

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Rift / L'Ecart (1979)

V.Y. Mudimbé (1941-2025)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Valentin Yves Mudimbé, born on 8 December 1941 in Likasi in the former Belgian Congo and deceased on 22 April 2025 in North Carolina, developed a trajectory that moved from early monastic training to a life devoted to critical inquiry. After leaving the Benedictine order, he pursued higher studies at Lovanium University and later completed a doctorate in philosophy and letters at the Catholic University of Louvain, where he refined an intellectual orientation shaped by phenomenology, structural analysis, linguistics and a sustained interrogation of colonial systems of knowledge. His academic career unfolded first in Zaire at the National University in Lubumbashi, where he taught and served as dean, and later in the United States at Haverford College, Stanford University and Duke University. Across poetry, fiction and theoretical essays, he produced a body of work that includes *Déchirures* in 1971, *Entre les eaux* in 1973, *L'Ecart* in 1979, *Shaba deux* in 1988 and *The Invention of Africa* in 1988, a study that transformed debates on African thought by exposing how external discourses shaped the continent's intellectual representation. His reception among scholars was marked by recognition of his originality and rigor, earning major distinctions and positioning him as one of the leading voices in African philosophy. His ideas revolve around the nature of knowledge, the tension between lived African realities and inherited conceptual frameworks, and the need to rethink how cultures understand themselves and are understood by others.

Book *The Rift* is built around the diary of Ahmed Nara, a young ethnologist researching the Kuba people in Congo. After Nara's sudden death, his friends passed his manuscript to Mudimbé, who kept its voice and tone intact and added only the title to highlight the inner conflict that shapes Nara's reflections. The novel follows Nara as he returns to Congo hoping to study the Kuba in a way that escapes colonial influence. His project quickly reveals its contradictions. Although he longs for an unfiltered connection to Africa, his methods, expectations and emotional vocabulary come from European training. His relationships and memories blur the line between Africa and Europe, and the story unfolds through fragments, repetitions and abrupt shifts rather than a straightforward plot. This structure mirrors Nara's struggle and turns his inner fracture into the central theme of the book.

Background The novel emerged in 1979, during a period when African thinkers were reexamining how colonial ideas continued to shape education, politics and cultural life. In Zaire, Mobutu's policy of Authenticité encouraged citizens to adopt African names and symbols as a way to reject colonial influence yet often served political control more than cultural renewal. Mudimbé himself had to publish under the name Vumbi Yoka Mudimbé. At the same time, anthropology and ethnology were being critically reassessed, as African scholars exposed how these disciplines had long simplified or distorted African cultures. Earlier movements like Negritude, which celebrated a unified African identity, were losing influence, and many thinkers were questioning rigid oppositions between Africa and Europe. New theories in Europe were also challenging stable identities and linear narratives. *The Rift* reflects all these debates. It captures the tension faced by African intellectuals who wanted to break free from colonial ways of thinking but still relied on them, making the novel an important window into the complexities of postcolonial African thought.

MAIN CHARACTERS

<i>Ahmed Nara</i>	A Zairean European-trained doctoral student doing field research on the Kuba peoples in Zaire
<i>Isabelle Colmeur</i>	Nara's ex-European lover. Her image constantly intrudes in Nara's thoughts.
<i>Aminata</i>	A young Congolese librarian, who rescues Nara from his dilapidated hotel room and becomes his enigmatic lover.

SYNOPSIS

Nara is a young African ethnology student trained in Europe who returns to Zaïre hoping to study the Kuba people in a way that avoids colonial bias. Over the course of a week, his life becomes increasingly chaotic. The harsh environment, political corruption, and poverty around him unsettle him, but his biggest struggles come from within. Old childhood trauma resurfaces, and his relationships with two women, Isabelle from his past and Aminata in the present, become emotional symbols he cannot control. Nights out with friends reveal social tensions and his own insecurity. Even as his research progresses, Nara is constantly pulled back into fear, shame, and obsessive thoughts. By the seventh day, Nara's mental state deteriorates sharply. He feels betrayed by people he trusted, haunted by memories of his psychiatrist, and overwhelmed by fantasies that blur reality. He begins confronting truths about his sexuality and realizes how much others have misunderstood him. His sense of identity starts to break apart under the pressure of desire, trauma, and the symbolic roles he feels forced to play. What began as a scholarly mission becomes a personal crisis: Nara is fighting to understand Africa and to keep his own sense of self from collapsing.

PLOT NARRATIVE

The story takes place over seven days, each one forming a chapter.

Day One (September 7, 1970.):

Nara Confronts Heat, Memory, and the Weight of a Decolonized Gaze.

An ethnology student on a mission Ahmed Nara, an African student of ethnology trained in Europe, is preparing to conduct field research on the Kuba people, an elusive tropical community of Zaïre (today the Democratic Republic of Congo). He is renting a room in a dilapidated local hotel, and nothing seems to go his way.

Suffocating living conditions Nara complains of the suffocating heat, the broken air conditioner that neither the indolent hotel owner nor the inept repairman can fix. He complains of the constant noise, the mosquitoes. He says that everything conspires to torment him.

An Image of Africa's decomposition For Nara, this hotel embodies his powerless confrontation with Africa's decomposition. Nonetheless, Nara remains determined to study the Kuba from an authentic, decolonized perspective. He believes that too many studies have approached the Kuba through biased European lenses, and he is determined to break from that legacy.

Nara's proximity to Aminata At the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, local library that Nara uses for his research, he has developed a discreet fascination for Aminata, an African librarian. Each time Nara steals a glance at Aminata, the image of Isabelle, his blond European lover, whom he suspects loves him out of a strange, inverted hatred, intrudes upon his thoughts.

