V. S. NAIPaul’S EXCURSIONS INTO THE THIRD WORLD: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF HIS TRAVELOGUES

ABSTRACT
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Abstract

This thesis titled “V. S. Naipaul’s Excursions into the Third World: A Postcolonial Reading of his Travelogues” is an attempt to situate V. S. Naipaul’s travel narratives in the late twentieth century political context. The last few decades of the last century saw the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as the sole super power. This global empire and the Israeli settler colonialism in historical Palestine came into a direct conflict with some of the Muslim countries in the Arab and non-Arab world. The Iranian Revolution, the rise of Taliban, the NATO bombardment of Libya, and the first Euro-American invasion of Iraq during the Gulf War brought the spectre of “Muslim hordes” back to the consciousness of the Western world. Old Orientalist clichés, images, stereotypes, and representations of Islam and Muslims as “backward”, “irrational”, and “anti-intellectual” got a new lease of life in Western mainstream media and culture. It is in this context, I argue, that Naipaul’s representation of Islam and “the revival of Islam” as “rage”, “neurosis”, and “parasitic” in his Islamic travelogues complements the ideological construction of the “clash of civilization” thesis which pits “Islam” against the “Universal Western Civilization”. I have argued that this representation of “Islam” as a threat to the “Western civilization” functions as the contemporary version of nineteenth century colonial discourse. It gives legitimation to the neoimperial and colonial policies of US-Israeli Empire in the Muslim world.

Although Naipaul has written great works of literary fiction in which he is said to have become an interpreter of the postcolonial world, his travel writing has garnered a reputation as a mandarin possessing a penetrating, analytical understanding of the ills of the Third World societies. Anglo-American mainstream scholarship popularized him as an “expert” on Islam. People began to consider him a political authority on Islam and “the revival of Islam”. Clearly, Naipaul’s prestige as a great novelist assisted him in sustaining his new image as an interpreter of postcolonial societies in general and Islamic world in particular. This diversion into the field of open political opinions about Muslim countries, where Euro-American alliance had deep colonial and neoimperial concerns, gave him a new reputation as a mandarin and an institution. His travel books and journalism began to overcome the attention that his fiction had received earlier. People in the West began to read him in order to understand what goes on in the Muslim world. His information and description of “rage of Islam”, that was said to be spreading throughout the Muslim world at the time of American Empires standoff, began to be considered more important and accurate
than Middle Eastern studies experts. It is in recognition of his ‘insights’ into the world of Islam that the Manhattan Institute invited him to give a lecture on the “fanaticisms out there”. The lecture was titled “Our Universal Civilization” in which he assured his hosts that “Islam”, an uncompromising form of ‘imperialism’, leads to the destruction of those societies, and the Western civilization will emerge victorious and vanquish the rest of the world. It is in this context that Rob Nixon writes about Naipaul that “

I assume throughout what follows that an understanding of his almost programmatically negative representation of formerly colonized societies is inseparable from the question – at once institutional and textual – of how he has secured a reputation in Britain and the United States as the foremost literary commentator on the so-called Third World. (Nixon 6)

I argue that his standard evocations of the former colonies as “barbarous”, “irrational”, “neurotic”, “fantasy”, “without history”, “parasitic”, and “mimic”, and or the West as “our universal civilization” that gives a sense of “vocation”, “responsibility”, “individualism”, “intellectual”, “creative”, “rational”, “dynamic”, “open” and “tolerant” are assimilable to late twentieth century imperialist discourse, a tradition that runs deep in Britain and the United States. On the one hand he has reproduced the most standard colonial and racial positions and on the other he has been able to present himself as someone who swims against the current ideological positions to tell the “truth” about the former colonies. In other words, and because of his prestige as an “expert” and interpreter of former colonies, his writings are suffused with opinions about the barbarism and dishonesty of Islam, cannibalism in Africa, and simpleminded irrationality of Indians. Although Naipaul has acquired a reputation as an unconventional writer in the Euro-American world, I maintain that his writings about Islam are full of old-fashioned Orientalist ideas, stereotypes, tropes, and images that, like the work of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, function as late twentieth century imperial discourses.

