our conversation with Naipaul, Bhabha, and Conrad further to introduce aspects of Salim's person and the nature of the game of squash: its history, aspects and particulars of the game, and its relation to Empire. In the analysis we study and discuss squash's functions in *A Bend in the River*, developing our understanding through a journey through the themes which emerge from the novel: clothes, Empire, sex, time and punctuality, and the body and its place.

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A Bend in the River is the story of Salim, a young man who after the civil war in Zaire in the 1960s purchases a trading business in the city at “a bend in the river” (previously Stanleyville and then, still, Kisangani) from Nazruddin, a family friend. Places are not named and neither is the Congo River, but the story is situated in something akin to historical events and places. Naipaul made research on a trip in 1975 that resulted in the *New York Review of Books* article “A New King for the Congo” which serves as a “skeleton” (Campbell 396) for the novel, as well as his trip to the same country (Zaire) in 1965-1966 from which he uses images but which serve mainly as template to his previous African novel *In a Free State* (ibid.).

Salim grew up in an ethnically Indian, Muslim family who are and have been traders in a city on the African east coast “for centuries” (BR 12) and Salim defines himself not as African but rather as belonging to the “people of the Indian Ocean” (ibid.). Salim discovers his place both culturally and geographically through “books written by foreigners” (13) and identifies said foreigners with strength and ability. The novel follows Salim for roughly nine to ten years as he lives as a trader in the city at the bend in the river where he belongs to an expatriate community of Portuguese, Indians, Greeks, and other displaced subjects. The story gathers speed during an economic boom with the arrival of his childhood friend Indar who introduces him to the European woman Yvette with whom he later has a romantic (or at least sexual) adulterous relationship.

After Indar and then Yvette leave the city, Salim decides to visit Nazruddin in London and upon returning discovers that his shop has been nationalized. He realizes that he must

leave Africa and is forced into dirty business to transfer his financial assets to London, the other city on a river. As a consequence of this incriminating business he spends a weekend in prison, is freed, and immediately leaves under threat to his life, the story ending with him going downriver on a steamboat.

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Naipaul is not the first author to have placed a story on the Congo River. It is infamously the *topos* of Joseph Conrad's famous novel *Heart of Darkness* where Marlow, the novel's protagonist, travels upriver to find Col. Kurtz, a renegade ivory-trader who is purported to have gone insane. *A Bend in the River (BR)* and *Heart of Darkness (HD)* share many themes such as the displacement of identities and geographies, the corrupting influence of Africa and its bush (inevitably beating back the civilized as well as attempts at civilization), and the playing off of the Congo river against the Thames.³ There are also important differences: Salim enters the African heartland symbolically from the east, observing events from neither the position of the colonizer nor the native; having the vantage point of being neither "African" nor "European"—whereas Marlow sees the world from the perspective of the colonizer and paints a racist picture of Africa (see Achebe's "An Image of Africa"). Naipaul is himself considered a problematic author who has also been criticised by Achebe for being a "scornful [...] purveyor of the old comforting [racist] myths" of the white race (*Hopes and Impediments* 18f). He is often contested on grounds relating to racism and has been accused of betraying the third world from which he originates (e.g. in "Signs taken for Wonders: ..." 149, and *Hopes and Impediments* 19).

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In Naipaul's article "Conrad's Darkness" he recalls a scene from *Heart of Darkness* that spoke to him where Marlow, "travelling back to the earliest beginnings of time" (*HD* 48), finds an English book in a hut on the bank of the Great River. The book is old and titled *An inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*, authored by a man called "Towson" or "Towser", and

at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than a professional light. (*HD* 53)

³ See Walunywa's "The 'Non-Native Native' in V.S.Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*" and Achebe's "An Image of Africa".

Naipaul is aware of, and intrigued by, the fetish and signifier of the English book. Homi Bhabha discusses this book in “Signs Taken for Wonders: ‘Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817’”—starting his discussion first in India where the English book in shape of the translated Bible works its *authority* on the natives (transforming both the book and the natives) but quickly moves through Conrad (the above-mentioned scene) and Naipaul, to arrive at a discussion of colonial authority and its ambivalence in the performance of Empire being resisted through way of hybridity. This thesis will not discuss matters of colonial resistance but rather focus on the functions of squash as a signifier of colonial power, i.e. Empire. Bhabha writes of the English book in *HD*: “Towson’s manual provides Marlow with a singleness of intention. It is the book that turns delirium into the discourse of civil address” (148). The signifier of the English Book establishes order, authority, and “singleness of intent” in a place where the great Congo River projects “the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an *inscrutable intention*” (*HD* 49, my emphasis).