Traumatic memories Nara is also haunted by a childhood memory: His mother locking him in a dark tool closet inhabited by a rat as punishment, then forgetting him there for days while she rushed to the scene of his father's accident and death.

Day Two (September 9, 1970.):

Humiliation and Unravelling Desires

Nara is fascinated by Tania Nara is invited to his friend Camara's birthday party. He accepts, reluctantly. Soum, another friend and committed communist activist, is there as well, along with Tania, Camara's wife. Nara watches Tania as she gracefully serves food and drinks. He finds her fascinating. Nara compliments Tania on her beautiful dress. She brushes the remark aside, telling him that he is drunk. Nara thinks he detects a flicker of contempt in Tania's eyes, and a familiar awkwardness rises in him, tinged with humiliation. To hide his discomfort, Nara asks Tania for the recipe of the Irish stew she made. Tania thoroughly details the ingredients to Nara. He listens politely, with his mind elsewhere, wondering when the

show will end. Tania's remark has unsettled Nara. He is no longer able to enjoy the party. He thinks that it has dragged on too long. He thinks that conversations are too boisterous. The heat seems to oppress him and he cannot wait to leave Camara's place.

Nara fantasizes on Marie-Astrid Nara is relieved when they decide to continue the party at a nightclub, the *Soleil Rouge*, without Tania. There, they are joined by Marie-Astrid, Camara's mistress. Nara becomes fixated on Marie-Astrid's red dress and breasts. His mind spirals into a stream of sexual fantasies.

What matter is class, not race To suppress his agitation, Nara tries to steer the conversation toward his research. No one shows interest. Soum, especially, retorts that all the rhetoric about African culture has never put a decent meal on a Zairean table and that Nara should join the communist party instead, where he would find companionship and a real purpose.

Nara lashes out at Dr. Sano Nara returns home in the early hours and sleeps late, until he is awakened by the landlord and a repairman. The air conditioner cannot be fixed; the repairman claims mice must have chewed through the parts. The mention of mice jolts Nara back to the childhood memory of the closet and the rat. He mentally lashes out at his psychiatrist, Dr. Sano, for lying to him that he would eventually overcome his phobia.

Like an obedient dog Amina arrives at Nara's hotel with a museum exhibition ticket. Nara tells her he is too tired to go. She offers to take him to her place, cook him a proper meal, and give him a quiet space to rest. He accepts, although inwardly he feels she is taking liberties with his life, possessing him, treating him like a small obedient dog. Isabelle surges again, as a dominant and assertive presence claiming prerogatives over him.

Day Three (September 10, 197 ...):

Nara Advances His Research While Wrestling with Desire and the Symbols That Possess Him

Exhilaration and insights Nara tackles his work at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* with exhilaration. He is satisfied with the discoveries he has made about the Kuba kings and the meaning of warfare among the Kuba. He mocks Western knowledge system for being mystifying and hermetic.

A bucket with holes Nara feels a growing disappointment toward his Western masters. He compares Western epistemology to a bucket full of holes. Nara's consolation is that he can plug these holes with his own perspective. Nara feels he is making real headway, and he is drunk with joy at being so close to Africa. He goes to the library's courtyard dancing.

"Aminata, I want to hug you." In Nara's imagination, the moment has come to conquer Aminata. He thinks, "Come here, Aminata. I want to hug you, overwhelm you with tenderness. I am happy. Do you not see?" (48). Then Isabelle emerges again and steadies his mood, tempering his joy, spoiling the moment.

A Barrier between skins Aminata takes Nara to a restaurant, Nara can only think of himself as a small, sniffing, obedient dog that follows. In the taxi that carries them there, Aminata's thigh brushes against Nara's. He wishes he could feel her directly. He curses his pants for creating a barrier between her skin and his.

Day Four (September 11, 197 ...):

Nara Confronts Desire, Rumor, and the Powerlessness Shadowing Zaire's Decay

Aminata, the man-eater Nara visits Marie-Astrid, Camara's mistress, the woman he has been fantasizing about. He had hoped to catch Camara there, but she tells him that Camara has just left. Marie-Astrid mentions a rumor that Nara is dating Aminata. She warns him that Aminata is a man-eater, that she has a kind of fetish that allows her to catch any man she wants but Aminata has been unlucky with men. Nara tries to be evasive about his relationship with Aminata. He laughs off the mention of Aminata having a man-catching fetish. Marie-Astrid explains that Aminata has not been fortunate with the men she

captures. They tend to be abusers or absent fathers. As Nara watches Marie-Astrid move around her apartment, he begins to notice imperfections in her environment and in her body.

Governmental negligence Nara and Aminata talk about the living conditions of the Zairean people. Marie-Astrid is also a communist. Unlike Soum, however, she does not plunge into theoretical exegesis. She speaks of the lived experience of ordinary people. The northeastern part of the country, she laments, is ravaged by sleeping sickness, yet governmental indolence, corruption, and the theft of donated vaccines keep the population dying.

Awareness of powerlessness Nara and Marie-Astrid become acutely aware of their powerlessness to change anything. The weight of that realization settles between them, in heavy silence.

Aminata pouts Nara goes home to Aminata. She pouts because he is late. He thinks that Aminata is playing mother, and that she is trying to take over his life, just like Isabelle. The thought irritates him even as he submits to Aminata's presence.

Day Five (September 12, 197 ...):

Nara Witnesses Identity Shatter and Confronts the Symbols That Threaten to Consume Him

Reflections This choppy chapter moves restlessly between reflections on the condition of the Black neurotic, the instability of interracial relationships, and the political tensions that shape the characters' inner lives.

Tania feels betrayed Tania discovers that Camara is having an affair with Marie-Astrid. The revelation shatters her. She bursts into tears, destroys whatever objects she can reach in the apartment, and unleashes a torrent of insults at Camara and at men in general, calling them pigs.

