Chapter III

Islam, West, and V. S. Naipaul’s Construction of Islam as a ‘Threat’

Islam has always been a very important topic of discussion in the Western world. From the late seventh century itself, when Arab armies began to spread in all directions beyond Hejaz, Islam and its Prophet became a subject of annals of history. The most important Arab conquests during this period took place in the lands which were part of Christendom. Egypt, Spain, Syria, and Palestine were until then major centers of Easter Roman Empire. The conquest of these lands was followed rapidly by conversion of Christians and Jews into the fold of Islam. Arabs established dominions throughout these lands and posed a political challenge to the Christian empire. In other words, the encounters between these two Abrahamic religions from the very beginning were not solely religious, but were shaped by political exigencies of empire formation. Islam was not seen just as any other religion, but a threat to the very existence of Roman Christian Empire. This image of Islam as a religious and political threat intensified during the medieval period when it was given a further boost by the Christian Crusades against Muslims. Crusaders and their theologians presented Islam as heresy and the Prophet of Islam as imposter. This hostile image of Islam proliferated during Turkish Empires imperial adventures into European mainland. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 and then the siege of Vienna in the seventieth century gave further impetus to the centuries old European distrust of Islam. Then during modern period of Western colonialism, slavery, and occupation of Muslim lands, Muslims began increasingly to be seen as backward barbarians, a phenomenon of which Edward Said has done an excellent study in Orientalism. He has extensively studied the Western scholarship to show that a deep distrust of Islam and Muslims has been integral to the self-representation of Europe as a cradle of civilization and progress. Europe has had a long tradition of conceptions of Orient, especially Islam, dating back to the first contacts between the two civilizations.
Islam, in particular, and Orient, in general, was not only geographically adjacent to Europe; rather during modern era it was

. . . also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience . . . Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles. (Said, Orientalism 2)

“Islam” and “Our Universal Civilization”: Construction of a Coercive Binary Opposition

This largely political conflict between the two cultures has given rise to ideologically inflected images, stereotypes, tropes and discourses, based on essentialized and homogenized binaries, which continue to circumscribe what can be said about Muslims and Islam in the Western mainstream media and scholarship. Much of the orientalist discourse, which still informs much of the Western writings on Islam, is designed to show Islam’s inferiority and backwardness with reference to the ‘Western’ civilizations (thought of as one homogenous entity from Classical Greece to the present US Empire), “which Islam is supposed to be hell-bent on opposing, competing with, resenting, and being enraged at” (Said, Covering Islam xxv).

This politically fraught relationship between Western world and Muslim World has been made more complicated because “over the last 200 years, until the threshold of the twenty-first century, Muslims around the world have been engaged in a vital confrontation first with European colonialism and after the
This fateful confrontation has meant a systematic corrosion of the innate cosmopolitanism of Islamic cultures and its gradual mutation into a singular site of ideological resistance to foreign domination – in both political and cultural terms. The rise of Islamic ideologies worldwide corroborated the centrality of European capitalist modernity in which its colonial edges were categorically denigrated and denied agency – a reality against which a series of anti-colonial ideologies and movements took shape, among them both Christian and Islamic liberation theologies. (Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology* 25)

This ‘fateful confrontation’ has gained a particularly ugly shape after the Second World War when the new US empire began to stretch its muscles into Muslim lands which had achieved political independence from French and British colonialisms. The situation was made worse by events that would, by the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of twenty first, lead writers like Lewis, Naipaul and Huntington to speak in terms of an intractable ‘clash’ between ‘West’ and ‘Islam’, a late twentieth century form of imperial discourse to justify the US military interventions in the Middle East. Events like deposition of Mohammad Mosaddeq by Euro-American intelligence services, the Iranian Revolution against Shah of Iran - an American ally, American embassy hostage crisis, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, rise of Taliban, American invasion of Iraq in early 1990, and Al Qaeda’s attack on World Trade Centre made Islam and its diverse cultures a ‘news’ in the Western world. In this context, as Dabashi has argued in *Brown Skin, White Masks*, racist images of old Orientalist scholarship got a new lease of life and “brown has become the new black and Muslims the new Jew” (Dabashi, *Brown Skin* 6). As a result of imperial situation occurring in the late twentieth century race in Euro-American world began to be recodified and Muslims and
their diverse cultures became the main targets of racist representations and cultural forms. On the one hand this end of the century colonial discourse was full of blatant racist implications and slurs against Islam in general and Muslims in particular, and, on the other, it sanitized “the United States’ imperialist adventurism (most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq) and the armed robbery of Palestinians’ homeland by a band of European colonialists that calls itself Israel – a process by which the Western imperialist powers have come to appear as legitimate and even innocent bystanders, and even, victims of a global barbarism targeting their Western civilization” (Dabashi 6). This racist framing of Islam and Muslims as backward and barbarian can be, for example, understood from what Peter Rodman, former National Security Council member, wrote in the National Review of May 11, 1992. He wrote

Yet now the West finds itself challenged from the outside by militant, atavistic force driven by hatred of all Western political thought, harkening back to age old grievances against Christendom. . . . Much of the Islamic world is rent by social divisions, frustrated by its material inferiority to the West, bitter at Western cultural influences, and driven by its resentments. (qtd in Said Covering Islam xvii)

Such and other writings on Islam and its relation to the Western world by writers like Daniel Pipes, Francis Fukuyama, Judith Miller, Bernard Lewis and V. S. Naipaul (which will be discussed later) are full of sweeping generalizations and clichés about “inferiority” of Islam and “superiority” of West. There is no mention of centuries of European colonization of Muslim lands. French occupation of Algeria, Zionist colonization of Palestine, and American military interventions, according to such a worldview, are not the causes of Muslim “resentments” and “rage”; rather their “material inferiority” makes them jealous of Western civilization, and therefore, they hate “us”. In such a late twentieth century narrative about Islam Muslims are said to be “frustrated” about the progress and
development of “our universal civilization”. This is what Mahmood Mamdani calls a typical Culture Talk, an interpretation of historical events that disregards diverse social, economic, political forces and explains everything in terms of a transhistorical category called ‘culture’. This tendency to explain political violence in terms of culture gained much traction during and after the Cold War when “green peril” began to replace the “red peril” as West’s eternal enemy. As I argued in the Chapter II of this thesis, this politicization of culture found its most ardent supporters in Naipaul, Lewis and Huntington who developed their own versions of conflict paradigm. These views see total difference and antagonism between Islam and the West. Islam is considered as “other”, with very little or no similarities between itself and other cultures. The notion of “inferiority” of Islam and “superiority” of West forms the underlying assumption of such writings about Islam. Islam is seen as violent and aggressive, committed to barbaric reactions against non-Islam, whereas West is portrayed as civilized, reasonable, generous, efficient, and enlightened. While questioning such coercive categories which are used to talk about Islam and Orient, Said argues that the terms like “Islam”, “West” and “Orient” themselves are constituted entities, and that the “notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically “different” inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space is equally highly debatable idea” (Said, Orientalism 322).