Salim is affected by said Imperial signifier (the English book), which he affirms by saying of his people: “All that I know of our history and the history of the Indian Ocean I have got from books written by Europeans” (*BR* 13). He firmly places himself under the authority of the signifier and indeed points to this signifier’s mode of authority via the power of knowledge and the ability and power to write history. The reading of books is a habit that Salim keeps, but only as a shallow fetish in which he shows insight: he tries to impress Ferdinand by showing him that he reads English-language magazines telling him of the outside world.⁴ Salim attempts to dominate Ferdinand by discussing these magazines with him but fails:

I wanted to say to him, ‘Look at these magazines. Nobody pays me to read them. I read them because I am the kind of person I am, because I take an interest in things, because I want to know about the world. (48)

The English book is not given great respect in the novel, in the following paragraph Salim further comments that: “[.] the books and magazines were junk – especially the pornographic ones, which could depress me and embarrass me but which I didn’t throw away because there

⁴ Ferdinand has become his protégé after Zabeth, a *marchande* from the bush who has magical powers as well as a son—Ferdinand—with a man from a far-away tribe, enrolls him at the *lycée* and asks Salim to care for him.

were times when I needed them” (ibid.).⁵ His books are not described as “luminous” but rather with contempt and associated both with his own, desperate, need to distinguish himself from Africans and with his sexual frustrations. To return to his measuring-up with Ferdinand, Salim, with great but lacking insight, states:

I knew there was more to me than my setting and routine showed. I knew there was something that separated me from Ferdinand and the life of the bush about me. And it was because I had no means in my day-to-day life of asserting this difference, of exhibiting my true self, that I fell into the stupidity of exhibiting my things. (48)

In contrast to Salim’s outspoken fears this thesis argues that he does have something in his “day-to-day life” to assert his difference and that he continuously uses this fetish as defence against idleness and bush alike. For Salim the civilizing function, the enabling of civil discourse, of the English book is filled by squash.

Bhabha writes of the “vision of the book” that it “figures those ideological correlatives of the Western sign—empiricism, idealism, mimeticism, monoculturalism (to use Edward Said’s term)—that sustain a tradition of English ‘national’ authority” (147). This thesis argues, or at the least poses the question, that certain modes of power through which the English book works as signifier are modes of representation available to the English sport as well: squash is a “Western sign”. To deflect off Bhabha’s title – “Signs taken for wonders [...]” – squash, while a Sign, is never a Wonder.⁶ Rather it is a backdrop, like an African drum beat playing a civilizing, though still ritualistic, tune—the antidote to his bars, idling, and his paying-for-sex degeneration—the total antithesis of the Congo River in its inscrutability. The novel interestingly mirrors the English book with Salim’s relationship to African women (whose “sexual casualness” is described as part of the “chaos and corruption of the place”, 44), which is contrasted to his sexual experience with Yvette, whose sexual intercourse is mirrored to squash.

In Conrad’s short story “An Outpost of Progress”, it too placed near Kisangani on the Congo River, “two white men in charge of the trading station” (77) live a life in the bush,

⁵ Salim also describes his squash-rackets as junk (47) once but only in a very general sense grouped together with other items in his possession that make the sitting room very messy, which is the sense in which they are “junk”.

⁶ The English book in the form of the Bible is the “wonder” referred to in Bhabha’s title. The role of Wonder in *BR* is rather filled rather by the Imperially signifying and mystifying merchant goods arriving in the city from distant shores (102). I would argue that the difference between a Sign and a Wonder is that a wonder is sublime whereas a sign might work in less obvious ways.

isolated from the (Western) world. The two white men, echoing Bhabha, discover the English book: “They took up these wrecks of novels and, as they had never read anything of the kind before, they were surprised and amused” (82). Their engagement with the English book is deep and meaningful but in the end the English book is not enough to stave off the bush. The bush encloses them and through a series of misunderstandings with the natives and through their continuing loss of “civilization” they go mad: the first murders the other and then hangs himself by the mighty river—much more powerful than him. The deterioration of their health is the result of a lapsing focus on maintaining the civilized body, in the end it brings a complete lack of mutual respect:

His legs were much swollen and he could hardly walk. Carlier, undermined by fever, could not swagger any more but kept tottering about, still with a devil-may-care air, as became a man who remembered his crack regiment. He had become hoarse, sarcastic, and inclined to say unpleasant things. He called it: ‘being frank with you.’ (93)

The white men lose the respect they had for each other and the shared intent and identity their mission requires. Days blur into days and weeks become months. The cultural centring they had achieved through the English book and the providing of it with “singleness of intent” proves unable to stave off the very physical presences of the river and forest who are, with Salim’s words, “much more powerful than you” (*BR* 9). To keep able to swagger your body must be disciplined, rules adhered to; Empire take shape in your bones. The “tradition of English ‘national’ authority” referenced by Bhabha (147) cannot live only in the mind but its ritual dance must be performed with the body to be set to work with the full force of civilization to keep the bush at bay. The English sport drums Salim’s existence into days; civilizes his body; nurtures his relationship to his non-African community; drums out the idle (and idling) Africa from his body: it is Salim’s fetish against the bush as the English book was for Marlow.

