

INTRODUCTION

Vidyadhar Surajprashad Naipaul (1932-2018) was named after an eleventh century Chindela King, Vidyadhar, who is said to have fought against Mahmud of Ghazni. Later on when he became V. S. Naipaul, he liked the name for its associations: "It's such a grand name, a very special name – I cherished it for that reason. I think great things were expected of me" (qtd in French 8). He was born to the descendants of a Brahman indentured family in colonial Trinidad. When slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire, cheap labor was still needed to work in the sugar plantations. The problem of paucity of cheap labor in absence of African slaves was solved by colonial masters by importing indentured laborers from colonial India. Poor and destitute Indians, both Hindus and Muslims, were brought from India as bonded labourers. This was the society in which Naipaul was born, and he would rise from this situation to become one of the best English writers of second half of twentieth century. As a writer his achievements are diverse and multifaceted. Known for his unimpeachable style, strong power of observation, and minute descriptions of people and things, his novels as varied as *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *The Loss of El Dorado*, and *The Enigma of Arrival* would be read and taught in universities throughout the world. Even Derek Walcott, a frequent critic of his ideas about Africans and Trinidadians, considered him as "finest writer of the English sentence" (Walcott 28). Tariq Ali, who called him a "kind of brown sahib" (Ali 134), had to agree that Naipaul was a very brilliant writer. He was a prodigious writer of both fiction and nonfiction. *A House for Mr. Biswas* was said to have the unforced pace of a master-piece. The novelist Angus Wilson wrote that V. S. Naipaul had joined the "small group of unquestionably first-class novelists" (qtd in French 201). This book was praised as a great illustration of the effects of colonialism and one's desire to find an identity. Tariq Ali quoted Edward Said as saying that "he's much better than many of the novelists who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s – he just writes much better" (Ali 134). Rob Nixon says that "nothing since has equaled the

inventiveness and emotional generosity of that homage to his father's misfortunes in the straitened circumstances of colonial Trinidad" (Nixon 3).

Naipaul, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001, has also written travelogues on the basis of his travels through India, South America and some Muslim countries. *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilization* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* are the record of his different travels and experiences in India. *Among the Believers* (1981) and *Beyond Belief* (1998) are the result of his excursions among the 'converted peoples' of four non-Arab Muslim countries: Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia, and Malaysia. His journalistic and travel writings have stimulated disagreements. On Naipaul's India travelogues Nissim Ezekiel wrote a spirited attack, 'Naipaul's India and Mine. Patrick French writes that "the sharp Naipauline vision that had arisen from his family background and sound colonial education now appeared to be at odds with current thinking, particularly about what was coming to be called the Third World. In 1969 in *Literature and Ideology*, H. B. Sygne started what was to become a critical trend by calling V. S. Naipaul 'a despicable lackey of neo-colonialism and imperialism' (French 266). Criticizing Naipaul's travelogues about Islam and what he called "the rage of Islam", Edward Said stated that he is a "kind of belated Kipling who carries with him a kind of half-seated but finally unexamined reverence for the colonial order . . . Naipaul the writer now flows directly into Naipaul the social phenomenon, the celebrated sensibility on tour, abhorring the postcolonial world for its lies, its mediocrity, cruelty, violence, and maudlin self-indulgence'. On the publication of *Beyond Belief*, Said would write in *Al-Ahram Weekly* that V. S. Naipaul was

One of the truly celebrated, justly well-known figures in the world literature today. . . somewhere along the way Naipaul, in my opinion, himself suffered a serious intellectual accident. His obsession with Islam caused him somehow to stop thinking, to become instead a kind of mental suicide compelled to repeat the same formula over and over. This is what I would call an

intellectual catastrophe of the first order. (Said in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, August 1998)