The late twentieth century debates about Islam in the mainstream Western media and scholarship, with due exceptions, are marred by demonization and distortion of Islam. Islam is treated as a threat to the West, its culture and to its values. These Western concerns about the perceived Islamic rage against Western culture and values began in the late twentieth century with the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979. This revolution overturned a staunch and strategically important ally of the West: the Shah of Iran. This perceived Islamic threat involves stereotypical representations of Muslims and Arabs. Those views are based on sweeping generalization that conflate Islam with controversial Muslim figures like
Ayatollah Khomeini, Osama bin Laden, Ayman Al Zehwari; and with militant Muslim groups like Al–Qaida, Taliban, Islamic State etc. It is during this period that terms like Islamic fundamentalism, Islamic terror and Islamic extremism became a common usage to refer to Islam in the Arab world. One can argue that the rise of overtly Islamic militancy in the last couple of decades has been one of the many components in the construction and portrayal of the negative image of Muslims, yet one cannot discount the persistence and influence of the old Orientalist clichés on the consciousness of the people. The Orientalist images that did the function of othering Muslims carried within themselves an undertone of threat and fear. Orientals are to be feared; and not to be trusted. According to Edward Said, “modern Orientalism already carried within itself the imprint of the great European fear of Islam, and this was aggravated by political challenges of the entre-deux-guerres” (Said, Orientalism 254). Writing about Orientalism’s ability to change according to differing circumstances Said continues

My point is that the metamorphosis of a relatively innocuous philological subspecialty into a capacity for managing political movements, administering colonies, making nearly apocalyptical statements representing the White Man’s difficult civilizing mission - all this is something in work within a purportedly liberal culture, one full of concern for its vaunted norms of catholicity, plurality, and open-mindedness. (Said 254)

Orientalist ideas would continue to be expressed without any special change to the character of those images even when historical periods and situations would change. Those ideas about Islam and Muslims have a kind of self-perpetuating character. Whenever any event happens that seems to pit “Islam” against “West”, metropolitan pundits would resort to age old tropes to ‘explain’ the behavior of Muslims. For example, Daniel Pipes wrote during the first Gulf War in order to ‘explain’ to the Western audiences the inherently ‘radical’ nature of Islamic culture. In a piece titled “There are No Moderates: Dealing with
Fundamentalist Islam” Pipes equates fundamentalism with Islam, and that according to Pipes is the new “fascist” ideology which the “democratic West” has to defeat. He equates Islam with fascism that it is “closer in spirit to other such movements (communism, fascism) than to traditional religion”. These generalizations about Islam, a very diverse and heterogeneous culture, are very difficult to make about any other religious tradition. But, since it is Islam, anything goes. For Pipes, Islamic “fundamentalism” is violent, irrational, uncompromising, and it threatens the world and “our” civilization. In other words, what I argue is that after the collapse of the USSR Soviet communism yielded to Islamism as the West’s new nemesis. Writers like Fukuyama, Huntington, Naipaul, Lewis and others of their ilk manufactured a new global enemy. There was this sudden interest in defending or eulogizing Western civilization by many scholars such as Alan Bloom (The Closing of the American Mind, 19870) and Jacques Barzun (From Dawn to Decadence, 2000), and this was in direct response to recent political events and the subsequent immigration of large number of Muslims to the Western world. For such writers the very presence of Islam is “threatening”. The concept of “enemy” gradually narrowed in on Islam. As I argued earlier, the most important regional factors contributing to the perception of Islam as the bête noire of the West were, according to Dabashi,

... the 1977-79 Islamic revolution in Iran, the formation of Hezbollah in the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the emergence of Hamas in Palestine after the commencement of the First Intifada in 1987, and the emergence of Groupe Islamique Arme in Algeria after the country’s military government annulled the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in the 1992 general elections. (Dabashi, Brown Skin 11).

In this context, my point is that the emergence of Islam, or what Orientalists like Lewis and Naipaul like to call “the revival of Islam”, as the nemesis of the West gave a new lease of life to old-fashioned Orientalism. The
typical tendency of this recalibrated Orientalism is: to glorify the Western civilization and to denigrate Islam and its culture. This is exactly what V. S. Naipaul did in his travelogues about Islam where he constructed the idea of “Our Universal Civilization”. This idea was later on given a fuller shape in the lecture to the Manhattan Institute. Naipaul preached thus:

This idea of the pursuit of happiness is at the heart of the attractiveness of the civilization to so many outside it or on its periphery. I find it marvellous to contemplate to what an extent, after two centuries, and after the terrible history of the earlier part of this century, the idea has come to a kind of fruition. It is an elastic idea; it fits all men. It implies a certain kind of society, a certain kind of awakened spirit. I don’t imagine my father’s parents would have been able to understand the idea. So much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement. It is an immense human idea. It cannot be reduced to a fixed system. It cannot generate fanaticism. But it is known to exist; and because of that, other more rigid systems in the end blow away. (Naipaul, The Writer 517)

While creating an unbridgeable opposition between ‘our universal civilization’ and “philosophical shriek” of “closed systems of faith” like “Islam, Naipaul maintains that

The universal civilization has been a long time in the making. It wasn’t always universal; it wasn’t always as attractive as it is today. The expansion of Europe gave it for at least three centuries a racial taint, which still causes pain. In Trinidad, I grew up in the last days of that kind of racialism. And that, perhaps, has given me a greater appreciation of the immense changes that have taken place since the end of the war, the extraordinary attempt of this
civilization to accommodate the rest of the world, and all the
currents of that world’s thought. (Naipaul, The Writer 516)

‘Our universal civilization’, i.e., the Western civilization undergoes normal processes of historical development and moves from one higher stage of development to another. It is open. It is elastic; it moves and gives “the idea of happiness” to those who embrace it. It gives its adherents, like Naipaul, a sense of “vocation” and a kind of purpose in life. It awakens a spirit of “responsibility”, “choice”, and the “life of intellect”. Since it undergoes natural movements of historical progress, it has come to a “kind of fruition”, and because of that “other more rigid systems in the end blow away”. Like Fukuyama, Naipaul in his own way declared “an end of history” because “other more rigid systems in the blow away”.