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Squash is a racket game played in closed courts sized approximately six meters in width, ten in length, and six in height. The game is played by two people against the front wall of the court where the ball must hit above the “tin”, a line drawn wall-to-wall circa half a metre above the floor.⁷ The ball, hollow and made of rubber, must then be hit back upon the wall

⁷ Hitting the ball upon the “tin”, which is made of metal, produces a metallic sound and is called “tinning”. The game can be played in doubles but this almost exclusively in North America—it is primarily a singles game.

(with racket) before it bounces twice on the floor. The ball can deflect an indefinite amount of times on the back and side walls allowing for a complex game where the ball can be hit in many directions. The game is fast-paced, tactical, and thoroughly exhausting.

What does squash signify to Salim? A clue is that Salim first mentions the game in introducing his child-hood friend Indar who later reappears mid-novel. Indar is the son of a Punjabi family that has only lived in the city on the coast for a mere two generations but still has outstripped all the old families in wealth.⁸ Indar's family business is money-lending, perhaps echoing squash's on-going popularity on Wall Street.⁹ Kareisha, daughter of Nazruddin and Salim's intended wife, comments on the house of Indar's family that "[w]hen you live in a house like that I suppose you think ten or twelve or twenty times a day that you are very rich or that you are richer than nearly everybody else" (*BR* 282). Indar's house, a signifier of great wealth, includes a squash court. In Salim's own words: "I didn't think it possible to be more exclusive or protected" (20). After playing squash in the courtyard of Indar's impressive home they share tea and orange juice. This scene is part of squash culture: camaraderie does not end with the game but rather the social discourse—small talk and a drink—is half the point and a habit that Salim keeps at the Hellenic Club: "squash at the Hellenic Club, with cold drinks afterwards in the rough little bar, watching the light go" (86). The exclusiveness of the sport (courts found only at clubs, prestigious schools and universities, and in very wealthy households) serves to strengthen social bonds between those with access to said courts. Indar reveals in their intimate post-squash communion both that he is travelling to England to study and that he is concerned with the state and security of their Indian merchant-community in the city on the coast. England is the safe place, the coast is unpredictable—England is wealthy, there is a future there. London is where Indar with his "effeminate" and "buttoned-up" (20) expression, with his squash, will fit in perfectly with English public school-kids at Oxbridge. Salim associates Indar's leaving for England and his studies with, again, great wealth, transferable to the squash court of his impressive house.

The modern concept of organized sports originates from the English tradition: it grew out of boys' games and was codified in the old public schools of England. Oldest among the

⁸ They were "imported" into Africa as indentured servants by the British government to build the Kenya-Uganda railway, a later Indian migration to Africa than the one Salim's geographical status is the result of: his family having lived on the coast of Africa as traders for centuries, if not a full millennium.

⁹ See McGill's "Wall Street's Latest Racquet".

English sports is the ancient game of Fives (as in *five fingers*) which involves playing a ball against a wall with your (often gloved) hand, either in singles or doubles. Tennis is likely older and has been around in England since the Norman conquest when it was imported from France. Tennis requires a net, court, and racket whereas fives could be played against any wall and thus was always a more popular sport at schools and the general public while tennis was, for a very long time, more associated with court culture (Money).

With the ingredients in place, i.e. wall, racket, ball, the boys combine these into something called rackets, which is a game where a ball is played against a wall with rackets.¹⁰ And when the boys of the public school of Harrow got their hands on India rubber they created the squash ball and named the new game Squash Rackets after the fact the ball is squashed when hitting the wall.¹¹ The game has developed from then but variants of fives and rackets are still played at the public schools of the United Kingdom (Money). *Squash Rackets* definitely shed the second word of its name in 1992 as The International Squash Rackets Federation changes its name to the World Squash Federation (Zug).

How then did the game travel from Harrow to Zanzibar?¹² The public schools of England, squash having become a popular game in all of them from the late 19th century and onwards, were where the British Empire recruited its colonial officers and higher civil servants: “Send forth the best ye breed-- Go bind your sons to exile to serve your captain’s need” as the poem by Kipling goes (VII). British schoolboys grew into college and university students who then became officers and civil servants in the colonies. These officers, accustomed to playing squash in their colleges and clubs, brought courts to the colonial setting as well. Considered parts of being English, sports were encouraged and filled an important function in the colonial arena:

Team games like cricket and rugby were ideal for keeping fit and holding the white community together in distant climes, and even where the white rulers were few and far between, tennis, golf, squash or fives were happy substitutes. (Perkin 214)

¹⁰ The game requires a stone or brick wall, preferably three walls creating an almost enclosed space. From the beginning this defines it as a game of cities, prisons, and schools.

¹¹ Rubber first being vulcanized in the 1840s (*Wikipedia*: “Vulcanization”), previous balls being made from leather, cotton and similar products. Intermediary names for the game also appeared, still at Harrow, such as baby racquets, soft racquets, or softer (Zug).