Extravagant quest for respectability At the library, Aminata and Nara notice a man sitting nearby, extravagantly adorned with symbols of wealth, as if material excess could compensate for a lack of respectability. Nara remarks that only in Africa can such improbable combinations occur, where lightning, thunder, and eighty-eight degrees can appear simultaneously: "He's wearing heavy shoes, enormous weights ... something between a boot and normal shoes, and yet something else ... A Terylene suit ... Holy Mother, did you look at his hand? The jewelry ... it's gold. Do you think it's real gold? ... Oh, you know ... gold or imitation, it's all the same on these hands" (79).

Isabelle's taste for refinement and sex This sight of the extravagant man leads Nara back to thoughts of Isabelle. She too loved beautiful things, jewelry, scarves, hats. Her taste for adornment was tied to emotional demands that weighed heavily on him. He remembers her complaints at three in the morning, when she accused him of not giving her enough sex and threatened to leave. The moment unsettled him so deeply that he felt reduced to "no more than a black symbol wrapped in a white sheet" (81).

Day Six (September 13, 197 ...):

Nara Celebrates Brief Joy While Succumbing Again to the Women Who Shape His Fate

A cheerful night out with friends Nara feels jovial. The night before, his friends had given him more attention as they celebrated the departure of Saran, one of their female friends, to an unspecified destination. There had been plenty to drink, but Nara made sure not to indulge too much. Everyone was laughing and arguing with good humor. This cheerful atmosphere reminded him of how starkly different his outings with Isabelle had been.

Outings with Isabelle vs Aminata Nara remembers that a night at the restaurant with Isabelle would always be "tense in mind and feeling ... there would always be annoying little arguments about a color of

make-up, a necklace to be straightened, or a haircut" (97). Yet, unlike with Aminata, with Isabelle it was simply a war to leave behind, once they were on their way to the apartment for scotch, music, and love.

Isabelle and Aminata amount to the same Nara recalls how Isabelle picked him up from the ground on rue Saint Germain, where he had stumbled and fallen on a Christmas night, and invited him to her bedroom. And now it is Aminata who, he says, has picked him up from his dilapidated apartment, his hole, and who insisted that he attend a Protestant mass before introducing him to her bedroom. In the end, Isabelle and Aminata amount to the same. He has followed both women like an obedient sniffing dog.

Day Seven (September 14, 197...):

Nara Confronts Betrayal, Consuming Symbols, and the Hidden Truths That Threaten His Sense of Self

A need to be alone Nara wants to be alone. Aminata worries that he is already tired of her. Nara finds Aminata's remark ridiculous. He reminds her that he is living with her in the same house. He just wants to be alone for a while.

Thoughts of death His thoughts are occupied with recollections of Dr. Sano and with the idea of death. He recalls their last conversation and how he imagined Dr. Sano no longer seated at his desk, but standing behind him with a knife, ready to stab him in the back: "... why are you standing behind me? You could put a knife in my back. ... Isabelle would have ... I'm sure of it ... And so are you ..." (121).

Chaotic thoughts Nara feels consumed by fire; he feels that he is fire itself. He sees Aminata and Isabelle interchangeably, as consuming presences: "Isabelle, Aminata's place; the other side, the black side of the symbol" (116). He relives the scene of himself in a procession, following the coffin of his mother.

Nara feels betrayed Nara feels that everyone around him has been lying to him, abusing him, or trying to force him into a straight mould, if only they knew that his "anus open[s] to the explosion of haphazard lovers ... and then getting to love men" (119). If only they knew that they had made assumptions about him, about his sexuality, while he was merely playing their game, and that they never truly knew him.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

AHMED NARA (fragmented, disoriented, longing)

Nara is a European-trained ethnology student who travels to Zaire, his country, to study the Kuba people. He carries a childhood trauma from being locked in a closet with a rat, an experience that still shapes his thoughts and sends him back to memories of sessions with his psychiatrist, Dr. Sano. His emotional life is divided between two women: Isabelle, whom he dated in Europe, and Aminata, with whom he now lives in Zaire. These figures, along with Dr. Sano, appear unpredictably in his mind, blurring together. Nara feels caught between Europe and Africa. Europe remains an inner structure he cannot escape, while Africa becomes an ideal he longs for but cannot fully inhabit. He often experiences himself from a distance, as if observing rather than living. Nara's identity wavers between desire and doubt. Aminata represents the Africa he seeks, but she cannot resolve his inner conflict. Isabelle remains the voice of Europe, unsettling him even from afar. Nara's sense of self is shaped by this constant oscillation, where origin, belonging, and desire never fully align.

Fragmented Nara is deeply fragmented character, unable to sustain a coherent self. Aminata, Isabelle, and Dr. Sano appear in his mind unpredictably, merging past and present. His identity breaks apart under competing desires, fears, and symbols he cannot control, revealing an inner self constantly slipping out of alignment.

Disoriented Nara's disorientation comes from his inability to organize perceptions or relationships. Congo, meant to anchor him, becomes destabilizing and oppressive. He cannot experience time, memory, or relationships in a stable way. His inner world becomes a maze without direction, leaving him unsure how to inhabit his own life.

Longing Nara longs for a pure Africa through Aminata, but Aminata remains an intimate origin never fully accessible. And all attempts to connect with Aminata are thwarted by images of Isabelle, as Europe, leaving him yearning permanently for an original anchor.

ISABELLE (sophisticated, authoritative, unsettling)

Isabelle is Nara's former European partner in Europe, a woman who values refinement and beauty and whose moods often unsettle him. She loves elegant things like jewelry, scarves, and classical music, and she expects emotional and physical intensity from him. More importantly, Isabelle represents the European world that shaped Nara's education and self-image. Even when she is far away, her presence lingers in his mind as a voice of judgment and expectation. Around her, Nara becomes acutely aware of how he is seen, especially across lines of class and culture. Isabelle becomes the inner reminder of the hierarchy that formed him, a force that complicates his longing for Africa and keeps him suspended between two worlds.