There is no doubt that the “rigid system” Naipaul talks about is Islam about which he comes to this conclusion:

In the 100 years since that story, the wealth of the world has grown, power has grown, education has spread; the disturbance, the philosophical shriek, has been amplified. The division in the revolutionary editor’s spirit and the renunciation of the fictional biologist—both contain a tribute unacknowledged, but all the more profound to the universal civilization. Simple charms alone cannot be acquired from it; other, difficult things come with it as well: ambition, endeavor, individuality. (Naipaul, The Writer 516)

As compared to West, Islam is static. It does not progress. It is rigid. Even when the rest of the world has moved ahead towards fruition, Islam is caught in the nineteenth century. Only the “philosophical shriek” has been amplified by Islam and its values. In other words, according to Naipaul only some kind of “fanaticism” of Islam and Muslims has increased. No luxury of progress for Muslims. They are forever stranded in desert. And that is why “they” hate “us”.

9
For Naipaul West opens a life of intellect and mind. It gives to those who belong to it a sense of ethics and responsibility in life. It makes one aware of an individual personality based on intellect and reason. It frees one from irrational and “rigid” systems of thought. It changes one’s attitude to oneself and towards others. The citizens of “our universal civilization” enjoy and uninhibited freedom of thought and values. Contrary to this, Naipaul’s representation of Islam is based on age old prejudices and biases. He argues that

... I found myself among a colonized people who had been stripped by their faith of all that expanding intellectual life, all the varied life of the mind and senses, the expanding cultural and historical knowledge of the world that I had been growing into on the other side of the world. I was among other people whose identity was more or less contained in the faith. I was among people who wished to be pure. (Naipaul, The Writer 512)

The idea that Naipaul gives to his immediate listeners of this lecture, and by extension to the people of the Western world, is that “Islam” and the culture and values it produces are incompatible with the life of intellect and reason, which are believed to be the sole preserve of “our civilization”. “Islam” forces its adherents to close off their minds and senses to the rest of the world. It makes them blind to historical progress. It makes them oblivious of the natural phenomenon around them. Economic, political and historical events and ideas do not influence the behavior of Muslims and their society. It is their “faith” that solely determines their response and attitude to their own lives and to that of rest of the people of the world. These ideas and such unqualified generalizations about Islam, if made about any other religion and civilization, would be considered outright racist and not a “dispassionate” analysis of Islam and Muslim civilization. In order to ‘inform’, as a typical Orientalist, his Western audiences in the Manhattan Institute about the ‘pernicious’ and ‘corroding’ influences of Islam, Naipaul talks about Malaysian Muslims and what their “faith” has done to them:
In Malaysia, they were desperate to rid themselves of their past, desperate to cleanse their people of tribal or animist practices, all the subconscious life, freighted with the past, that links people to the earth on which they walk, all the rich folk life that awakened people elsewhere cultivate and dredge for its poetry. They wish, the more earnest of these Malay Muslims, to be nothing but their imported Arab faith; I got the impression that they would have liked, ideally, to make their minds and souls a blank, an emptiness, so that they could be nothing but their faith. Such effort; such self-imposed tyranny. No colonization could have been greater than this colonization by the faith. (Naipaul *The Writer and the World* 512)

As compared to the ‘Western civilization’, a civilization which opens one’s mind to the history, science, intellectual thought, open-mindedness, toleration, and humane values, Islam, “the imported Arab faith”, has robbed the Malaysians of their history, their power to think, their sense of tradition, their cultural life: in short, “Islam” ends the very being of a human being. In other words, Naipaul theorizes that “Islam” is irrational, anti-intellectual, anti-science, primitive, totalitarian, fascistic, and barbaric. In order to create this neat binary opposition between ‘progressive’ West and ‘fundamentalist’ Islam, Naipaul overlooks the tremendous havoc that colonialism caused in these Muslim regions. He completely remains silent about the ongoing imperial policies of the United States and the settler colonialism of Israel. Palestinians, Jordanians, Lebanese, Iraqis and other Arab victims of the US-Israel military aggressions are not even mentioned; simply because that would have undercut the liberal and democratic assumptions of the neat narrative of ‘our universal civilization’. No mention is made of America’s support to dictatorships around the Arab world. While analyzing such representations and images of Islam, propagated and perpetuated in the Western world by media and Orientalists during and after Iranian Revolution, Edward Said maintained that “such claims about Islam, most of the time, the Arabs, are
designed to obscure what it is that Israel and the United States, as “Islam’s” main opponents, have been doing.

Between them the two countries have bombed and invaded several Islamic countries (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Libya, Somalia, Iraq), they have (in Israel’s case) occupied Arab-Islamic territory in four countries, and in the United States’ case are seen in the United Nations as openly supporting the military occupation of these territories . . . Israel . . . has wielded its power over United States Middle Eastern policy whereby the interests of four million Israelis totally overshadow the interests of two hundred million Arab Muslims. It is all this, and not Bernard Lewis’s quaint formulation that Muslims are enraged at Western “modernity”, that has created an understandable sense of Arab-Islamic grievance against powers who, like Israel and the United States, proclaim that they are liberal democracies but act against lesser peoples according to quite contradictory norms of self-interest and cruelty.... I am saying that much of what one reads and sees in the media about Islam represents the aggression as coming from Islam because that is what “Islam” is. Local and concrete circumstances are thus obliterated. In other words, covering Islam is a one-sided activity that obscures what “we” do, and highlights instead what Muslims and Arabs by their very flawed nature are. (Said xxi-xxii)

Such biased representations of Islam and the cultures it produced continue to influence the people’s attitudes towards Muslims. And, as writers like Said have shown, they also are dominant in policy circles of the Western world.

In order to make his theory about “Islam’s” anti-intellectual and irrational tendencies seem more plausible to his Western citizens of “our universal civilization” Naipaul gives the example of a novel called Foreigner written by an Iranian woman named Nahid Rachlin. The novel deals with an Iranian woman
who works in Boston as a biologist. She is married to an American, and Naipaul informs his listeners that in Boston, a city of ‘our universal civilization’, the biologist “seems to be all right”. But the moment she returns back to Iran and hence comes into contact with Islam, she “begins to feel lost”. A touch with Islamic culture leads to loss of clarity. Naipaul infers from the behavior of the protagonist of the novel that

... we can see that the young woman was not prepared for the movement between civilizations, the movement out of the shut-in Iranian world, where the faith was the complete way, filled everything, left no spare corner of the mind or will or soul, to the other world, where it was necessary to be an individual and responsible; where people developed vocations, and were stirred by ambition and achievement, and believed in perfectibility. Once we understand or have an intimation of that, we see, with the central figure of the novel, what a torment and emptiness that automatic, imitative life in Boston has been for her. (Naipaul, The Writer and the World 515)

Apparently, the Iranian woman, a Muslim, was not prepared by her faith for the outside world. Islam “colonized” the mind and soul of its adherents to such an extent that it left no space for other experiences and ideas. It corroded one’s sense of ‘individuality’ and ‘responsibility’. Muslims become, Naipaul clearly suggests, neurotic because of the hold their “faith” has on them. They cannot negotiate with the rest of the world. On the other hand, Boston stirs “ambition and achievement” and belief in “perfectibility”. Iranian protagonist stands for Muslims and Boston stands for “our universal civilization”. Belief system of Islam is clearly pitted against the West in an unequal power relation. The whole argument hinges on the assumption of the superiority of Western culture and way of life, and inferiority of Islam and the civilization it gave rise to.

