

Possible *Bend in the River* response ideas:

1. Hamlet's confused actions compound the tragedy of his father's death, for example his killing of Polonius and Ophelia's suicide, and Salim's failure to know how to deal with his situation in Central Africa leads to his abandonment of Metty (Ali). Salim writes to Nazruddin about the worsening situation in his town, "It deepened my panic. At the same time it strengthened my resolve to stay and do nothing" (201). Compare the nature of inaction in these two tragedies.
2. E. M. Forster writes in his opening to *Howard's End*, "Only connect . . ." Forster is suggesting that social connections are at the heart of our sense of self and others. Is it necessary for one to connect at a "profound" level with at least one person in a culture in order to "fit" into that culture? Explore this idea by examining Salim's connections to his town, being careful to explain what you mean by "profound" and "fit."
3. Given the contention of question 2, examine Hamlet's and Salim's ability to connect within their respective communities. Compare Hamlet's connection to Horatio with Salim's connection to Metty and perhaps Zabeth. Are Horatio and Metty intimates of their respective communities, Horatio of the Danish court and Metty of the African bush? What is significant about whether they are or not?
4. Following the line of thought of questions 2 and 3, compare Salim's significant relationships, among them Metty, Yvette, Mahesh, Indar or Kareisha, to "Bub's" relationship with his wife and the blind man in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral." Compare Salim's blindness with Bub's. What is necessary for a character to "see"?
5. Relate the Big Man to Yeat's poem "The Second Coming" (Charters 1079). In what way is the Big Man's universe like the Second Coming: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity. / Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand." (lines 7-10)? In Christianity there is a sense that a savior is needed to set things right, that if the right person fills the position, all will improve. What role does this concept play in creating the need for a Big Man? How does a Big Man relate to tribal cultures that did not develop democracy as a reaction to monarchy or as an expression of religious freedom, but rather were forced into a European-kind of democracy when colonialism ended?
6. Continuing the thought in 5, one wonders at the end of *Hamlet* if Fortinbras will be any different from King Hamlet and Claudius. Does a big man – King Hamlet, Prince Hamlet, Claudius, the King of Norway, Fortinbras, the Big Man – solve the problem or make it worse? How does Claudius's relationship to those in his court compare to the Big Man's relationship to Ferdinand and Raymond?
7. Perhaps the fundamental difference between the culture of Hamlet and the culture of the African tribe is that the latter is organized from the bottom up: it doesn't

- depend on a Big Man. When the concept of a Big Man is introduced, it throws the culture off. The center cannot hold because in an African setting, the center was not necessary, at least not in the sense of a Big Man, because the people were sufficiently robust as tribal units to deal with their problems. Do you agree or disagree? This question would require some research into the tribal nature of the Democratic Republic of Congo.
8. Explore Nazruddin's view of business culture and how it enables him to integrate into most any society, including those he finds in Africa and England. Why does Salim find it so difficult to buy and 10 and sell at 12?
 9. Mahesh states that it's not that there's a right of wrong in Africa: there's no right. Explore what this means in terms of Salim's experience.
 10. Compare the advice Salim receives from Nazruddin and Indar to that Polonius gives Laertes and Ophelia.
 11. To what degree are the Asians in Africa like Hamlet in that they hate the culture in which they are forced to live? When Shoba returns from her trip to the east after her father's death, she goes into hiding. "She had never liked Africans and had come back raging about thieving and boastful politicians, the incessant lies and hate on the radio and in the newspapers, the bag-snatchings in daylight, the nightly violence" (203).
 12. Is Salim capable of love? What does he think love is?
 13. Continuing with 11, compare Salim's relationships to women – prostitutes, Yvette and Kareisha – to Hamlet's relationship to Ophelia and Gertrude. Compare their concepts of love? How does Salim want to relate to a woman? How does Hamlet?
 14. Why does Salim conclude on page 245 that his comical, "meaningless" encounter with a woman remove the special doubt he has about Kareisha, who he hasn't yet even kissed?
 15. What role do masks play in this novel? What is the nature of the masks Father Huisman collects? Why do the Africans appear to care less about their masks than Huisman? Why does Salim conclude when he's stuck in a town in the bush, since the Big Man needs the airplane, that a beer-drinking African has converted a fireman's helmet into a mask?
 16. How do Mahesh and Shoba learn to fit into the African culture? As they become more successful economically, what happens to their personal relationship? Why does Shoba feel as though she has been scarred?
 17. Zabeth has Ferdinand, but where have all the children gone? Is there any significance to the absence of children among the expatriates? If this a real culture or an allegorical one, and if the latter, what's the metaphor?