The basic idea that I explore in this dissertation by analysing V. S. Naipaul’s representations of Islam and Muslims in his travelogues is that far from living in an after- or post-imperial world, the political and economic relations between different nations are still determined by hegemonic imperial power structures. These relations are underlined by the continuing presence of colonial discourses about different cultures and peoples. Though the mid-twentieth century nationalisms of Asia and Africa succeeded to end the direct Western
domination of the major portions of the non-Western world, settler colonialism intensified in other parts exactly at the time when we were supposed to have entered into the era of the ‘postcolonial’. Along with settler colonialism, neo-imperialism, particularly in the form of neoliberal economic policies of international financial institutions headed by United States of America, has engulfed the poorer countries once again. After the Second World War and in the ‘postcolonial’ period United States of America donned the imperial robes of a super power as an heir to the nineteenth and early twentieth century European empires. The countries of the Third World though are politically independent, but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were when ruled directly by European powers. In this context I make an attempt to critically analyse the continuing usage of the idea of ‘postcolonial’ as a conceptual category to characterize the contemporary world and the relations between different nations. I argue that there is a need to theoretically relook at the relevance of the term ‘postcolonial’ considering the increasingly hostile attitude of the only super power, USA, towards the world in general and the Islamic world, in particular.

This project maintains that though for the most part the previously colonized countries have won their political independence, many of the imperial attitudes and structures of feeling underlying colonial relations continue. These structures of feeling support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice and position of empire. I emphasize that the imperial formations have continued to linger not only in political and economic practices but also in general cultural practices of metropolis. I take up Saidian ideas to argue that imperialism and its colonial forms are perpetuated by cultural forms ranging from poetry to novels, dramas, history, anthropology, geography, mainstream media and travel narratives etc. I apply to V. S. Naipaul Edward Said’s writings on culture and imperialism to show that modern imperialism does not depend for its survival only on tangible material things like war and aggression. Rather it is enabled and then perpetuated by an idea, a discourse, a universalizing worldview and impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination that certain people are inferior and are in need of civilization from the West. In this context my thesis purports to show that when it comes to writing about Islam and Muslims one finds that in writers like V. S. Naipaul there is no intellectual break with the eighteenth and nineteenth British ideological framework mostly represented by Orientalism. In other words, I posit the view that writings about Islam, like that of Naipaul, act as the contemporary equivalents of nineteenth century colonial discourses. In addition to this I maintain that the production of cultural forms in metropolitan
centres cannot be understood without also apprehending the imperial setting itself within which culture takes form.

The thesis revolves around the idea that the “principle dogmas of Orientalism exist in their purest form today in studies of the Arabs and Islam” (300), and these permeate the diverse artistic and scholarly endeavours ranging from Hollywood, mainstream news channels and documentaries to novels, travelogues and academic studies of Islam. These dogmas that structure Western representations of Islam and Muslims are recounted by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* as:

One is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, underdeveloped, inferior. Another dogma is that abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a “classical” Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. A third dogma is that the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself; therefore, it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically “objective”. A fourth dogma is that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared (the Yellow peril, the Mongol hordes, the brown dominions) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation whenever possible). (Said *Orientalism* 300-1)

This is the basic theoretical framework that I employ in my analysis of V. S. Naipaul’s representations of Islam and Muslims in his travelogues. Following in the footsteps of Said I trace the involvement of a particular kind of cultural form called travel writing/travelogues in the enterprise of colonialism. Colonial discourse theory makes us aware about the complicity of cultural and academic forms in modern forms of colonialism, capitalism, and hegemonic power. Like many other artistic and cultural expressions, the genre of travel writing too has been read from the perspective of subaltern peoples, highlighting its complicity with the colonial discourse. It has been argued by theorists like Mary Louis Pratt, Peter Hulme, and Benita Parry that “travellers, explorers and adventurers were scouts for imperialism, mapping the terrain, signposting potential sources of wealth, marking physical hazards and warning of unfriendly natives” (Parry 149). In his article
“Imperial Design and Travel Writing”, Jack Warwick points out that the individual travellers coming from the imperial centres were encouraged to publish accounts of their journeys into countries which were deemed available for colonization. These writers make it abundantly clear that we can no longer ignore empires and the imperial context in our studies of the metropolitan cultural forms. In order to better appreciate V. S. Naipaul’s travelogues about Islam and Muslims I have used the above discussed conceptual framework to trace their affiliation with the imperial ideology of late twentieth century Euro-American Empire.