Sophisticated Isabelle embodies refinement and cultivated taste. She loves jewelry, scarves, hats, and classical music, surrounding herself with beauty that both attracts and intimidates Nara. Even from afar, she remains a polished, demanding presence in his mind, reminding him of the cultural sophistication he both admires and resents.

Authoritative Isabelle's expectations, especially for intensity and attention, make Nara acutely aware of how he is seen across class and cultural lines. Isabelle becomes the internal voice of European judgment, shaping Nara's self-perception and reinforcing the hierarchy that formed him.

Unsettling Isabelle unsettles Nara. She embodies the European structure he cannot escape. Her moods destabilize him, and her presence lingers as a disruptive force even when she is absent. She is the emotional form of the West inside Nara, complicating his longing for Africa and keeping him suspended between incompatible worlds.

AMINATA (nurturing, enigmatic, anchoring)

Aminata is a Zairean librarian who becomes both Nara's caretaker and, eventually, his lover. She offers him stability and gently organizes his daily life, yet she also draws him in with a quiet allure that fuels his fascination. For Nara, Aminata represents the Africa he longs to return to, an origin that feels intimate but never fully attainable. Her moments of distance and refusal remind him that the Africa he imagines cannot be reclaimed through desire alone. Through Aminata, the story reveals the limits of Nara's search for belonging: she embodies a world that nurtures him but remains beyond possession, highlighting the tension at the heart of his identity.

Nurturing Aminata nurtures Nara through care and practical stability. As a librarian, she organizes his days, feeds him, and offers him a space of rest when his inner world unravels. Her presence softens the chaos around him, yet her gentleness never fully calms his turmoil.

Enigmatic Aminata is mysterious. She fascinates Nara without ever revealing herself completely. She embodies a world he can approach but never fully possess or understand.

Anchoring Aminata anchors Nara in the African world he hopes to reenter. She represents the possibility of rootedness, offering daily routines and emotional steadiness. Yet this anchoring is fragile. She is both a grounding presence and a reminder of the rift inside him, highlighting how Africa feels close but never fully inhabitable.

THEMES

Western Knowledge

Mudimbé reflects on the difficulty of freeing African thought from Western ways of understanding the world. In *L'Odeur du père* (1982) (The Scent of the Father), he writes:

Pour l'Afrique, échapper réellement à l'Occident suppose d'apprécier ce qu'il en coûte de se détacher de lui; cela suppose de savoir jusqu'où l'Occident, insidieusement peut-être, s'est approché de nous; cela suppose de savoir dans ce qui nous permet de penser contre l'Occident, ce qui est encore occidental; et de mesurer en quoi notre recours contre lui est encore peut-être une ruse qu'il nous oppose et au terme de laquelle il nous attend, immobile et ailleurs. (44)

[For Africa, to actually escape from the West means to understand what is at stake in being separated from it. It means to understand how close to us the West, insidiously perhaps, has come; it means to know in what allows us to think against the West, what is still Western; and to measure how our mutiny against it might be a ruse that it opposes to us and at the end of which it is waiting for us motionless, somewhere else.]

Mudimbé explains that Africa must understand how deeply Western thought has shaped its ways of thinking. Even ideas used to criticize the West may still carry Western assumptions. As Mudimbé puts it, the West may be waiting “*motionless, somewhere else,*” ready to reclaim any attempt at escape.

The Rift explores this idea through the character of Ahmed Nara. The novel shows how difficult it is for him to break away from Western intellectual habits. Nara returns to Zaire hoping to reconnect with an African origin untouched by colonial influence. He arrives with enthusiasm and a desire to study the Kuba people with fresh eyes. He believes earlier studies have missed their true goal and declares: “I would like to start from scratch, reconstruct the universe of [the Kuba] peoples from start to finish: “decolonize the knowledge already gathered about them, bring to light new, more believable genealogies, and be able to advance an interpretation that pays more careful attention to their environment and their true history” (13).

For a brief moment, Nara feels confident. He thinks he has made important discoveries about Kuba history. His excitement grows as he criticizes Western scholarship. When he reads J. Dansine's *The Ancient Kingdoms of the Kavana*, he finds it confused and careless. To expose what he sees as its flaws, he jokingly replaces Dansine's references to Lele and Kuba with “Spanish” and “Portuguese”:

The Spanish and the Portuguese are placed under the same heading, not because they have similar political systems, far from it, but because they have a common origin, speak practically the same language, and share a same culture. The traditions of the Spanish, just like those of the Portuguese, at least of the central Portuguese, claim that these peoples go back to the same common origin and are issues of the same woot ancestors. (44)

Nara mocks the way Western writers classify African societies. Yet the tools he uses to build his own research come from the same Western traditions he criticizes. His methods come from ethnology, his expectations from European romantic ideas, and his emotional language from Western psychology. Even his desire for Africa is shaped by Western ideals of purity and return.

This creates a paradox. Nara wants an Africa untouched by Western influence, but he approaches it with Western concepts. His observations remain analytical and self-conscious, shaped by the very intellectual world he hopes to leave behind. The more he tries to reach an unfiltered sense of belonging, the more he reveals that such a return is impossible. His project collapses because it rests on foundations he cannot escape.

PSYCHOLOGY

Outsider

The early conversation between Isabelle and Nara signals the collapse that will follow. His difficulty speaking with her is the first visible sign of a deeper unraveling. The same lack of clarity that separates him from Isabelle also shapes his strained interactions with his friends Soum, Camara, and Salim, his emotional distance from his mother, and his growing sense of disconnection from himself. Mudimbé shows that every relationship reflects Nara's divided identity.