¹² Which is the likely historical name of the city on the African east coast where Salim grew up. Mombasa is another, less likely, candidate.

The English sport is part of what was called, in the USA and the United Kingdom, “Muscular Christianity”: the idea that the Christian civilizing mission (a cornerstone of Empire) needs physically fit servants of Empire to carry out its mission; encouraging participation in (particularly team) sports and physical education (Baucom; Money). Often though it was the officers who played squash and had access to courts whereas the regular soldiers engaged in cricket: “[...] [The officers’] choice of sporting hobbies perforce lent itself more easily to the individualistic and often restricted facilities of recreational life in the colonies than to a replay of the team games enthusiasm of their schooldays” (Kirk-Greene 188).

Squash follows the spread of the British Empire, never becoming as prolific as cricket and never achieving the same symbolic status of both fostering the young and serving to ever renew nostalgia for the English countryside and a simpler way of life (Baucom’s chapter on cricket is titled “Put a little English on it”). Squash became as Birley notes, speaking of the early 20th century, “the game of exclusive clubs, the better regiments, and the public schools” (136). The game in the colonial setting was perhaps even more exclusive and white. In Cairo it was a staple game at the famed and exclusive Gezira club, from which a young Edward Saïd (a life-long squash player himself) was thrown out for being Arabic, despite him insisting that his family were members (Saïd 44). As a rather challenging sport physically, it is not surprising that it acquires what Tad Friend, long-time squash player and sports chronicler, calls a “mad-dogs-and-Englishmen burnish as it spread”, it being often played (at, again, the early 20th century) with “the ambitious, competitive ruthlessness the late twentieth century associates with squash” (Lowerson 104).¹³

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A while after Ferdinand has arrived into the story and Salim has attempted to communicate his separateness from him, Salim hears from his Indian expatriate friend Mahesh that the two boys of his household, Metty and Ferdinand, are telling people that he (Salim) will send them abroad to study.¹⁴ This worries Salim who, when he next sees Ferdinand at the shop, tells him

¹³ “Mad Dogs and Englishmen” is the title of a song by Noël Coward released in 1931. The only creatures to take a walk in the (colonial, i.e. tropical) midday sun are “mad dogs and Englishmen”, meaning that there is a kind of effete, naïve, bold, gentlemanly craziness unique to the British (*British* is used synonymously with *English* in the song) imperials, resonating with Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden”.

¹⁴ Metty is Salim’s servant / helper throughout the novel. He is a slave boy of his family on the coast who insisted to be sent specifically “to Salim” as the family on the coast evacuated

off harshly—using irony (which Ferdinand does not understand), patronizing his lies as provincial, and outing his (rural and provincial) misconceptions of education and business. He narrates: “He had found me as I was leaving to play squash at the Hellenic Club. Canvas shoes, shorts, racket, towel around my neck” (BR 59). Salim’s words carry extra meaning as he is garbed for squash. Salim’s earlier fears that he has “no means in his everyday life to assert [...] difference” (48) towards Ferdinand are proven (to the reader) unjustified: he has extensive means: the clothes and what they signify set him apart.¹⁵ Ferdinand is of the bush and the people of the bush are impressed by clothes: Naipaul almost echoes Conrad in his description of the European cloth as magical fetish when Salim sees the Africans of the bush “idling about the market stalls in the square, gazing at the displays of *cloth* and ready-made *clothes*” (BR 74, my emphasis).

Later, Salim still feels himself caught in Ferdinand’s web of lies (which does not end with the above-discussed telling-off) but soon has his chance to end the misconception of himself as a benefactor of young Africans:

A well dressed young man came into the shop one morning [...] he hung around, waiting for people to go away [...] and I saw too that the man’s shirt, though obviously his best, wasn’t as clean as I had thought. It was the good shirt he wore on special occasions and then took off and hung up on a nail and wore again on another special occasion. The collar was yellow-black on the inside. (63)

It becomes apparent through Salim’s observation that clothes are both used as and interpreted as signifiers by both locals and expatriates. The danger in using a fetish is, of course, to use it wrongly, or being unable to use it—failing in the handling of their magic, or of their magic being lost through mishandling (such as not washing). The importance of appearance and clothes is further exemplified by the images of the president present throughout the novel (even more salient in the prototype “A New King for the Congo”) and the evolution of the president’s clothes and the emerging (in the images) of his stick containing a powerful fetish.

The young man with the shirt carries with him another signifier: a ledger, later referred to as a book, stolen from the *lycée*: “its money-attracting qualities recognized” (BR 64). The ledger contains the signatures of the school’s (mainly expatriate) benefactors and that of

themselves and their “limpet” slaves after the African uprising there. His real name is Ali but in the new city he became *Metty*, meaning ‘mixed-blood’, from the French *métisse*.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that in the new preface to the novel, written by the author himself, at the airport of Kisangani having just arrived, Naipaul approaches the man he “thought to be [his] truck driver”. “[...] he was dressed in sporting clothes, with a towel around his neck” (viii). This man became the prototype for Salim, and was not Naipaul’s truck driver.