Naipaul's views about Indians, Muslims, Africans, and other postcolonial peoples would be highly controversial, and that would cause a rift between his admirers in Euro-American world and detractors and critics in the Third World. The Western world has heaped upon him great literary awards and accolades, among them the Booker Prize, the W. H. Smith Prize, the Hawthornden Prize, the Bennett Prize, and the T. S. Eliot Award, this last honoring authors "of abiding importance whose works affirm the moral principles of Western Civilization" (qtd. in Nixon 3). In 1990, the British Crown knighted him, and Naipaul became Lord Naipaul. Some Western commentators hailed him as somebody who interprets the conditions of the Third World countries and diagnoses their problems better than anybody else. On Islam, he was even considered an 'expert' who had informed the Western readers and governments about the "rage" which was setting Muslim countries on 'boil'. On the other hand, and as mentioned above, he has been criticized by those whose cultures were at the receiving end of his diatribes and acidic provocations. It has been argued that Naipaul is a smart restorer of the myths of the 'superior', white, Western race. His travels have been seen as confirming his Eurocentric biases and ideas. Some others "perceive his knighthood as perfectly intelligible, given that he is England's favorite 19th century Englishman" (Nixon 4). Hamid Dabashi in *Brown Skin, White Masks* coupled him with "native informers" like Dinesh D'Souza, Fouad Ajami, Azhar Nafisi, and characterized him as a comprador intellectual who provide the "newly-globalized service to power" and to "the American Empire" (Dabashi 45). Terry Eagleton complained "great art, dreadful politics" while Kwesi Johnson said 'he is a living example of how art transcends the artist because he talks a load of shit but still writes excellent (qtd. in French xii).

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 as 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 thesis by analyzing 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 analyze 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 century 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 centers 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” (Said, *Orientalism* 300), and these permeate the diverse artistic and scholarly endeavors 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 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 “travelers, 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 travelers coming from the imperial centers 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, has 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.

A Note on Methodology

In order to show that Naipaul's creation of West vs. Islam binary in his Islamic excursions acts as the contemporary equivalent of nineteenth century colonial discourse embedded in cultural forms of travelogues I follow two methods of analysis: close reading and contrapuntal analysis. Contrapuntal method allows me to juxtapose Naipaul's cultural explorations with other historical and political texts dealing with the same issues so as to point out what was forcibly excluded from the narrative in order to create a homogeneous representation of Islam and Muslims. As Edward Said has pointed out that, "in reading a text, one must open it out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded" (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 79). Similarly, the method of reading the texts closely helps me to understand and unveil the assumptions underlying Naipaul's responses to the presence of Muslims and anything Islamic. For example, consider his visit to Imaduddin's house in Indonesia. While waiting in an empty room at Imaduddin's house he begins to describe the room:

On the pillars of the sitting room there were two or three decorative little flower pieces and, surprisingly, a picture of a sailing ship. About the sitting room were small mementoes of foreign travel, tourist souvenirs, showing a softer side of Imaduddin (or his wife), a side not connected with mental training, if indeed the house was theirs, and if their mementoes had truly tugged at their hearts (and did not, rather, preserve the memory of some pious giver). (Naipaul *Beyond Belief* 18)

By using the word ‘surprisingly’ and the part of sentence ‘a side not connected with mental training’ Naipaul manages to insinuate to his Western readership that such modern and aesthetic aspects of life like ‘decorative little flower pieces’, ‘picture of a sailing ship’, ‘mementos of foreign travel’ do not actually fit together with Islam and the culture it produces. The assumption is that Islamic education is incompatible with a love of travel, sentimentality, or a liking for nautical sense. Such usage of language helps Naipaul to give credence to his ideological formulation that Islam and modernity are diametrically opposed to each other. It allows him to conflate modernity exclusively with the Western world, and simultaneously to negate any other alternative roads to modernity. In addition to this and by equating ‘the West’ with ‘the universal civilization’ Naipaul forecloses any critical reflection on the project of Western modernity itself. In other words, I suggest, that in so doing he soft pedals any suggestion that such universality might often be exploitative in its nature and imperial in its expansiveness.

An Overview of the Chapters

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 posit 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 the 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, a conclusion will summarize the argument and address the limits of this thesis. It will also emphasize the need of further research into literary forms that would take into consideration the rising Islamophobia in the Euro-American world and the contemporary imperial and coercive power relations between Muslim countries and the US-Israeli imperial formation.

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