In *The Rift*, the constant shift between Aminata and Isabelle is intentional. Mudimbé uses this pattern to reveal how fragmented Nara's inner world has become. Nara no longer experiences time, memory, or relationships in a steady or coherent way. Conversations with Aminata, which should anchor him in the present and in the African world he hopes to reenter, are suddenly interrupted by images of Isabelle, who belongs to his past and to the European world that shaped him. The two women collide in his thoughts. Aminata speaks, yet Isabelle's presence intrudes. Aminata's words bring back memories of Isabelle. Aminata's gestures remind him of her. The story moves from one woman to the other because Nara's mind moves in the same unstable rhythm.

This confusion shows that Nara cannot fully inhabit any relationship. Aminata represents the possibility of rootedness and African intimacy. Isabelle represents the pull of Europe, the intellectual and emotional world that formed him. When their images overlap, Mudimbé reveals that Nara cannot separate these worlds. He cannot be present with Aminata without feeling the shadow of Isabelle. He cannot return to Africa without carrying Europe inside him. These interruptions highlight the central paradox of the novel: Nara's attempt to reclaim Africa is constantly disrupted by the emotional and intellectual traces of the West. The rift Mudimbé describes exists inside Nara. His collapse begins when these two worlds can no longer remain apart.

Dislocation

Nara's experience with Isabelle is central for understanding his collapse in *The Rift*. Their failed romance becomes the emotional place where his divided identity starts to overwhelm him. Isabelle is European, and their relationship pulls him into a world that attracts him while also unsettling him. With her, he feels seen and desired, yet he also feels judged, inferior, exposed and constantly out of place. As he recalls, "The crowd was there, very young, seated or standing, watching us go by with odd grimness" (36). Their intimacy carries an imbalance he cannot resolve. He wants her approval, but her presence reminds him of the intellectual and cultural world that shaped him and that he cannot leave behind. He performs versions of himself that never feel true. His emotions swing between desire and resentment, admiration and irritation, longing and withdrawal. Isabelle becomes the emotional form of the West inside him, a presence he cannot integrate or escape. This is why memories of her interrupt his conversations with Aminata and his efforts to reconnect with Africa. Isabelle remains in his present as the figure of the world that has shaped his thinking. His experience with her reveals the rift Mudimbé describes: Nara cannot live in Europe without losing himself, and he cannot return to Africa without carrying Europe within him. His entire experience with Isabelle can be summed up in the word dislocation.

Everything in their relationship creates a feeling of being out of place. With Isabelle, Nara is never fully himself, never fully present, never fully at ease. He desires her, but the desire unsettles him. He seeks recognition, but the recognition feels conditional. He wants intimacy, but intimacy exposes his inner fracture. Isabelle becomes the emotional space where his African self and his Western formed self collide. This collision leaves him suspended between identities he cannot reconcile. Their relationship is troubled, and it is where his inner division becomes visible and unbearable. Dislocation captures the emotional, cultural and intellectual rupture that shapes his experience with her and prepares the collapse that follows.

The dislocation Nara feels with Isabelle also appears with Aminata. He describes it clearly: "[Aminata] had made me climb a slope. Precisely where she wanted me to go. And I was slipping on the incline, in the most natural way, tormenting myself about the pitiful society that was a witness to my downfall" (36). This repetition is essential for understanding Mudimbé's construction of Nara's inner life. The dislocation is not tied to a particular woman. It is not caused by Isabelle as an individual, nor by Aminata as a cultural alternative. It is a condition inside Nara himself. Isabelle reveals it because she represents the European world that shaped him, and Aminata reveals it because she represents the African world he hopes to return

to. The fact that both relationships produce the same discomfort shows that Nara's fracture is not relational but ontological. He cannot inhabit intimacy with Isabelle because Europe unsettles him, and he cannot inhabit intimacy with Aminata because Africa no longer feels fully reachable. The same sensation of being out of place, of performing himself rather than living himself, of being present and absent at once, follows him from one woman to the other. Mudimbé uses this repetition to show that Nara's crisis is not a matter of choosing between Europe and Africa. It is the impossibility of inhabiting either world.

Identity

The Rift can be understood as a long reflection on identity. Personal crises, racial tension, hidden sexual life, and social absurdity come together to show how people in postcolonial settings struggle to live beyond the labels placed on them. Throughout the book, identity appears fragile, shaped by desire, resentment, and the gaze of others. Mudimbé's characters live under constant pressure to act in ways that satisfy lovers, friends, institutions, and society.

This pressure becomes visible in moments of emotional breakage. When Tania learns that Camara has been involved with Marie Astrid, she reacts violently, breaking objects and cursing Camara and all men as pigs. Her reaction shows how a person can fall into pure emotion when betrayal removes the relationships that help them understand who they are. This collapse of identity in intimate life appears throughout the narrative, where characters face the gap between who they believe they are and who others expect them to be.

Mudimbé also explores identity in public life, where people often build their sense of self through display and performance. A man seen by Aminata and Nara in the library, covered in signs of wealth, becomes a striking example of this. The description of him, "he's wearing heavy shoes, enormous weights ... something between a boot and normal shoes, and yet something else ... A Terylene suit ... Holy Mother, did you look at his hand? The jewelry ... it's gold. Do you think it's real gold? ... Oh, you know ... gold or imitation, it's all the same on these hands" (79), shows a person who tries to create value through objects rather than through character. Mudimbé uses him to reveal a social problem in which identity becomes a collection of signs meant to cover an inner emptiness. His appearance is ridiculous, but it also reflects a world where people fear being unseen and feel pushed to exaggerate themselves.