13
It is very pertinent here to note that Naipaul’s hostile attitude towards Islam and Muslims has roots in his upbringing in a Brahman family of Trinidad. As Paul Theroux wrote in *Newsweek* about Naipaul that “he’s proud dignified . . . the embodiment of all those things is being a Brahmin. You must never forget that he is a Brahmin” (qtd in French 396). This upbringing and education shaped his response to Islam. For example, at the time of Iranian Revolution against the Shah Naipaul’s sister Kamal wrote to him: “what with all the back to Islam movement and the Ayatollah, I have gone back to the old thinking of my family. You know, I had got rid of that deeply ingrained distrust of the Muslims but now it’s all come back” (qtd in French 396). His family had very rigid and biased ideas about Islam. They did not like Islam and Muslim culture. His brother Shiva had said, “my mother has always found it hard to forgive the Muslims for their numerous invasions of India and for forcing the partition of the subcontinent” (28). Like his mother, his father also distrusted Muslims: “If a fellow is a decent Indian, it doesn’t matter if he is a Christian; but he should never be a Mohammedan” (qtd in French 110). In this context Patrick French writes in his biography of V. S. Naipaul that “Vidia’s instinctive Indian, or Hindu, exclusivity, which had in the past been expressed more through comedy than enmity, changed gear. It was an irreversible shift; like Trinidad itself, V. S. Naipaul went through a hardening of racial attitudes in 1956” (French 170). French also writes that “his attitudes and outlook had been formed by his family background, his colonial education and his experiences in Britain and beyond in the 1950s and 1960s: his instincts and prejudices were intact, but his eyes were wide open, missing nothing” (279). His attitudes towards Islam had already been shaped even before he visited the four Muslim countries. His mental horizons of expectation had prepared him beforehand for “rage” and “parasitism” that he ‘saw’ Muslims suffering from. Having “shed all these colonial political concerns” in 1978 after he joined “civilization” in England (French 213), Naipaul’s objective became to inform the Western people about the “universal” nature of their civilization and, at the same time, to warn them about the “revival of Islam”. The underlying assumption of this attitude is that the “Islam” represents a threat to the “open” and “tolerant”
civilization of the West. It automatically associates emotions of fear, suspicion and menace with Islam and its adherents. This background, I argue, is very relevant when one has to make sense of Naipaul’s racist and stereotypical representation of Islam and Muslims.

Naipaul’s whole arguments and generalizations regarding Islam rest on the notion of innate inferiority of Islam as compared to Christian West. West gives an “idea of the pursuit of happiness . . . an idea of pursuit of happiness is at the heart of the attractiveness of the civilization to so many outside it or on its periphery” (Naipaul The Writer and the World 517), while, on the other hand, “no colonization had been so thorough as the colonization that had come with the Arab faith. Colonized and defeated peoples can begin to distrust themselves” (Naipaul The Writer and the World 513). West gives a sense of self and Islam creates a distrust of self. Not only is Islam inimical to the sense of self, it also impairs one’s sense of past history. It wages a ‘war’ against pre-Islamic past. In Muslim countries “the rage is against the past, the history, and the impossible dream is one of true faith, growing out of a spiritual vacancy” (Naipaul Beyond Belief 52). Naipaul seems to have an obsession with pre-Islamic past of these Muslim countries. For him anything is better than “Islam”. The idea of Islam as the most debilitating form of “imperialism” is, therefore, reiterated again and again throughout his writings on Islam: “there probably has been no imperialism like that of Islam and the Arabs. The Gauls, after five hundred years of Roman rule, could recover their old gods and reverences; those beliefs had not died, they lay just below the Roman surface. But Islam seeks as an article of faith to erase the past; the believers in the end honor Arabia alone; they have nothing to return to” (331). Christianity, on the other hand, did not “mean a break with the past” (81). At another place in Beyond Belief Naipaul states that “Converted people have to strip themselves of their past; of converted peoples nothing is required but the purest faith (if such a thing can be arrived at), Islam, submission, is the most uncompromising kind of imperialism (64). Such characterization of Islam as an uncompromising form of “imperialism”, a faith that “erases past”, is highly
ideological and motivated, especially when one considers the historical context within which Naipaul formulated these ideas about “the colonization of Islam”. The irony is that this was the same period, as I have shown, when American empire and Israeli settler colonialism were attacking one Muslim country after another. Naipaul leaves no room for individual choice and freedom of conscience for Muslims. He does not consider the implications of the possibility that the “converted” people may be more than happy with their faith. This new faith may have given them spiritual framework on the basis of which they could make sense of the world and their relationship with the nature. It is apparent from Naipaul’s arguments that he would actually like Muslims to go back to their pre-Islamic roots and shun their new faith. This attitude reflects the “Islamoclasm that has taken hold of the public sphere in North America and Europe, which lays out broad, unquestioning certainties about the nature and history of Islam. Certainties that are as dogmatic as the supposed dogmas that they set out to oppose. The critique-by-media of Islam claims to defend certain ‘core Western values’, which are founded on the principles of the Enlightenment and assumed to lie at the base of all civilized discourse” (Hoskote and Trojanow, Confluences 183). Such images are meant to excite the Western audiences and ‘inform’ them about what sinister things are going on ‘there’. While analyzing such descriptions of Islam which flooded market in the wake of Iranian Revolution, Edward Said stated that

. . . the market for representations of a monolithic, enraged, threatening, and conspiratorially spreading Islam is much greater, more useful, and capable of generating more excitement, whether for purposes of entertainment or of mobilizing passions against a new foreign devil. For every unusual book like Richard Bulliet’s *Islam: The View from the Edge* . . . there are many more books and articles expressing views . . . in which Islam, terrorism, the Palestinians are routinely harangued together, these tend to be what passes for informed analysis and coverage in the United States’ prestige media. The daily reader of the mainstream media is most
unlikely to encounter, for instance, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad’s careful analysis of “Islamist perceptions of US Policy in the Near East” . . . She carefully distinguishes among five different kinds of Islamists (preferring the use of that word instead of the inflammatory “radical” or “fundamentalist”) and even more useful, collects a whole series of real incitements to Muslims that have exacerbated relationships between the world of Islam and the West. Among them are statements by Ben-Gurion (“We fear nothing but Islam”), Yitzhak Rabin (“The religion of Islam is our only enemy”), and Shimon Peres, (We will not feel secure until Islam puts away its sword”), and the long list of direct Western actions against the Islamic world that culminate in the strong, not to say aggressive, Israel-United States partnership. (Said Covering Islam xxviii)