Father Huismans (the headmaster)—all of them powerful signifiers of wealth. Salim says to the young man: “I will keep this book. I will give it back to the people to whom it belongs. Who gave you the book? Ferdinand?” (id.). Salim denies the young man the right to carry the book, having already seen through the primary fetish of his white shirt. This is key—the possibility to use a signifier with its proper (magical) authority requires certain rituals or knowledge on part of its wielder: had Salim not actually played squash his signifying outfit could have been rendered as useless as the young man’s unwashed shirt. In case of feigning his use of said signifier he would have been outed immediately by someone familiar with the discourse of squash and of European styles of clothing. A signifier used without proper knowledge can signify something other than the intended, i.e. bush rather than Empire.

Salim is worried by the rumours spread of him, which he describes as “simple magic” (“if you say something about a man to his friends, you might get the man to do what you say he’s going to do”, 58) because he feels “unprotected” (63): “I had no family, no flag, no fetish” (id.). Regarding the fetish he is in the wrong, but this section of the book offers another angle to the squash-clothes: it reminds him of home, his place, and that he is now displaced:

He [Ferdinand] had found me as I was leaving to play squash at the Hellenic Club. Canvas shoes, shorts, racket, towel around my neck – it was like old times on the coast” [Later in the same paragraph he continues] “[...] open fires rose blue among the imported ornamental trees – cassia, breadfruit, frangipani, flamboyant [...] I knew the trees from the coast. I suppose they had been imported there as well; but I associated them with the coast and home, another life. The same trees here looked artificial to me, like the town itself. They were familiar, but they reminded me where I was. (59)

His game of choice is also an imported one, both on the coast and in the city at the river’s bend. His memories of home, squash and tropical trees, are both signifiers of Empire. The power of Empire is to make bodies move in certain ritualistic patterns on other shores, the power of reshaping the very landscape these bodies live their lives within. Salim approves of Empire and its signifiers (mainly, it seems, out of fear of the bush), into which he seemingly has insight, but is strangely unaware of the signifier of his game of choice. The trees look artificial, not the game; the trees remind him of where he is, the squash clothes seem to remind him of home without seeming artificial, and never confusing or reminding him of his unfortunate place—his geographical placement is not a happy one, a fact the trees remind him of. Squash is the steady beating of the drum in which he is secure, regardless of geography.

Squash is isolated from nature, closed-court, and providing focus (“singleness of intent”) where the imported trees “seem artificial” and, perhaps, farcical.

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Salim and his family are well aware of the power of Empire, having thrived within it on the coast. This is an important difference between the native Africans and Salim, who comes from a family who once traded in African slaves who were captured near the place in the heart of Africa where he is now living: “Ferdinand would be outraged if he knew” (94). Salim’s grandfather told him once that “he had once shipped a boatful of slaves as a cargo of rubber” (12f)—rubber being the very same product that the Belgian king Leopold II, during the time of Conrad (what Naipaul calls “the time of a great peace” in “Conrad’s Darkness” 216) had attempted to exhaust of the Congo Free State, His personal rubber-and-ivory plantation, and the very product to enable the game of squash and of which squash balls are exclusively made.

Squash is a product of Empire. It owes its existence to the systems of global trade and industrial production of inchoate capitalism, in every way enabled by Empire. It is carried by colonial subjects in the tropical regions of the world to colonial harbours, loading it onto English ships transporting it over the oceans to harbours in Europe, entering through a combination of economic strength and scientific achievement into the industrial factory, to be bought by English public school-students intending to hammer said colonial product with rackets against a wall. Rubber is a difficult substance to manufacture with an extremely painful history of extraction. When Salim retells the story of his grandfather shipping slaves labelled as rubber (12f) he is telling the story of deaths of African nations at the hands of Empire. Furthermore squash is quite a violent sport often played with “competitive ruthlessness” (Lowerson 104). Before the game can begin properly the ball, which is cool and should be stored coolly in order for it to retain its flexibility, must be heated which is done by hitting the ball against the wall in a fast-paced warm-up of both players and ball. The native ball is beaten warm in the white-washed, ordered, box by two white-dressed polo shirt-wearing players wielding prosthetic elongations.

In squash, unlike tennis, players do not face each other on a “field of battle”, but stand next to each other facing the wall. The closeness of the players and the possibilities of standing in each other’s way, blocking the view, hitting the opponent with either ball or racket, is always present—a potential for barbarism and uncivilized woundings. As a result of

this potential there is a requirement of commitment to civility, politeness, and respect. Potential for barbarism breeds respect because of a shared “singleness of intent” and a mutual respect for both the rules and spirit of the game (very rarely played with a referee). Respect literally means “looking back” and is something that is enabled by the possibility to not look. In e.g. tennis, cricket, and most other sports it is a different matter altogether because you cannot avoid it as they are in front of you, facing you—threatening to win. In squash the failure to respectfully notice and see your opponent could well result in violence and loss of civility.