This scene leads Nara to think more deeply about his own identity, especially in relation to Isabelle and Aminata. His joyful moments with friends, full of laughter and friendly arguments, remind him of how different his outings with Isabelle had been. A night at a restaurant with her would always be "tense in mind and feeling ... there would always be annoying little arguments about a color of make-up, a necklace to be straightened, or a haircut" (97). Enjoyment with Isabelle required constant adjustment and symbolic alignment. Even intimacy felt like a performance. He remembers how she picked him up from the ground on rue Saint Germain after he fell on Christmas night and invited him to her bedroom, beginning a relationship in which he followed her "like an obedient sniffing dog."

Aminata repeats this pattern. She picks him up from his run-down apartment and insists that he attend a Protestant mass before bringing him to her bedroom. This parallel shows how Nara's identity is shaped again and again by women who rescue him, guide him, and pull him into their symbolic worlds. Isabelle and Aminata feel the same to him because both impose roles that he accepts without resistance, even as these roles weaken his sense of self. Their demands and their fears become overwhelming forces. Nara sees them as interchangeable: "Isabelle, Aminata's place; the other side, the black side of the symbol" (116). They become symbolic figures rather than individuals, and he feels trapped between them.

The pressure grows stronger in his memories of Dr. Sano. Nara imagines his psychiatrist standing behind his back with a knife, ready to stab him: "... why are you standing behind me? You could put a knife in my back. ... Isabelle would have ... I'm sure of it ... And so are you ..." (121). This imagined violence shows how deeply Nara feels threatened by the roles others place on him. Identity becomes a space of fear, where betrayal seems possible not because of specific actions but because of the symbolic expectations he believes others hold. He feels consumed by fire; he feels that he is fire itself. His identity burns under the weight of these expectations.

The deepest break appears in his memory of following his mother's coffin. He feels that everyone around him has lied to him, mistreated him, or tried to force him into a straight mould. They do not know that his "anus open[s] to the explosion of haphazard lovers ... and then getting to love men" (119). His hidden sexuality stands in direct conflict with the roles others assign to him. This moment highlights one of

the book's central ideas: identity collapses when it is built on assumptions instead of truth. Nara has been performing the roles expected of him, while those around him never truly knew him.

Across the book, characters face similar pressures through political involvement, intellectual thought, or emotional struggle. Scenes of heartbreak, social satire, racial reflection, and sexual confession reveal a shared anxiety in which identity is always contested and always under strain. Mudimbé's shifting narrative style reinforces this instability. The book moves between personal memory, philosophical thought, and social observation, suggesting that identity cannot be separated from the forces that shape it.

In this way, *The Rift* becomes a condition, a break between self and symbol, between desire and expectation, between the individual and the collective. Nara's reflections, Tania's rage, Isabelle's demands, Aminata's fears, Dr. Sano's imagined threat, and the man's exaggerated display all point to the same truth: identity is a battlefield where the self must constantly defend its existence against the projections of others. Mudimbé's characters are anxious because they live in a world where identity never rests, where colonial history, racial dynamics, sexual pressure, and modern expectations constantly unsettle the self. In this sense, *The Rift* becomes a powerful meditation on what it means to live in a world that insists on seeing people as symbols rather than as individuals.

Failure

Mudimbé uses the encounter between Nara and Aminata in *The Rift* to show how desire reveals the limits of Nara's attempt to reconnect with Africa. The physical details of the scene become signs of a deeper break between the world he longs for and the world that shaped him. In his diary, Nara writes: "Aminata took me to a restaurant. I was watching myself follow her like a dog, nose sniffing. In the taxi I felt her naked thigh against my leg. She was lukewarm, pleasantly soft, lightly perspiring all over ... I cursed my pants, which prevented any direct skin contact with her" (51). This moment shows a man who cannot fully inhabit his own experience. He watches himself from a distance formed by exile and Western education, which means his return is already compromised.

Nara treats Aminata's body as a path back to an imagined Africa. The touch of "her naked thigh against my leg" feels like a promise of access. Yet the contact is blocked by the pants he curses because they "prevented any direct skin contact." The clothing becomes a symbol of the layers of history and identity that separate him from the Africa he hopes to rediscover. His desire is shaped by Western fantasies and Western norms, which turn intimacy into frustration. When he strokes her "lightly" and then "insistently," Aminata "readjusts her skirt," a gesture that sets a boundary and interrupts his fantasy of effortless return. Her refusal shows that Africa cannot be reached through desire alone.

Aminata's gesture reveals an Africa that is active, self-directed, and unwilling to be reduced to an origin that Nara can reclaim. The failure of touch becomes a metaphor for the failure of cultural and historical reconnection. Nara's body, shaped by Western experience, cannot merge with the African body he idealizes. The encounter exposes the fracture Mudimbé sees in the postcolonial condition. Africa cannot be recovered through nostalgia, longing, or physical closeness. Each attempt at return reveals how deep the divide is. Nara realizes that the Africa he seeks is not present in Aminata, nor in the immediacy of skin, nor in the fantasy of intimacy. The scene shows that desire makes the rift visible. His longing exposes his alienation, his Western gaze, and his inability to inhabit African space without repeating the very dynamics he wishes to escape.

Desire

Mudimbé explores desire in *The Rift* as something that arises in the small, unstable space between two people. Desire lives in the interval, the gap where one person's perception does not match the other's. This space becomes the site where feelings intensify, where the body senses meanings that the mind cannot fully explain. The brief encounter between Nara and his librarian friend Salim in chapter 5 shows how this works.

Desire appears as a form of attention, a sensitivity to the moment when two consciousnesses fail to align. Mudimbé treats this interval as both emotional and intellectual. It is where presence meets withdrawal, where one person feels a vibration that the other does not notice.