Most of these post-Iranian Revolution images of Islam heightened the sense of insecurity and perpetuated the monolithic and hostile representations. They, like Naipaul’s dispatches from Muslim lands, elevated representations of Islam to the level of objective truth. Edward Said’s arguments in Covering Islam regarding the simplistic and essentialist binaries between “Islam” and “West” created by mainstream Western scholarship are apt to describe Naipaul’s activities of image creation. Said maintains that:

Why the slavish and uncritical adoption of views that stress the unvaryingly reductive arguments about Islam, and why the extraordinary willingness to accept the official rhetoric emanating from the governments in its irresponsible characterizations of Islam: by that I mean the loose application of the word “terrorism” to “Islam”, and the attitude that elevates Israeli views of Islam’s “danger” to the level of United States policy?
The answer is in how prevalent age-old views of Islam as an acceptable competitor to the Christian West still are. . . . The tendency to consider the whole world as one country’s imperium is very much in the ascendancy in today’s United States, the last remaining super power. But whereas most other great cultural groupings appear to have accepted the United States’ role, it is only from within the Islamic world that signs of determined resistance are still strong. Therefore we have an efflorescence of cultural and religious attack on Islam from individuals and groups whose interests are informed with the idea of the West (and the United States, as its leader) as a standard for enlightened modernity. Yet far from being an accurate description of “the West”, such an idea of rightful Western dominance is in reality an uncritical idolization of Western power. (Said Covering Islam xxix, italics in original)

Similarly, Hoskote and Trojanow critique the negative and stereotypical images of Islam that have flooded the Western culture during the second half of twentieth century. Their critical intervention unmasks the current rhetoric of the West in relation to Islam. They argue that this rhetoric “falls victim to the mystification, closure and lack of nuance that it challenges in the other” (Hoskote and Trojanow 184). They point out that in the West Islam is generally

. . . viewed as a regressive, intolerant religion that demands submission of its followers and commands violence against those who do not follow it. The general image is of a faith that is backward-looking and self-denyingly austere; that swaddles its women in bulky robes when it isn’t killing them for defying the family patriarch in matters of love, sex and marriage. . . . The Nobel Laureate V. S. Naipaul and others have popularised the idea that contact with Islam has been catastrophic for other cultures – that Islam has wiped out all signs of the cultures it has supplanted,
that Islam is an unfinished project that is only waiting for an opportunity for world domination. This is no more than a projection of the aims and methods of European colonialism. We have only to recall that, after the centuries of Islamic political dominance, Muslims in India remain a minority and Hinduism flourishes. We have only to point to the beautifully sculpted stone Ganeshas and Garudas that abound in Muslim-majority Indonesia, not to mention the mellifluous Sanskrit names that Indonesia’s Muslims bear: Meghawati, Sudarsano, Sukarno, all laden with Hindu mythic associations. And the Buddhist temple-complex of Borobudur stands in splendor, damaged by an earthquake but still a symbol of national pride. (186)

Cultural Talk and Islam: Naipaul’s “rage” over “revival”

In the previous section of this chapter I have argued that V. S. Naipaul constructed the binary opposition between essentialized “Islam” and “West” at a time of intense political unrest between 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 colonialism and imperial relations that were accruing during the last few decades of twentieth century. I argued that Naipaul, like Lewis and Huntington, used old Orientalist clichés to portray Islam as a threat to the balance not only of its adherents but also of the Western civilization. As a new Orientalist, Naipaul performed the task of ‘informing’ the West about culture of Islam so that it would be easy for the Westerners to ‘understand’ and, then, to control the Muslim lands. As a body of knowledge, Naipaul’s descriptions of Muslim world form a part of late twentieth century Orientalism that sought to deal with it “by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, Orientalism 3). This
ideological formation of the concept of “our universal civilization” in opposition to the “parasitism” of Muslims and Islam is complemented by Naipaul’s analysis of what he calls “revival of Islam”, i.e, Islamic form of fundamentalism. This is also related to and forms a part of the clash of civilizations thesis, which has been discussed in Chapter II. In this section of this chapter I argue that, given the historical moment of conflict between US imperialism and some Muslim countries, Naipaul’s insistence on the “revival of Islam” as antagonistic to Western world is faulty, and it serves the ideological function of imperial discourse designed to justify Euro-American military interventions in the Middle East. While arguing this I do not deny the rise and existence of overtly militant Islamist organizations which have resorted to violence in the world, particularly in Islamic world itself. What I am questioning is Naipaul’s insistence on Islamic faith as the sole cause of “the rage of Islam”. My point is that Naipaul overlooks more important political, economic, and imperial reasons behind the growth of fundamentalism within some of the Muslim communities. He is silent about the late twentieth century imperial formations and military interventions of US Empire as a possible cause of this hardening of religious identities. This persistent rhetoric about “Islamic fundamentalism” ends by equating the religion of more than a billion people with ‘terrorism’, ‘anti-intellectualism’, ‘parasitism’, ‘neurosis’, and violence. I critique this kind of cultural determinism by highlighting what Naipaul has left unsaid, because in ideological formations what is left unsaid is sometimes more important than what is said. His ideological tactic is to suppress a significant amount of other historical experiences between Islam and West. In such a context and at this juncture of history, Naipaul’s interest in Islam is not purely incidental, but, rather deeply embedded in ideological struggles at the end of the Cold War. As Said has suggested about Bernard Lewis, and I argue is equally applicable to V. S. Naipaul,

European interest in Islam derived not from curiosity but from fear of a monotheistic, culturally, and militarily formidable competitor to Christianity. The earliest European scholars of Islam, as
numerous historians have shown, were medieval polemicists writing to ward off the threat of Muslim hordes and apostasy. In one way or another that combination of fear and hostility has persisted to the present day, both in scholarly and non-scholarly attention to an Islam which is viewed as belonging to a part of the world – the Orient – counterposed imaginatively, geographically, and historically against Europe and the West. (Said *Orientalism* 344)