One of the arguments of my thesis is that though Naipaul’s earlier novels gave expression to postcolonial identities and aspirations, especially of the diasporic communities, there occurred a marked shift in his ideological orientation. According to Patrick French, V. S. Naipaul stopped writing about postcolonial societies from the perspective of the subaltern nations. This ideological shift occurred during the 1970s and 1980s when, according to Edward Said, erstwhile radical writers and philosophers like Foucault began a conservative turn (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 29-30). It is the same period when neoliberal economic system and political liberalism of Western democracies intensified its war against Soviet Union, enlisting the support of authoritarian and unpopular Arab monarchies in the process. Western cultural and political onslaught, under the leadership of United States of America and through international institutions like International Monetary Fund, World Bank and NATO, began to reassert its global power. From Latin America to Korean Peninsula, and in Sudan, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Libya, American military industrial complex began to attack the nation states which had gained independence from European colonialism after the devastation of the Second World War. During the period of Afghan Jihad against Soviet Union, Iranian Revolution and first Gulf War, the area studies experts and mainstream media think tanks in the Euro-American academic world began to publish their analysis of Islam’s relationship with the Western world. Western scholars like Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, Sania Hamady, Raphael Patai, Harold Glidden and other American Arabists began to marshal their academic standing in the power canters to explain the so-called “Arab mind” to the world. The idea was that if you peel off the external and secondary influences of history and personal experience, an unchanging and transhistorical category called “Muslim” and “Arab” will show itself in its true colour. In other words, Arabs and Muslims are treated as fixed, stable, in need of investigation, and even in need of knowledge about themselves. As Edward Said reminds us in his seminal investigations of the Western representations of the Orient in *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*, these Western think tanks and mandarins
resort to age old and hackneyed Orientalist clichés to account for the causes of the immanent political conflicts between Muslim nation states and Euro-American powers. I argue in my thesis that it is in this context that V S Naipaul has written his two travelogues titled Among the Believers and Beyond Belief about four Muslim majority nations during the later three decades of the twentieth century. I argue that instead of presenting a dispassionate picture of the social, economic and political changes occurring in these Muslim countries, Naipaul uses the Orientalist tropes and images to formulate his theory of what he calls “parasitism” of “Islam” and of “Muslims”. He also develops the idea of a “Universal Western Civilization” as opposed to the non-West, particularly Islam. Like the nineteenth century Orientalist writing about Islam, he also uses water-tight binaries like ‘us’ vs. ‘them’, ‘West’ vs. ‘Islam’ in order to formulate his own version of clash of civilizations thesis. I maintain that Naipaul has many ideological similarities with Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, two other proponents of clash theory.

My contention in the thesis, as said earlier, is that like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, Naipaul too operates within the overarching ideological apparatus of Orientalism that circumscribes the boundaries of what can be said or written about Islam and Muslim cultures. I have particularly focused on his construction of “Islamic fundamentalism”, his thesis of conversion leading to neurosis of Muslims, his idea of Western Judeo-Christian world as representing a ‘Universal Civilization’, and especially his contribution to the formulation of the ‘clash of civilizations’ paradigm. I have used scholars like Tariq Ali, Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, William Dalrymple, Hamid Dabashi, Ranjit Hoskote, etc. to bolster my claim that Naipaul’s understanding of Islam’s relationship with the West is based on the nineteenth century colonial historiography of Islam. My thesis provides a critique of V. S. Naipaul’s formulations by arguing that the modern cultural theory teaches us that cultures are hybrid and heterogeneous. Cultures and civilizations are not fixed, unitary and monochromatic. They are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simple delineated description of their individuality. By following Said’s work on the modern Western scholarship about Orient and Islam, I argue that Naipaulian attempts to “force cultures and peoples into separate and distinct breeds or essences exposes not only the misrepresentations and falsifications that ensue, but also the way in which understanding is complicit with the power to produce such things as the “Orient” or the “West”” (Said Orientalism 349).
In exploring Naipaul's intellectual authority, I have chosen to focus on his Islamic travelogues and some other related material. Because, as I have argued, it is there that we encounter his most Orientalist and politically charged accounts of his understanding of the Islamic world. Furthermore, because of their frequently inflamed polemics, Naipaul's nonfiction, particularly related to Islam, have met with a more acutely divided reception along First World-Third World divide. The vigor of the debates sparked by Naipaul's work and his ‘insight’ into the Islamic world for his readership in the Euro-American world, have ensured that he is no longer simply viewed as a writer, but as embodying a set of politically charged ideas about Third World-First World relations. For this reason, and because Naipaul's obsessive concerns repeat themselves across the decades and across the globe, I have not followed a conventional development-of-the-author approach. Instead, I have designed my thesis around a series of Naipaul's recurrent fixations and ideas.

