

# NAIPAUL'S TRAVELOGUES AND THE "CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS" COMPLEX

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With Naipaul, the controversial writer *par excellence*, one is neither neutral nor indifferent. The critical response to his travelogue pronouncements are characterized by a clear cultural cleavage: Anglo-American critics celebrate him as the uncompromising truth-teller, a “manager of stories,” and “a travelling salesman”; third-world critics label him as “V.S. Nightfall” (Derek Walcott), a “false native informant” (Spivak), and condemn him for insensitivity and arrogance that pander to Western prejudices.

As his fictional and non-fictional works reveal, V.S. Naipaul has an expressed loathing for the cultures and political aspirations of many third-world societies: be they Indian, Caribbean, or African. However, to the delight of neo-colonial politicians and cultural mandarins, Naipaul has reserved his inimitable brand of satire for Islam. His two books, *Among the Believers* (1981) and *Beyond Belief* (1998), testify to that. They deal with his visits to four non-Arab, Muslim countries: Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Based on brief visits to these four countries, he makes categorical presumptions about a rich, diversified, and complex culture like Islam's. He extrapolates whatever contradictions he gleefully spots in the Muslim individuals he interviews in these countries toward totalizing assumptions about the whole societies to which those individuals belong.

Naipaul's early fictional work held immense promise. His blend of humour

and humanity, shown in *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *Miguel Street* (1959), has accorded him the admiration of many readers and critics alike. And his magnum opus, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), is a fascinating meditation on the nature of exile, survival, and human intimacy under strenuous family and social constrictions. Regrettably, Naipaul's fund of spirited irony and benign cheer degenerated into a relentless series of books denigrating the hopes and aspirations of many third-world countries. Being such an inveterate denouncer of the third world, Naipaul has increasingly earned, at least in the eyes of many postcolonial critics, the just title of being the curmudgeon of contemporary literature in English.

In his second travel book on Islam, *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples*, Naipaul revisits the same four Muslim countries that he has covered in *Among the Believers*. However, the key new element in this book is the sub-titled term "converted," that represents the bedrock of his pet claim. With no rational foundation or historical analysis, he makes a hasty generalization that all current non-Arab Muslims—representing about one billion out of a total of 1.2 billion Muslims in the world—should be identified with the suspect term "converted." All his subsequent travelogue observations are tiresomely tailored toward this initial and unexamined hypothesis: the great masses of non-Arab Muslim peoples are still considered, in Naipaul's eyes, "converts." Naipaul never pauses to reflect upon the simple fact that all existing religions must have been founded, at their inception, on a conversion from one system of belief toward another, and that all initial adherents to any new religion are converts. So, why Muslims alone are accorded this dubious description? Never known for examining his narrow views or engaging in graceful dialogical discourse, Naipaul arrogates to himself, a man of Hindu ancestry, the role of labelling Muslims with a term that they robustly reject as being quite offensive. This prejudicial exterior perspective is no credit to him.

It is instructive in this context to read Naipaul's diatribes against Islam in the light of Samuel Huntington's oracular pronouncements on Islam. In his highly overrated essay, "The Clash of Civilizations?" Huntington states his cardinal concept that "the fundamental source of conflict" in the world is neither ideological, nor economic: "The Great divisions among human kind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural" (22). In a grandiose schema, he divides the world into "seven or eight major civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and possibly African civilization" (25). My objection to such a presumptuous

claim is that conflicts—whether global, regional or national—cannot be attributed to one source only: there are always more than one factor provoking and exacerbating a conflict. No self-respecting intellectual would reify or essentialize all conflicts: conflicts are not created equal and there is no one-size-fits-all description: each conflict pertains to its own locale, socio-political specificity, and cultural particularity: the natures and sources of conflict in Northern Ireland is different from that in Tibet, what is happening in Kurdistan is different from what is happening in Rwanda, and the conflict in Bosnia is different from that in Chiapas, Mexico, or in Columbia. Since Huntington's perspectives are shaped and confined by Western—specifically US—geopolitical interests and strategies, Huntington is in no position to make meaningful, objective hypotheses that could be taken seriously as insightful discourse.