V. S. Naipaul began to formulate his ideas about “the revival of Islam” almost exactly at the time of Iranian revolution in 1979. After this and during his travels through four Muslim countries he gave his thesis about “rage of Islam” a shape and structure, and connected it with his other idea of Muslim “parasitism” and “neurosis”. This thesis received its final form in his lecture “Our Universal Civilization”, given at the time of first Gulf War; one of the consequences of this war was the death of nearly five lakh children in Iraq. Naipaul makes many diverse comments about the nature and world view of “Islamic fundamentalism”. He found ‘fundamentalism’ a growing threat in these countries, and recounted the ‘nihilistic’ influences on social, political, cultural, economic, and intellectual aspects of life. While providing an analysis of “Islamic fundamentalism”, as writer like Said, Tariq Ali, Dabashi, and Purabi Pawar has stated, Naipaul “erases the difference between Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, and uses them as interchangeable terms which they are not” (Pawar: 17) . According to Naipaul, Islam is not “a philosophical or speculative religion”. Rather it has been “imperialism” from its very inception in the Arabian desert (Naipaul 7 Among). It was less “metaphysical and more direct” and “it had generated nothing like a Renaissance. Muslim countries, where not colonized, were despotisms; nearly all, before oil, were poor” (12). In other words, Muslims suffer this ill fate of not controlling themselves properly. Without ‘colonization’ by the West they will always remain “despotisms”. They like “despotism”. Muslims have not given rise to inquiry and knowledge like the Westerners did during the Renaissance. This
stereotypical and biased understanding of Islamic intellectual history has been thoroughly dismissed by recent revisionist scholarship of Islam. Historians of Islamic influence on the making of “European” Renaissance have been arguing for long now that this upsurge on free and rational inquiry would not have been possible with the deep philosophical and ethical influences of Arabs and Muslim Spain. Refuting such broad claims and generalizations, as made by writers like Naipaul, about the static and passive nature of Islamic intellectual tradition, revisionist historians maintain that this denial of Islamic contribution has been a typical trend in mainstream Western intellectual history. It is in this context that Hoskote and Trojanow have argued that

Unwilling to the perceived adversary more of a due than absolutely necessary, European historical accounts usually reduce these Islamic accomplishments to the safeguarding and forwarding of “our” treasures. This smug belief overlooks the fact that the savage in the bogs of Middle England was far removed from the supposed heritage of classical antiquity, both in space and sophistication, while the trader in the Baghdad souk was a neighbor to Hellas. ‘The Arab, almost as much as the Byzantine, was an heir of Graeco-Roman civilization. His way of life was not very different. A Byzantine felt far more at home in Cairo or Baghdad than he would feel at Paris or Goslar, or even at Rome’ (Ruciman 1951, Vol. 1:75). Early Islamic civilization was not a cold storage for perishables that could not be entrusted to the illiterate barbarians who were then rampaging across Europe, but a factory humming with a variety of technologies and cultural developments. Amongst the many factories that were active – Baghdad, Damascus, Alexandria – none were more impressive and beautifully enduring than the cities of al-Andalus. (Hoskote and Trojanow 46)
Commenting on Dante’s silence about his Islamic influences as precursors of the *Commedia*, these authors highlight the European tendency of not giving due credit to Islamic sources of their late Renaissance achievements. They further point out:

This attitude prevails in Europe until today, an obsession with a pure origin, as if the fact of the outside influences would contaminate one’s own identity and diminish one’s greatness. In our minds, exactly the opposite is true. The achievement of a colossal figure like Dante is that he was receptive to pre-existing ideas, and that he had the energy and the vision to form an individual masterpiece in the spirit of confluence. Unfortunately, the denial and erasure of Muslim precursors was about to become a common editorial manoeuvre in theology, literature and science.

(68)

This erasure of history is too common a practice in Naipaul that he totally erases the contemporary Euro-American and Israeli settler colonial policies and their impact on Middle East Muslims from his thoughts about the rise of “Islamic fundamentalism”. According to him Islamic faith is the main and sole reason behind all the ills of Muslim societies. Political, social, economic, and cultural conflicts are said to be the result of “Islam”. The main trouble with Naipaul’s understanding of “Islamic fundamentalism” is that he fails to make a subtle distinction between militant Islamism, a modern political ideology, and Islam, a religious belief system of almost a billion people. Islamic societies are so diverse and varied that only ideologically committed demagogues can talk in terms of a homogenized form of “Islam” and “Muslim”.

In *Among the Believers* one section is titled “The Disorder of the Law” in which Naipaul sums up his comparison between “Islam”, “Islamic fundamentalism” and “West” or “Universal Civilization”. The “Law” of the title refers to Islamic Law, and its association with “disorder” makes it clear to the Western readership that “Islam” causes disorder. Therefore, “disorder” is what
Naipaul finds in the four Muslim countries he visited at the time of Iranian Revolution. The underlying ideological assumption is that whatever “we” are doing in “that” part of the world is perfectly normal and justified. “Universal civilization”, which is open, tolerant, and rational, cannot cause any “disorder” the way the “uncompromising imperialism” called Islam does. As a typical Orientalist, Naipaul characterizes the anti-imperial political movements of Muslims as merely a “part of their rage against the civilization that encircles them and which they as a community despair of mastering” (Naipaul *Among the Believers* 167). According to Naipaul

The Islam that was coming to the villages - brushed with new and borrowed ideas about the wickedness of the machine, the misuse of foreign aid – was the Islam that in the late twentieth century had rediscovered its political roots . . . this late twentieth century Islam appeared to raise political issues. But it had the flaw of its origins – the flaw that ran right through Islamic history: to the political issues it raised it offered no political or practical solution. It offered only the faith. It offered only the Prophet, who would settle everything – but who had ceased to exist. This political Islam was rage, anarchy. (Naipaul *Among the Believers* 355)

All the political movements from Algeria to Pakistan are not legitimate political movements; they are only “rage” at the modern Western civilization and its achievements. Naipaul seems to suggest that Muslims are too primitive to organize modern political movements based on ideas of freedom, equality and individual dignity. ‘They’ cannot formulate their political mobilization around issues of justice and equality. Their resistance to US imperial policies and Israeli settler colonialism is demonized as “rage against the civilization”. Muslims are unable to cope up with the “tolerant” and “liberal” Western world, which encircles them, therefore their only response is either “despair” or “rage”. Or even “neurosis.
According to Naipaul “neurosis” is another result of “Islam” and “Islamic fundamentalism”. In the “Prologue” to the *Beyond Belief* Naipaul sums up his reactions to Islam thus:

Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert’s worldview alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history of alters. He rejects his own. He becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab history. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easily set on the boil. (Naipaul *Beyond Belief* xi).