This space of civility, potential for violence, and requirements of respect are analogous to Empire’s ruthless civilizing mission. The inclusion of the Other into Empire’s system of trade, education, language, and morality is both essential to true dominion and a result of the strength behind the blow about to hit the subject who doesn’t see the force approaching. The rubber ball is traded between the players, smashed against racket and squashed against wall, but as long as it is played it never gets cold.¹⁶ If your opponent is playing *your* game you can’t lose. In squash “dominating the T” is essential: there are markings on the floor intended to regulate the service. As soon as the service is performed the markings on the floor lose most meaning, but retain some in signalling where the middle of the court is (i.e. the “T”). Since the ball can be played against any wall and arrive from different directions, controlling the centre (“dominating the T”) is pivotal. If one player dominates the T he is able to send the ball in any direction, forcing the opponent to run after it, in essence playing the first player’s game—abiding under the same rules, the opponent’s freedom within them are dictated by the dominating player. Sports are games: play with codified order. The rules of play are codified by Empire and players are allowed to flourish within it; as long as play is within its codified bounds. The power of Empire is to reward those who play well under its rules while disciplining those who break them, forcing the people unable to play well under said rules to still abide by them. This is contrasted by the lack of rules outside the court, where the bush prevails: “Here was nothing. There had been order once, [...] Instead of regulations there were now only officials who could always prove you wrong, until you paid up” (*BR* 65).

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¹⁶ “[S]quashed themselves in” is the phrase Salim uses to describe the “people like [him]self” (269) who have migrated to London.

The first time Salim meets “real” Europeans (unlike the ones at the Hellenic Club, who are not colonizers and do not belong to Western European nations) in significant number is at a party in the Dominion, in Yvette and Raymond’s house. He sees dancing for the first time: “I had never been in a room where men and women danced for mutual pleasure, and out of pleasure in one another’s company” (147). His ensuing affair with Yvette comes as an expected surprise, and after the end of their first intercourse Salim states: “I was full of energy. I could have gone and played squash at the Hellenic Club. I felt refreshed, revitalized; my skin felt new” (204). The company and indeed conquest of Yvette, being a European woman with “feet white and beautiful and finely made” (146)—herself quite a powerful signifier—has the opposite effect to that of the African women he has slept with before:

How many African women were hustled away at difficult hours – before Metty came in, or before Metty woke up! Many times on that bed I waited for morning to cleanse me of memory; and often, thinking of Nazruddin’s daughter and the faith of that man in my own faithfulness, I promised to be good. In time that was to change; the bed and the room were to have other associations for me. But until then I knew only what I knew. (47)

The narrating Salim, hinting early in the novel at his future encounter with Yvette, describes his encounters with the native women as causes for regret and angst whereas the future encounter – with a prized European – is contrasted against these and referenced with hope. After his first sexual encounter with a white woman, which he describes as his very first sexual encounter altogether (“But I felt now as if I was experiencing anew, and seeing a woman for the first time”, 202), he feels invigorated and wants to go play squash (204)—the total opposite of his reaction to sex with African women. After his European conquest he must reaffirm his *place* within the European civilization, after sharing the bed with native women he lies awake all night in lamentation. With Yvette, another matter: “before she left the bedroom she stooped and kissed me briefly on the front of my trousers” (204). After Yvette leaves, with her submissive and / or grateful gesture, Salim is confused, shaken: “That gesture [...] moved me to sadness and doubt. Was it meant? Was it true?” (204f). His response to this confusion: “I thought of going to the Hellenic Club, to use up the energy that had come to me, and to sweat a little more” (205) brings to memory Bhabha’s comments on Towser’s book: “Towson’s manual provides Marlow with a singleness of intention. It is the book that turns delirium into the discourse of civil address” (148). But the depth of the first encounter’s association with squash doesn’t stop there—when Salim disowns the young African of his money-attracting ledger (book) after seeing through the failed use of the

unclean white shirt, he does so with a right of superiority. The young African cannot hold on to the artefact, and Salim returns it to its colonial and rightful owner Father Huismans (64ff). Salim in confusion of what was true and real of his encounter with Yvette (“If what she said was true! But I had no means of gauging her response”, 204) reaches for his own “white shirt” to make sure it isn’t dirty, lest he might be relieved of his book; been shown to have no right to it.

The second European to share his bed is an encounter with a woman he meets at a Belgian bar on his layover flight home from London. It is the last mention of squash in the novel and is interesting from many perspectives. Salim is, despite the narrator’s description of the encounter as “reassuring” (286), shaken:

The woman, naked, unruffled, stood in front of a long mirror and looked at herself. Fat legs, roundish belly, chunky breasts. She said, ‘I’ve begun to do yoga with a group of friends. We have a teacher. Do you do yoga?’