Interestingly, Huntington approvingly nuances a statement made by V.S. Naipaul claiming that “Western civilization is the ‘universal civilization’ that ‘fits all men’ ” (Huntington 40). While Huntington has no qualms about Naipaul universalizing Western values for “fitting all men,” he highlights the stiff resistance to these values because of their conflict with indigenous, mainly Asiatic but more specifically Islamic, values:

Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist, or Orthodox cultures. (40-41)

What both Naipaul and Huntington want us to believe is that the so-called “non-Western cultures” are congenitally benighted because they decline climbing the magical bandwagon of “Westomania” (Jalal al-Ahmad) or “Westoxification” (212), to borrow Fred Halliday’s coinage. Apart from their fetishization of Western values, both Naipaul and Huntington share two striking attitudes: both reveal a suspicion, if not a hostile dislike, of other cultures and an uncanny tendency towards grand generalizations about the nature and values of these “other” cultures that Huntington and Naipaul have essentially constructed and attributed whatever they fantasized to them. This constructed “other” is often subjected to all sorts of reductive, essentialist qualifications, none of which is complimentary or appealing. The outcome of this assembled alterity is a notion that clash and conflict between the West and its “other” are inevitable and they better be understood, “discoursed,” and controlled to the

advantage of the legitimized, civilized/civilizing West. This binary, oppositional configuration becomes very pronounced when Huntington and Naipaul point out Islam, both as a religion and as a culture, as the retrograde force whose destructive tendencies need to be curtailed, contained, or conquered.

While both Naipaul and Huntington unabashedly proselytize their grandiose categorical declarations, they differ in their methodology. Huntington appropriates blocks of global cultures and civilizations across history and realigns them into seven or eight groups, with the “Western” being the one grand privileged block and the rest being conveniently “othered.” This macro approach contrasts Naipaul’s selective interviewing method of meeting individuals from specific countries, then expanding from their private narratives towards schematized descriptions of the societies that produced those narratives. Naipaul has done so very effectively time and again in his several travel narratives about India, Africa, and the Caribbean, but most specifically in his two non-fictional books about Islam.

When Naipaul visited the four non-Arab Muslim countries in 1980 (Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia), his aim, as declared in *Among the Believers*, was “to see Islam in action” (99) and “to find out about the application of Islam to institutions, to government, to Law” (107-08). In *Beyond Belief*, Naipaul makes a different claim: he says in the first three sentences of the prologue: “THIS IS A BOOK [sic] about people. It is not a book of opinion. It’s a book of stories” (xi). However, one does not need to go beyond the prologue’s second paragraph to realize that the book is dominated by opinions, and blatantly biased ones at that:

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 alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. (xi)

On dissecting this loaded statement, one can recognize twin concepts that represent the book’s defining “opinions”: A) Islam is an Arabic religion, not only in its origin but in its normative values as well, and B) Islam is an imperialism worse than European imperialism because the latter, in Naipaul’s opinion, was

“regenerative” while “Islamic imperialism” aimed at loot and plunder (women, slaves, lands, and riches) and the destruction of the “converted cultures” especially the Hindu-animist heritages of Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. He claims “Converted peoples have to strip themselves of their past; of converted peoples nothing is required but the purest [sic] faith . . . , Islam, submission. It is the most uncompromising kind of imperialism” (64).

While Naipaul presents these premises, he never really pauses to elaborate or prove these overwhelming claims, as if they are such self-evident truths that he does not need to tire himself with details. Yet the book’s entire premise revolves around these twin tenets. All the “narratives” that follow are sought out, selected, and structured to illustrate these claims. Despite all this effort, the supposed evidences never prove the grand claims. Granted, several of the episodes Naipaul gathers involve moving events of pain and suffering, yet they fail to prove his dubious thesis. The result of his manipulative strategy is to gleefully package a skewed argument about the culture and history of Islam that aims at deliberate exploitation of detail.

In his entrenched view, he considers Islam as an Arab religion because it originated in Arabia and then spread globally thereafter; all the non-Arabs are, in his eyes, “converts” even though over a millennium has lapsed since the non-Arabs have espoused Islam. Would he dare to apply the same principle by calling the millions of current Euro-American followers of Christ, whose roots are not linked to Christ’s birthplace in Palestine, as “converted people” too? It is important to point out here that it is offensive to all Muslims, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, to call Islam as an “Arab” religion. Although Prophet Muhammad was an Arab and the Qur’an was revealed to him in the Arabic language, Arabs are never accorded a privileged status in the religion, nor are they designated as God’s chosen people. Islam is an egalitarian, universalist religion and Muhammad, in a final key speech, specifically stated that “no Arab believer can claim an elevated status over a non-Arab except in the depth and sincerity of his/her piety.” In fact, the appeal of Islam to the thousands of contemporary European and American converts to Islam is its transcendence over race, class, ethnicity, nationality, and, yes, even gender. Non-Arab Muslims are not obliged at all to learn the Arabic language, even though many willingly love to learn it because it is the language of revelation. As an ironic twist, most classical Muslim commentators on the Qur’an were non-Arabs.

