

**V. S. NAIPAUL'S VIEWS OF ISLAM IN HIS TRAVEL BOOKS: A  
POST-COLONIAL STUDY**

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**Committee Decision**

This Thesis (V. S. Naipaul's View of Islam in his Travel Books: A Post-Colonial Study) was successfully defended and approved on 5 January 2006

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## **Dedication**

To my wife Muna and children, Amjed, Anas and Amani, who shared the difficulties and anxieties when I was working on this thesis, to people across the globe who believe in the hybridity of cultures and human endeavor.

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis discusses V. S. Naipaul's View of Islam in his travel books written about the Muslim World. This discussion is based mainly on two books written by the Trinidadian author of Indian origin and British nationality: *Among the Believers: an Islamic Journey* (1981) and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (1998). These books chronicle Naipaul's two journeys to Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia in the last years of the nineteen seventies and in the mid-nineties.

The thesis uses the Post-Colonial Studies theory to reveal the prejudiced view of Naipaul towards Islam and the Muslim World, his lumping together of historical Islam and modern political Islam, a kind of Islam that is determined by the clash of cultures towards the end of the twentieth century.

The thesis tries to deconstruct these views which are based on personal observations rather than on true historical knowledge. In addition to *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*, the thesis has used some of Naipaul's novels, some of his lectures based on his travels to the non-Arab Muslim countries, and many interviews published all over the globe. The use of this wide range of documents reveals the obsession of Naipaul with Islam, Arabs and Muslims in his long literary career.

## Introduction

This study of the Nobel Laureate V. S. Naipaul's travelogues to the Islamic world attempts to delineate the relation of Naipaul's view of Islam to his upbringing in the Caribbean, focusing mainly on his stress in his novels, travel books and interviews, on the question of India and the role of Islam and Muslims in the destruction of the old civilization of India. Although Naipaul was a frequent commentator on the Islamic World, very few critics and writers tried to articulate his views of Islam and relate them to his postcolonial upbringing in Trinidad. The aim of this study is to fill the gap and see Naipaul's view of Islam and Muslims in light of his complex Hindu origins.

When he won the Nobel Prize in literature, the Swedish Academy commented on Naipaul's position as "a cosmopolitan writer, a fact that he himself considers to stem from his lack of roots: he is unhappy about the cultural and spiritual poverty of Trinidad, he feels alienated from India, and in England he is incapable of relating to and identifying with the traditional values of what was once a colonial power." Because of this complicated, unsettling situation of Naipaul as a writer originating from the former British colonies, living now in the Metropolitan center, the Swedish academy calls him "Conrad's heir", "the annalist of the destinies of empires in the moral sense: what they do to human beings. His authority as a narrator is grounded in his memory of what others had forgotten, the history of the vanquished." (The Nobel Prize in Literature, 2001)

The position of Naipaul as a postcolonial writer, who moved in his twenties to the center of the Anglo-Saxon world (London), will reveal the causes of his harsh criticism of Islam and Muslims. The study uses Post-Colonial theory to dig up the

excess of prejudices of Naipaul against Islam and Muslims, to see under the surface of his highly informed narrative. It emphasizes the role of this kind of study to reveal the nature and complexities of Naipaul's view of Islam.

Post-colonial studies incorporate the reading of the effects of European colonization in most of the cultures of the world; it also include various academic disciplines practiced in institutions of learning. The term 'post-colonial' causes anxiety and confusion to people practicing this kind of study. The confusion stems from the prefix 'post' and, at the same time, from the staggering geographical, temporal and theoretical sweep of the term. Critics who read the 'post-colonial' to mean 'the end of colonialism' are troubled by its implication that the so-called decolonization in the Third World effected a clean break from colonial exploitation. Other critics, who realize the necessary ambiguity of the prefix 'post', do not take it as a synonym for 'de' or 'ex', and are able, in that sense, to read the 'postcolonial' to mean 'since colonialism began'. The 'Post' here does not mean 'beyond'; and in Homi Bhabha's elucidation of the term, the 'beyond' is "neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past... There is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond'." (Bhabha, 1994, 1)

The term covers a vast terrain of decolonized and neo-colonized cultures that may have witnessed the end of one phase of Western imperialism, only to enter another phase of that hegemonic new Western imperial era. There is another objection to the rubric 'post-colonial'; it is related to the present Western institutional usage of the term which, effectively, elides an array of differences: for instance, between a vast number of nations and cultures in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean; between internally colonized European communities, such the Irish; and between recently post-colonial Third World nations, and the European-settled ex-colonies of Australia,

New Zealand and North America, in which any surviving indigenous non- European populations are now reduced to minority status. Homi Bhabha, a well known theorist of Post-Colonial studies, defines the term as emerging from the “colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geopolitical divisions of east, north and south.... They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the ‘rationalization’ of modernity.” (Bhabha, 1992, 438)