This becomes clear when Nara describes the accidental touch between his body and Salim's. He writes: "Salim's knee against my thigh ... I pull my thigh back. Nonchalantly ... not to bother Salim, who, seemingly sees nothing wrong in his knee being implanted in my flesh" (82). The moment is small, yet it produces an

unexpected intensity. The contact is accidental, but it opens a space inside Nara where the presence of another body creates a disturbance. This is not sexual desire for Salim. It is a sensitivity that emerges in the interval, a reaction to the difference between what Salim does and what Nara feels. Nara experiences the gesture as a kind of perlocutionary effect, a “doing things with words,” except here the words are unintentional movements.

When Salim withdraws his knee, Nara writes: “Salim has pulled his knee back. Suddenly, his common sense wears me out. Now here’s a man without desire” (84). Nara does not mean that Salim lacks sexuality. He means that Salim does not sense the vibration that arose in the space between them. For Nara, desire is a way of being affected, a capacity to feel the fissure. Salim appears untouched by it, while Nara inhabits it fully.

The scene raises a question about how desire moves between people. Nara learns that desire is a way of being touched by another’s presence. The fissure becomes the place where desire begins. Sexuality becomes a metaphor for relational intensity, showing how desire arises when perceptions fail to coincide, when one person is troubled and the other remains neutral. Mudimbé uses this interval to show that desire is a way of staying open to the other, a way of recognizing that the gap between two people is where vulnerability and responsiveness take shape.

The novel offers a Deleuzian view of experience. The interval is a zone of productive difference, a space where intensities circulate without settling into fixed categories. The encounter between Nara and Salim does not reveal a hidden truth about sexuality. It reveals desire as a field of becoming, an impersonal flow that shapes the self from the outside. The lack of coincidence between their perceptions is not a failure. It is the condition of relation itself. Desire emerges in the gaps where subjectivities misalign, where forces meet without merging. To inhabit this interval is to enter a process of becoming other, to let the fissure open new ways of feeling and responding.

Quest

Nara’s story is built around a double quest: the scholarly ambition to complete a decolonized study of the Kuba, and the intimate hope of reconnecting with Africa through Aminata’s presence. From the outset, he longs for an origin that would stabilize him, a place where knowledge and belonging might finally coincide. This quest collapses under the weight of his own postcolonial condition. Although he dreams of “starting from scratch” to reconstruct Kuba history, the very tools he uses, ethnology, Western epistemology, psychological vocabulary, bind him to the intellectual world he seeks to escape. His exhilaration at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* quickly reveals its limits: He mocks Western knowledge as mystifying, but his methods remain shaped by it. The same fracture appears in his relationship with Aminata. She should anchor him in African intimacy, yet Isabelle intrudes at every moment, showing that Europe inhabits his inner world as persistently as Africa. Nara slips “on the incline” between these two symbolic poles, unable to inhabit either of them fully. If Nara’s quest fails, it is not because Africa is unreachable, nor because his research is misguided. It is because the rift Mudimbé describes lies within him. He cannot reconcile the two worlds that constitute him, and the quest meant to heal this division only exposes its depth.

GENDER

Women as symbols

The Rift uses a familiar literary pattern in African writing: two women who symbolize two cultural worlds. Mudimbé’s Isabelle and Aminata belong to a long tradition in which the postcolonial subject is caught between Europe and Africa. Senghor explored this structure in his poetry, where Isabelle and Soukeina represent Europe and Africa as lived by a diasporic intellectual. In poems such as “Chants d’ombre” and “Hosties noires,” Isabelle appears as pale, refined, and tied to French intellectual life, while Soukeina embodies a maternal, enveloping Africa connected to memory and origins. Senghor imagines a form of coexistence. As Frindethie explains, his negritude seeks “compossibility,” a vision in which Europe and Africa can inhabit the same subject without destroying each other. Soukeina does not erase Isabelle, and Isabelle does not eclipse Soukeina. The speaker tries to hold both worlds together, becoming a bridge rather than a site of rupture.

Mudimbé returns to this motif in *The Rift* but gives it a tragic form. Isabelle and Aminata do not coexist in Nara’s consciousness. They represent a fracture that cannot be healed. Isabelle stands for Europe, the

world Nara has absorbed through education, exile, and intellectual formation. Aminata stands for Africa, the world he longs for but cannot inhabit. When Aminata “took me to a restaurant” and Nara finds himself “watching myself follow her, like a faithful dog,” the scene shows a man split from his own experience. He is in Africa, yet he observes himself as if he were elsewhere. The taxi scene intensifies this break. Feeling “her naked thigh against my leg” and cursing his pants because they “prevented any direct skin contact,” Nara discovers that even the body reveals the impossibility of return. When Aminata readjusts her skirt after he strokes her lightly and then insistently, her gesture refuses both the sexual advance and the fantasy of collapsing the distance between Nara and Africa.

Unlike Senghor’s Soukeina, who opens a space for reconciliation, Aminata marks a boundary Nara cannot cross. Mudimbé uses this failed intimacy to show the epistemological rift that shapes the postcolonial condition. Nara’s desire repeats colonial fantasies that imagine Africa as a feminized space available for possession. Aminata’s refusal shows that Africa cannot be accessed through desire, nostalgia, or physical closeness. In Senghor, the motif leads to mediation. In Mudimbé, it becomes a sign of tragic disconnection. Isabelle and Aminata do not coexist. They tear Nara apart. The West he carries within himself blocks any return to Africa, and Africa refuses to become the origin he seeks. Mudimbé rewrites Senghor’s feminine duality by removing its hopeful horizon. The postcolonial subject becomes a wound rather than a bridge. The motif persists, but its meaning shifts from compossibility to rupture, from synthesis to failure, from poetic reconciliation to existential tragedy.