It is indeed curious to see many influential circles and institutions in the West, the Nobel Prize awarding committee being one, give prominence to

Naipaul's proclamations on Islam without pausing to think that those views are concocted by a writer who, at best, is ignorant of the religious heritage and social dynamics of Islam. At worst, Naipaul's writings are tainted by a glaringly crippling factor: Naipaul's conception of Islam is confined by his Brahmanic bias. He may protest to being labelled as a Hindu hard-liner but his arrogance and acerbic tone towards the people of the third world, whom he regards as wretched and "contemptible," stem from a fundamentalist caste-obsessed mentality. In the letters exchanged with his father, published in 2000, it becomes obvious that Naipaul comes from a background that is specifically anti-Black and anti-Muslim (*Father and Son* 122-24). It is disingenuous and downright dishonest of him not to state this basic fact to his readers as he arrogates to himself the role of being the insightful expert on Islam

To make matters worse, in October 2001, three weeks after 9/11, at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, Naipaul recited his usual mantra, claiming that Islam "has had a calamitous effect on converted peoples," because, as quoted in *The Guardian* of London (October 4, 2001), Islam demands "an abolition of the self" that is "worse than the colonial abolition of identity. It is much, much worse in fact." Bereft as he is of grace and compassion, this statement, to say the least, is irresponsible, given the inherent anti-Muslim sentiments in the West. It might even have put the lives of some Muslims at risk, especially those in vulnerable and marginalized minority situations. This prejudicial pronouncement not only reveals bigotry but also maliciously comes at a time when many caring and concerned Muslims, who strongly condemn terrorism, find themselves threatened by a violent backlash. The role of any sane, self-respecting writer or intellectual is not to stoke the fire of prejudice but to enrich public debate by making a distinction between the impressive civilizational contributions of Islam throughout the centuries and the terrorists' twisted appropriation of that precious heritage which, for all intents and purposes, belongs to all, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

It is indeed a stain on the integrity of the Swedish Academy to award the prize to Naipaul shortly after his "calamitous" claim. Would the Academy have awarded the prize to a writer who had claimed that Judaism "has had a calamitous effect on converted peoples?" Wouldn't such a statement have engendered indignation and cries of anti-Semitism against it? If attacking Judaism is not acceptable, as indeed it should *not* be, why then is it free game to lambaste another faith that *too* has Semitic roots? Why this double standard? By rewarding this petty prophet of prejudice with a prize and lauding him, in the award's

citation, for “the acuity of his ear” and his “his powerful description of the eastern regions of the Islamic world,” the Swedish Academy has, intentionally or otherwise, become an accomplice to his anti-Islamic pronouncements.

By contrast, many academics may take Naipaul’s pronouncements lightly or dismiss them laughably as the riotous ranting of a cynic or the discharge of a deranged mind. However, Naipaul is a writer of talent, stamina, and seriousness. His discourse is too calculating and opportunistic to be explained away so airily. Prejudice, not psychosis, is the proper diagnosis. Naipaul is not the first talented writer who harbours prejudice against a world religion: the names of Celine and Ezra Pound readily come to one’s mind.

It is important to underline one significant fact: both Naipaul and Huntington, being astutely media savvy, have been metamorphosed for some time into prophetic figures. These two as well as Bernard Lewis, from whom Huntington has borrowed the key term “clash of civilizations,” have cultivated self-made personae as stars and experts who can proclaim whatever they wish about the Other. They speak as oracles of civilization, and they mean by that only Western civilization. They assume a false tone of being aloof, objective interpreters of cultures well beyond the comprehension of their entrenched mindsets. These three are so locked in their discursive paradigms that they become tediously smug. More seriously, because the current anti-Islamic hysteria, covert or candid, dominates mainstream American media, there is little tolerance for dissent. The counter-discourses are marginalized, cowed into silent submission or, worse, subjected to racist taunts and outright aggression. Sadly, in this perilous period when many Muslim minority communities in the West are under apprehensive and antagonistic surveillance or are subjected to various forms of hostility and harassment, pronouncements from the likes of Naipaul, Huntington, and Lewis have not enriched debate and mutual understanding but confirmed prejudice and enflamed feelings. I hate to conclude on a pessimistic note, but I can only say that the dialogical voices of tolerance, understanding, and respect have history on their side.

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