This in any other would have been considered outright racism. According to Naipaul, neurosis, a tendency towards nihilism, aggressive attitude towards the rest of the world, characterize Muslim behavior, and this has been caused by their “conversion” to Islam, an Arab faith. About Pakistan Naipaul writes:

The local people would hardly be there, in their own land, or would be there only as ciphers swept aside by the agents of faith. It is a dreadful mangling of history. It is a convert’s view; that is all that can be said for it. History has become a kind of neurosis. Too much has to be ignored or angled; there is too much fantasy. This fantasy isn’t in the books alone; it affects people’s lives. (329)

This theme of “neurosis” caused by a conversion to “Islam” is, as is apparent from above, a constant theme of Naipaul’ Islamic excursions. In other
words, Naipaul insinuates to his Western audiences that Islam is a disease-causing faith. It ends one’s emotional and intellectual balance. Islam is found guilty of inducing mental illness on a cultural scale because it is an “Arab” religion with sacred lands in Arabia. It creates pessimism and nihilism. Its adherents lose any sense of purpose. They become spiritually incapacitated. They become unable to make any difference between reality and “fantasy”. Rather “fantasy” takes the place of reality for them. Unable to cope up with the changing world, its intellectual and scientific revolutions, ‘Muslims’ shut themselves in a cocoon of their own past. All these are outcome, according to Naipaul, of “conversion” Muslims have to go through. Commenting on Naipaul’s “neurosis” thesis O’Shea Meddour argues that

According to this peculiar thesis, Arabs do not suffer from neurosis because they are not “converts”. Naipaul fails to mention that Arabs were generally polytheistic at the time of Prophet Muhammad and, in order to become Muslims, necessarily “converted”. Perhaps he dismisses this factor because he believes that the “sacred places” of Arabs are “in their own lands”? Assuming that this is Naipaul’s reasoning, it would follow that European and American Christians and Jews suffer from a similar “neurosis” because their “sacred places” are abroad. However, it is clear that Naipaul regards western Christians and Jews as mentally sound. The logic behind his argument is impossible to follow. (Meddour 68)

Referring to Naipaul’s “neurosis” thesis about Islam, Eqbal Ahmad asks in an interview, “Distorted Histories: An Interview with Eqbal Ahmad”:

Who is not a convert? By Naipaul’s definition, it Iranians are converted Muslims, the Americans are converted Christians, the Japanese are converted Buddhists, and the Chinese, large numbers of them, are converted Buddhists as well. Everybody is converted
because at beginning every religion had only a few followers. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, all prophetic religions developed through conversion. In that sense, his organizing thesis should not exclude anyone. (Ahmad 129)

Eqbal Ahmad contests Naipaul’s obsession with “Islamic fundamentalism” in Muslim societies and argues that in order to provide a neat Orientalist picture of Islam, Naipaul overlooks other elements of these societies. For example, in case of Pakistan Naipaul gives his readers an impression that Pakistan is an Islamic state, run by a military dictator and supported by its people. Naipaul’s ‘objective’ reporting completely ignored that “the regime was being opposed at great risk to themselves by hundreds of thousands of people, including almost all the known poets, writers and artists of Pakistan. Our best writers of that time were in prison or in exile. . . . and you don’t make one mention of it. . . . this Islam that you are presenting is not the final Islam of Muslims” (Ahmad Confronting Empire 129).

As has been amply demonstrated in the previous and in this chapter, Naipaul’s construction of the idea of “Islamic revival” and “rage” is purely a one-sided ideological construct. Like typical Orientalist scholars Naipaul portrays Islam at war with itself and with the rest of the world. It is shown to be obscurantist and backward looking. Its experiences with the colonial rule of Europe and America have only given rise to “rage and anarchy”. Muslim intellectual and political anti-colonial movements are portrayed as a mere “distress” and hatred of “Western” modernity. The fact that these movements, collectively called political Islam or Islamism, emerged during and in response to experiences of colonialism is not given due credit while formulating their ideas and structures. On the contrary, Islam is portrayed as a single monolithic entity, conflating militant Muslim movements with mainstream Islam. This kind of scholarship views Islam as the new enemy and threat. I have argued that this particular attitude towards Islam is necessary for the West, both to reassert its
imperial authority over the Muslim world and, at the same time, to construct and affirm its own image. Consequently, Western Orientalist writers tend to demonize Islam by portraying it as a threat to Western civilization and to the liberal values of the modern world. Like other Orientalists, Naipaul too claims explicitly and implicitly that “Islamic fundamentalism” represents a genuine future threat to the ‘civilized’ modern world and the “new World”. Like Bernard Lewis, Naipaul too has portrayed “Islam” as a rejection of modernity. This discourse attributes the rise of “Islamic rage” to Islam’s specificity, rather than to the social, economic, cultural and political dynamics of the contemporary world. This kind of argument looks at Islam as having ‘inherent’ and transhistorical features that that reinforces the differences between the Islam and the West. These characteristics, we are made to believe, produced “revival of Islam”, which renders Islam incompatible with modernism. This trend, according to Elzian Elgamri, in “contemporary scholarship may be considered a continuation of the old Orientalist tradition, hence the terms Neo-Orientalism and Neo-Orientalist. This discourse also emphasizes the continuing existence of the potential confrontation with Islamic resurgence, given the long history of the potential confrontation with the civilization of the West” (Elgamri 42). This approach emphasizes various perceived differences between the “West” and “Islam”, and assumes an inevitable ‘clash of civilizations’ as formulated by Lewis and Samuel Huntington. While critiquing the reductive representations of Islam in mainstream media and scholarship, Elgamri maintains that

The relationship between Islam and the West is deeply involved in the discourse used by contemporary scholarship in viewing, reviewing, interpreting and representing Islamic fundamentalism. One common factor between Orientalist discourses and the discourses of contemporary scholarship is the tendency to emphasize the difference between the West and the world of Islam. Conflation is another common characteristic shared by the discourses of the Orientalist tradition and the discourses of those
who view Islamic societies as monolithic and look at the Islamic fundamentalism as a manifestation of assumed inherent characteristics that arguably make Islam incapable of change and adaptation to certain aspects of the Western liberal ideology. (Elgamri 43)

Against this culturally deterministic interpretation of the relationship between West and Islam, I argue that the rise of Islamism as a political ideology in the last decades of twentieth century can be best explained by reference to a combination of socio-economic and political factors. Most important factor of all is the US-Israel colonial and imperial adventures in the Muslim world. Military interventions, Cold War politics, and unequal power relations that accrued as a result of colonialism cannot be sidelined as major factors in the rise of Islamist political ideologies and parties. As Hamid Dabashi has stated that “the emerging global reconfiguration of power has no use for that outdated binary, but plenty of room for the globalized empire and manners of revolutionary resistance to it. This is not a war between “Islam and the West” any more. We are at the threshold of a whole new reconfiguration of power and politics, empire building, and moral and normative resistance to it. (Dabashi Islamic Liberation Theology 2). The new empire-building and the disproportionate balance of power enable the US to exercise a tremendous influence over Muslim countries. In other words, the centrality of unequal power relationships cannot be avoided while giving any account of “the revival of Islam”.