Women’s bodies

The Rift portrays a Kuba society where women’s bodies become the central means through which political conflict is resolved. The novel describes how two women, each tied to one of the warring factions, are chosen, mutilated, and killed in a ceremony meant to secure peace between rival princes. Their selection appears as a cultural inevitability. Their bodies symbolize lineage, continuity, and the hope for reconciliation. In this way, the women act as political stand-ins, their suffering replacing the violence that might have taken place between men. The community frames their mutilation as a necessary offering, a sacrifice that turns their bodies into instruments of collective salvation. Their deaths are reinterpreted as states of grace, which reveals the ideological work behind the ritual. By naming the violence as grace, the society erases its brutality and replaces it with a narrative of transcendence that justifies the use of women’s bodies for political ends.

This logic shows how deeply objectification is embedded in the social order. Women are turned into symbols, their physical lives subordinated to political stability. The princes negotiate through their bodies, and the women’s deaths become the currency of peace. Gendered violence becomes a political language. Their bodies speak for the factions, their deaths becoming signs of alliance. The community’s insistence that these deaths are honorable or sacred reinforces this system. By elevating their suffering into a spiritual realm, the society prevents them from being mourned as victims. Their humanity dissolves into their function.

The novel suggests that this ritual is part of a broader pattern in which women’s bodies absorb conflict, maintain social order, and preserve male authority. The mutilation of the two women is an extreme example of a worldview that treats women as vessels for lineage, honor, and political strategy. Their deaths reveal how deeply Kuba society relies on gendered sacrifice to maintain stability. By exposing how their suffering is reframed as grace, *The Rift* invites readers to confront the violence embedded in tradition and to question the narratives that turn victims into symbols.

RACE

Racism

The Rift examines interracial intimacy through moments where affection becomes shaped by history, privilege, and the politics of being seen. Nara’s embrace of Isabelle in the Jardin du Luxembourg shows how a quiet gesture can become charged when it unfolds across racial and class lines. He describes them as “on a bench in the jardin du Luxembourg, with our books,” a scene of comfort and leisure. The moment shifts when he notices “three steps from our bench, a black laborer at work.” The presence of the street sweeper introduces a tension that complicates Nara’s experience. As a Black man holding a white woman, he occupies a position marked by scrutiny. At the same time, he feels elevated above another Black man

whose labor places him in a subordinate role. Isabelle's whiteness becomes a symbol of access, and Nara feels implicated in a hierarchy that grants him comfort while another man works nearby.

This discomfort appears in his confession: "I am ashamed to be here, my arm around Isabelle." His shame is tied to the distance he senses between himself and the street sweeper, a distance shaped by his proximity to whiteness. While Nara enjoys affection, the custodian performs undervalued labor. The contrast forces Nara to confront how racial structures distribute dignity unevenly. His guilt reflects an awareness that he is benefiting from a hierarchy that places him, even briefly, in a privileged position.

Nara sees himself through his own eyes and through the imagined eyes of the street sweeper. He wonders, "Does he think that I'm having a good time with this fast chick." The question reveals his fear of misrecognition. He worries that his relationship with Isabelle might be seen as a symbolic distancing from Blackness or as participation in a system that privileges whiteness. Fanon's analysis of interracial desire helps illuminate this tension. Fanon argues that interracial intimacy carries fantasies of elevation and escape. Nara's guilt emerges because he fears that the street sweeper might interpret his relationship through this lens.

The moment exposes the ethics of being seen. Nara's shame shows that intimacy is shaped by the conditions under which it is witnessed. His final admission, "I am ashamed to be here with Isabelle," captures the complexity of privilege, loyalty, and identity. The street sweeper's gaze becomes the catalyst for Nara's internal reckoning with what it means to love across racial and class lines.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does *The Rift* dramatize the effects of trauma, dissociation and symbolic collapse on Ahmed Nara's subject formation?

Students may analyze Nara's childhood confinement, the rat as a recurring figure of terror, the failure of the paternal function, and the alternating presences of Isabelle and Aminata. They can explore how Mudimbé uses narrative fragmentation to mirror psychic fragmentation and how trauma shapes Nara's inability to inhabit either Africa or Europe.

2. In what ways does Mudimbé use scenes of physical proximity and failed touch to reveal the impossibility of postcolonial return in *The Rift*?

Students may examine the taxi scene with Aminata, the mediation of desire through clothing, and the interruption of intimacy. They can argue how the failure of touch becomes a metaphor for historical rupture and how desire exposes the depth of Nara's alienation from the Africa he seeks to reclaim.

3. How does the alternating presence of Isabelle and Aminata reveal dislocation as the structural condition of Nara's identity?

Students may analyze how memories of Isabelle intrude into conversations with Aminata, how both women produce the same instability, and how Mudimbé constructs dislocation as an ontological rather than relational condition. They can explore how Europe and Africa function as competing symbolic worlds that fracture the subject from within.

4. To what extent does Mudimbé's fragmented narrative form in *The Rift* operate as a critique of Western epistemology?

Students may examine discontinuity, repetition, stalled narrative movement and shifts in tone. They can argue how fragmentation becomes a philosophical method that resists Western expectations of coherence and how the novel's form embodies the instability of origin, identity and knowledge in a postcolonial landscape.

5. How does *The Rift* portray sexuality as a site of identity conflict, secrecy, and social pressure, and what does this reveal about the broader struggle for selfhood in the novel?

Students can analyze how Mudimbé uses sexuality to illuminate the tensions between personal desire and social expectation. They can consider how characters negotiate their sexual identities in relation to cultural norms, racialized fantasies, religious pressures, and the symbolic roles imposed upon them. Students may explore moments where sexuality becomes a source of vulnerability, misunderstanding, or resistance, such as Nara's reflections on his relationships with Isabelle and Aminata, his hidden attraction to men, or the ways intimacy becomes entangled with power and representation.