‘I play a lot of squash.’

She paid no attention. ‘Our teacher says that a man’s psychic fluids can overpower a woman. Our teacher says that after a dangerous encounter a woman can become herself again by clapping her hands hard or by taking a deep breath. Which method do you recommend?’

‘Clap your hands.’

‘She faced me as she might have faced her yoga teacher, drew herself up, half closed her eyes, pulled her outstretched arms back, and brought her hands violently together. At the sound, startling in the over-furnished little room, she opened her eyes, looked surprised, smiled as though she had been joking all along, and said, ‘Go!’ When I was out in the street I took a deep breath, and went straight to the airport to catch the midnight plane. (BR, 286f)

Salim, being an ethnic Indian, becomes the target of a question regarding his relation to a Hindu practice, yoga. Indians are historically perceived as Hindu rather than Muslim, and the two words (*Hindu* and *Indian*) derive from a common root, the name of yet another river: the great river of Indus. Whether or not the woman is aware that he is Muslim is largely irrelevant—he is associated with the practice of yoga. His reply that he plays “a lot of squash”, aiming to locate himself within a Western cultural sphere, is ignored and he is faced by the woman “as she might have faced her yoga teacher”. Salim is presumed to be Indian and as such is associated with Yogic traditions, the hippie movement (this is historically close to when The Beatles go to Rishikesh for the first time), the Third World, and the dissolution of Empire, by a woman whose nationality is Belgian, the former colonial overlord of Salim’s

city of residence.¹⁷ The “deep breath” was one of her methods of not being overpowered by a man’s “psychic fluids”. Her stance is forceful and oppositional. Her security and command castrate him, and to avoid being overpowered by Empire he, upon leaving, takes the symbolic breath, and leaves Empire for Africa. In Europe Salim’s fetish doesn’t work, the magic is unable to locate him within Empire as he has geographically entered it. The Belgian woman faces him “as she might face her yoga teacher”. It doesn’t matter that he plays squash: to her he is Indian and, forcefully and painfully so, colonial.

*

A further function of squash in *BR* is its repetitiveness: Salim plays it every day. To reuse the example of squash as the drumbeat that drums his days and his body into existence and into order: Salim lives a punctuated and isolated existence in the city at the river’s bend. His daily routine seems to be to wake up, Metty brings him coffee, he listens to the BBC radio news, he opens up his shop, he leaves said shop to go to the Hellenic Club for squash and then has an after-game cold drink while watching the sun go down. Repeat. This routine is regulated, punctual, and intentional:

[...] after making myself some tea, and changing, I went down again. I was going to the Hellenic Club for my afternoon squash. It was my rule: whatever the circumstances, however unwilling the spirit, never give up the day’s exercise. (*BR* 121)

Salim takes pride in the routine and acts a colonial doing his business and then retreating to the Hellenic Club and meeting his peers there. They have no rule about it, but they never talk local politics (217)— the undertone is that they like to talk international politics. They want to detach themselves from their geographical location. When Salim describes the Club to Yvette he emphasizes that “the last thing they want to talk about is the situation of the country” (200). The people at the club, Salim included, like to assert their Europeanness (71) and compared to the Belgian priest (Huismans, secure in his place) they are “in every way [less] secure” (id). The “expatriate habit of listening to the BBC news” (32) has the same function as squash, but overt and easier to exercise. Anyone can listen to the news, not everyone manages to play squash daily—both owing to economic and lifestyle-reasons but also reasons of family, health, motivation, and discipline. Both, though, anchor the owner of said habit into British traditions, with the BBC-habit it is even more apparent that upon meeting real

¹⁷ Rishikesh is a city in northern India, a popular destination for hippies from the 1960s onwards.

Englishmen (regardless of caste) it is less of a defining quality than squash; everyone in the UK listens to the BBC but in the city at the bend (which, to remind the reader, is in a *Belgian* ex-colony) only expats needing to distance themselves do. The regulation of his body, the regularity of the regulation, the punctiliousness of it, all serve to distinguish him from the natives. On the topic of cultural allegiance and time Shaup discusses E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and notes that in it:

Englishness is equated with the ability to adhere to timetables and to be punctual; Englishness in the colonies was a performance that played out, in part, through the regulation of time. One way to show Englishness, or to critique non-Englishness, then, was through reference to an individual's relationship to time. (230)

Salim uses this punctuality to signify allegiance to Western civilization, a place where time matters—respect for it and the planning according to it. Still even in this he over-corrects: he is in time to his invitation to Yvette's house but she has forgotten the engagement totally and is amused at the situation. Yvette can afford these mistakes as she is secure in her place.