This interpretation and analysis of “Islamic fundamentalism” and “rage” as is provided by V.S. Naipaul considers “Islam” as the primary cause. This lays too much emphasis on culture as the determining factor. It borders on a kind of cultural determinism. This kind of determinism assumes that every culture has a tangible and transhistorical essence that defines it, and it then can explain politics as a consequence of that essence. Therefore, “Islamic fundamentalism” is offered as both description and explanation of any standoff between Muslim countries and
Euro-American imperialism. It is not capitalism, colonialism, state formation and neoimperial reconfigurations, but some religious essence (culture) that is said to be “the dividing line between those in favor of a peaceful, civic existence and those inclined to terror. It is said that our world is divided between those who are modern and those who are premodern. The moderns make culture and are its masters; the premoderns are said to be but conduits” (Mamdani 18). It is these explanations of the “revival of Islam”, thought of as ‘rage’, ‘neurosis’, and ‘threat’, which Mahmood Mamdani calls Culture Talk. Samir Amin defines this kind of culturalism as “an apparently coherent and holistic theory based on the hypothesis that there are cultural invariants able to persist through and beyond possible transformations in economic, social and political systems” (Amin 7). This culturalist argument is an affirmation of irreducible unique traits of culture or faith that are said to determine the course of history of civilizations. Amin argues that this culturalism is a kind of Eurocentrism characterized by an “inability to see anything other than the lives of those who are comfortably installed in the modern world. Modern culture claims to be founded on humanist universalism. In fact, in its Eurocentric vision, it negates any such universalism. Eurocentrism has brought with it the destruction of peoples and civilizations that have resisted its spread” (Amin 185). However, it is pertinent here to mention that this cultural determinism, or Culture Talk, did not originate from V. S. Naipaul first. Rather its more durable version has been provided by Bernard Lewis, a senior British Orientalist. Put together, they form a perfect contemporary version of nineteenth century colonial discourse.

Lewis’ and Naipaul’s views are utterly conventional in their derivation from nineteenth century Orientalists of the British school. Both see in Islam a danger to Christianity and liberal values. Both provide cultural (religious) explanations of what Naipaul calls Islam’s “rage”. Both use the words “rage” and “revolt” in referring to Muslim responses to colonialism and neoimperialism. Like Naipaul, Lewis claims that
There is something in the religious culture of Islam which inspired, in even the humblest peasant or peddler, a dignity and a courtesy toward others never exceeded and rarely equaled in other civilizations. And yet in moments of upheaval and disruption, when the deeper passions are stirred, this dignity and courtesy towards others can give way to an explosive mixture of rage and hatred . . . . (Lewis 59)

As I pointed out earlier, Lewis and Naipaul make huge cultural points about an entire civilization of Islam. They show a complete inability to grant to Muslims right to their own cultural practices, political and historical experiences by denying any agency to them. Naipaul and Lewis make a calculated attempt to show that because Muslims are not part of “our universal civilization” they cannot be tolerant, intellectual, rational, and unbiased. These are meant to be exclusive qualities of Western civilization. Natural processes of human life are denied to them. Their “faith” is said to have a total hold on them, and therefore, “faith” is the all-encompassing explanatory category on which “West” can rely to understand the “rage” and “revival of Islam”. Commenting on Lewis, which equally applies to Naipaul also, Said states that “Lewis simply cannot deal with the diversity of Muslim, much less human, life because it is closed to him as something foreign, radically different, and other” (Said Covering Islam xxxi).

Naipaul’s lecture “Our Universal Civilization” and Lewis’ articles like “The Roots of Muslim Rage” and “The Return of Islam”, which was later published as a chapter in Islam and the West, allege that most of the major nineteenth and twentieth century Muslim political and anti-colonial movements that they disapprove of are actually throwbacks to seventh-century Islam. For both of them there exists a fundamental, even ontological, difference between “Muslims” and the “modern West”. Islam and Muslim world, according to them, has not changed over the course of history. This disallows the possibility of historical change and human agency to Muslims of diverse cultures; instead, it lumps them all together as a monolithic entity. For example, in order to give credence to his “diagnosis” of
“rage of Islam” and in order to say that this “rage” among Muslims is not something new, but a part of their “faith”, Naipaul connects himself with Joseph Conrad who, Naipaul tells us, “was able at a time of high imperialism to go far beyond the imperialistic, surface ways of writing about the East and native peoples . . . (Conrad published a book) in 1896, nearly 100 years ago, in which he catches something of the Muslim hysteria of that time – the hysteria that, a hundred years later, with greater education and wealth of the native peoples, and the withdrawing of empires, was to turn into the fundamentalism we hear about” (Naipaul The Writer and the World 513). Naipaul seems to point out to his audiences that Muslims are doomed to “hysteria” and irrationalism as “we” are to the enjoyment of our secular, rational, and civilizational superiority. The point Naipaul suggests to his Western audiences is that the Muslim “hysteria” now in the late twentieth century is not something new; rather ‘they’ have not changed even within a century. ‘Natives’ are natives; their anti-colonial movements are merely “hysteria”, a kind of a mental disorder. This “hysteria” is elsewhere called “neurosis” and “rage”. It increases with the “withdrawing of empires” and “with greater education and wealth of the natives”. In other words, Naipaul argues that the education which in other peoples brings intellectual and rational understanding of the world, in Muslims it only leads to a confusion of reality and fantasy. The underlying assumption is colored with imperial nostalgia and longing for the return for the old empires. West would do good to Muslims if it colonizes them again because in the absence of imperialism and with “withdrawing of empires” the “hysteria” of Muslims has only increased. Therefore, if Muslims are “revolting” today it is because it is historically determined that they should do so. Naipaul seems to suggest that “What they react to are not policies or actions, or anything so mundane as that. What they are fighting on behalf of is an irrational hatred of the secular present which . . . is “ours” and ours alone” (Said Covering Islam xxxiii).

In this chapter I have argued that using “Islam” as a monolithic cultural category to account for, as Naipaul does, the rise of different political Islamist
movements is an ideological gesture that is designed to justify and perpetuate the neoimperial policies of late twentieth century US empire. I have maintained that Naipaul’s characterization of anti-colonial movements in the Muslim world as “hysteria”, “neurosis” and “rage” are based on the old Orientalist ideas of inherent superiority of the “West” as compared to the Muslim Orient. This association of Islam with some kind of a mental disorder and anxiety creates an atmosphere of threat among the Western people and provides “legitimate” reasons for future military interventions in Muslim countries. In other words, I argue that Naipaul’s writings on Islam, along with that of Lewis and Huntington, help to create late twentieth century versions of nineteenth century colonial discourse based on Orientalist categories that posit an ontological and epistemological difference between “rational” West and “hysterical” Islam.
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