An Overview of the Chapters

In the Introduction of this thesis I have briefly talked about Naipaul’s works and the critical reception of his oeuvre. I have maintained that his writings on Islam and Muslims function within the overarching colonial discourse of Orientalism and, like the theories of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, work as contemporary colonial discourse that justify Euro-American neoimperial power structure.

Since my claim is that cultural forms like travelogues cannot be explained without taking into consideration the larger political, historical and imperial context within which travel and travel writing takes place, in my first chapter titled “Culture, Travel, and Imperialism” I give an account of how and when was Asia subordinated by European colonial powers. I point out that the colonized spaces were not only politically and economically subjugated; their cultural, spiritual and intellectual life was also disrupted and looked down upon by the colonial powers. I argue that colonization altered not only their economies but their ways of life, feeling, and their structures of thought were also changed. I maintain that though physical and psychological violence is at the heart of colonialism, the legitimizing discourses are formed in and through cultural expressions. I post a deep symbiotic relationship between colonial power relations and cultural forms that narrativize the colonial setting and ideology.
Chapter II is called “Naipaul, Clash of Civilizations and Resurgence of Empire”. I argue that Naipaul’s construction of the binary between ‘universal’ West and ‘parasitic’ Islam is a part of late twentieth century Orientalist discourse represented by people like Lewis and Huntington. It is argued that during the last decades of twentieth century American interventions in the Muslim world were part of the neoimperial power relations that were forming during and after the end of the Cold War. In such a situation, I maintain, Naipaul’s representation of Islam as ‘reactionary’ and ‘anti-modern’ and West as an “open” and “universal civilization” has given credence to the ‘clash of civilization thesis’ that has been used by policy think tanks to influence American foreign policy with regard to the Muslim world. This has created an image of Islam based on the idea of threat, which is subsequently used to justify further military interventions in the Muslim world.

In the third chapter “Islam, West, and V. S. Naipaul’s Construction of Islam as a ‘Threat’” I have argued that V. S. Naipaul constructed the binary opposition between essentialized forms of “Islam” and “West” at a time of intense political unrest between some Muslim nations and the US-Israel colonial policies in the Middle East. His representation of Islam as an uncompromising form of “imperialism” and “colonization” is a projection of aims and methods of US colonial and neoimperial power relations that were accruing during the last few decades of twentieth century. I argue that Naipaul, like Lewis and Huntington, has used old Orientalist clichés to portray Islam as a threat to the valance not only of its adherents but also of the Western civilization. I add that as a new Orientalist, Naipaul performed the task of ‘informing’ the West about culture of Islam so that it would be easy for the Western governments to ‘understand’ and, then, to control the Muslim lands.

Chapter IV is titled as “Naipaul and India’s Islamic History: An Assessment”. This chapter looks at Naipaul’s attitude towards Muslim presence in India, and maintains that his treatment of Islam in India was shaped by the preconceptions and assumptions derived from the history written by historians of the Raj.

Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the arguments and addresses the limits of this thesis. In this thesis I have essentially maintained that the project of anticolonial critique needs to be strengthened and fully articulated, particularly in relation to defining its opposition to neoimperial imperatives today. Instead of purely textual idealism, that has dominated the colonial discourse theory under the influence of poststructuralist and postmodernist insistence on difference, I argue that anticolonial critique would do better if it
brings the hard materiality of history, politics and economics back to bear upon the analysis of cultural forms. However, I would like to mention that this dissertation has not dealt in detail the diverse debates around the politics of representation and the processes of othering. This is one of the limitations of this dissertation. The framework which I have tried to develop here can be further developed if it is applied to other cultural forms like films and cinema, especially films made by Hollywood during and after the Iranian Revolution. Increasingly large numbers of films have resorted to Orientalist clichés to present Muslims as villains and terrorists in movies. The framework of this dissertation can be used to better understand the relationship between those movies and the US imperial policies and actions.