A further function evident in the quotation is that of the disciplining and regulating the body. Salim is physically fit: squash is a physically challenging, very healthy, sport and Salim plays it every day.¹⁸ Salim's habits beyond the game are neither particularly healthy nor unhealthy, but his body is well exercised. Throughout the book characters' bodies are described and deemed important at many occasions. Both Ferdinand – “already [at fifteen] quite big, taller and heavier than the men of the region” (39), whose skin is “black and healthy, with a slight shine” (*BR* 42), and Metty – “taller, more muscular, looser and more energetic in his movements” (36) are different than the men of the region—something described as important in defining their status in the city. The “men of the region” are about five feet (39), “not sturdy” (63), “very small and slightly built” (*ibid.*), and, made apparent and symbolized by their appearance, *malin*, by which is meant *malin* in the way of “a dog chasing a lizard [...] or a cat chasing a bird” (*ibid.*)—the men are small but like to “wound with their hands” and “live with the knowledge of men as prey” (*ibid.*). The mother of Metty's child, who is deemed lowest of the low, is described as “almost bald”, her “feminine characteristics” “neutered” by “[h]ard work and bad food” (120). Your body, like your clothes, says the world of who you are and what your place is.

Salim's own body, however, isn't a topic of discussion until he enters into captivity towards the end of the novel: “In a cell like mine you very quickly become aware of your

¹⁸ *Forbes Magazine* rates squash as one of the top 10 healthiest sports (Santelmann)

body. You can grow to hate your body. And your body is all you have: this was the curious thought that kept floating up through my rage” (315). His feelings towards his place in the city and his identity often resemble that of a captive, as when he imagines himself pleading to Indar: “Help me get away from this place. Show me how to make myself like you” (181). In prison, as he has outside of it, Salim “resolve[s] to maintain and assert [his] position as a man apart” (317) and uses the means at his disposal to achieve this. In the setting of the city he has his magazines, his English sport, the BBC, and in prison he resolves to not “be touched physically by a warder” (ibid.), and achieves this by becoming cooperative and obeying orders “almost before they were given” (id.). His self-regulation proves the need for punishment unnecessary, himself a panopticon of behavioural regulation.¹⁹

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When Salim’s shop is nationalized he becomes a captive of the city. His assets held ransom leaving him unable to leave. This makes his difference from the Europeans of the domain increasingly obvious to him. On the people of the domain he narrates that “[w]hat was common to these people was their nervousness and contempt, contempt for me, contempt for the country. I was half on their side; I envied them the contempt that it was so easy for them to feel” (305). His place, his envy, and his contempt for weakness are major themes in the novel and, I argue, central to the functions of squash in the novel. The “ruthlessness” of the game, the social aspects, its history firmly anchored in the personal-achievement-culture of modern capitalism as well as the English Public School and the colonial administration of Empire, his fitness, the regularity of it, and the clothes and civility—coupled with the potential for barbarism and the inherent violence of the sport—all serve to affirm his place among the people he envies. The contempt Salim feels for weakness and for those who “allow themselves to become nothing” (3) is mirrored only by his envy towards those who have and are born with place.

Symbolically, and significantly, the game matches his wants. The beating and mishandling of the colonial rubber ball is analogous to his relationship to the Imperial mission; he disdains weakness and the greatest weakness is to allow (and participate in) one’s own exploitation. The Congo River is the place of a particularly violent assault (even by the

¹⁹ *Panopticon* is a sociological term coined by Jeremy Bentham to describe a hypothetical prison with cells in a circle, enabling the prisoners to guard each other’s behaviour making obsolete the use of guards and force in the control of the prison population.

standards of colonialism) on humanity and human life for rubber and ivory. Salim's family participated in this assault on Africa as slave-traders for centuries, and most likely also as traders of rubber and ivory (ivory being a product Salim himself trades in the novel)—and today Salim engages in the Imperial sport of Rubber-Bashing.

Salim is a product of Empire, precisely where Naipaul (according to the Swedish Academy) excels as an author: What does Empire do to human beings? How are Imperial signifiers used and misused? Walunywa describes Salim and his group of expatriates as non-native natives, distinguished from both natives (the colonized) and the colonizers. This group, small in number and political influence, must navigate the difficult power-geography of the colony with great care. They must align themselves with Empire in order to work their trade, usually as artisans or small or large-scale merchants. They must also remain useful to the colonizers in order to take part in the exploitation of the natives and in the economic strength of Empire (within the borders of which they operate and migrate). What they lack is number and place. Salim upon entering into the city feels that “[t]he river and the forest were like presences, and much more powerful than you. You felt unprotected, an intruder” (*BR* 9). Alignment with Empire is a matter of life and death, and Imperial signifiers and fetishes must be employed and put to work in maintaining and asserting the non-native natives' position as “apart” (317). Squash is such a signifier and in *BR* it functions through several modes to enable Salim to assert discipline upon himself and show alignment with Empire, clearly distinguishing himself and his daily routine from the natives and showing him with varying success as a man apart.

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