Post-Colonial studies, as it is conceived in the realm of literary theory nowadays, is structured on the ground of difference; it persists to examine the relationship between various postcolonial formations – and to do so without assuming either their a priori coincidence (so that one can be made to represent another in the academy ) or their a priori radical discontinuity (so that the differences between them need be theorized). Homi Bhabha sees difference as a primary tool in the work of the Post-Colonial critic, and the “the strategies of representation or empowerment [are] formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable.” (Bhabha, 1994, 2)

This claim, offered by Bhabha, resituates the question of Post-Colonial theory; it reunites both the colonial and postcolonial discourses as subject to exploration and scrutiny. It studies the effects of cultural displacements and the ways in which the displaced had culturally defended themselves. To sum up, Post-Colonial theory, as a way of reading and rereading texts of both metropolitan and colonial cultures, “draws deliberate attention to the profound and inescapable effects of

colonization on literary production; anthropological account; historical records; administrative and scientific writing. It is a form of a deconstructive reading most usually applied to works emanating from the colonizers (but may be applied to works by the colonized) which demonstrates the extent to which the text contradicts its underlying assumptions (civilization, justice, aesthetics, sensibility, race) and reveals its (often unwitting) colonialist ideologies and processes.” (Ashcroft, 1998, 192)

In that sense Post-Colonial theory emphasizes the tension between the metropolis and the former colonies, between what within the colonial framework were the metropolitan, imperial center and its colonial satellites. “It focuses on the cultural displacements – and its consequences for personal and communal identities – that inevitably followed colonial conquest and rule and it does so from a non-Eurocentric perspective.” (Bertens, 2001, 200)

Historically speaking Post-Colonial theory dates back to the 1950s when the critics of the colonialist discourse published their works on colonialist and imperialist experiences of what became called the Third World. Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire and Albert Memi questioned the foundations of imperialist discourse, and by that questioning they laid the foundations of what later came to be called the colonialist discourse. In his monumental study *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) Fanon sees in Western racism a form of scapegoating that permits the West to cling to its power and leads to violent reactions by the colonized. He calls for the rejection of the situation to which the Western countries wish to condemn the colonized world. “Colonialism and Imperialism have not paid their score when they withdraw their flags and their police forces from our territories. For centuries the foreign capitalists have behaved in the underdeveloped countries like nothing more than criminals.” (Fanon, 1968, 102)

Fanon embraces the idea that the colonized can liberate themselves only through violent struggle. In the first chapter entitled “Concerning Violence,” he asserts that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.” (102) With the appearance of *The Wretched of the Earth*, including Sartre’s preface, the 1960s saw a major development in the critical formulation of the problematic. Fanon’s work legitimized for many the issues raised and postulated the Western ‘Manichean delirium’ (good versus bad, black versus white).

Edward Said, whose *Orientalism* (1978) is the central text in the establishment of Post-Colonial studies, deplors that the literary establishment in Western culture had declared the serious study of imperialism off limits. Said’s argument is that the representation of the Orient in Western discourse has been predicated upon an unequal relationship of economic, political and imaginative power. In Said’s words Orientalism can be “discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.” (Said, 1978, 3 )

Said’s key contributions to the field of Post-Colonial theory include the use of Michel Foucault’s idea of discourse that links the domains of culture and politics and the elaboration of the idea of the ‘textual attitude’. In addition to *Orientalism*, Said wrote three books that give rise to the idea of writing back to empire. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he unites his writings about Orientalism, Palestine and the Middle East with his reflections on the role of the intellectual and his critique of the Western culture and its forms of hegemony. He suggested a new kind of reading cultures; contrapuntal reading aims at reading and rereading of the ‘cultural archive’ of the colonizer and the colonized so as to reveal the deep implication of the colonial texts in

imperialism and the colonial process. “As we look back at the cultural archive,” says Said, “we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.” (Said, 1993, 59)

Taking into consideration the emphasis of Said’s work on the study of colonial and postcolonial discourses together, i. e. contrapuntally, the 1980s witnessed the centrality of the colonialist debate with its focus on how imperialism affected the colonies and how the former colonies then wrote back in an attempt to correct Western views. In their book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin use the term ‘post-colonial’ to “cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European aggression.” (2)

The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* study contemporary literatures with the concern of the world as “it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination.” (2) According to this scheme, literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, the Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all post-colonial literatures. They also place the United States of America within the domain of their study. This wide geography of Post-Colonial studies can give us an idea of the concern of such emerging theory and experience. The term Post-Colonial studies would incorporate the study of all the effects of European colonization on the majority of the cultures of the world, and include all the academic disciplines in use in institutions of learning across the globe. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin observe,

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“Post-Colonial theory involves discussion about experiences of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being,” (Ashcroft , Griffiths and Tiffin, 1995, 2)

The term is impregnated with all the complexities and ambiguities of the different cultural experiences it underlies. Central to Post-Colonial theory is the question of Empire. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said stresses the fact that “the extraordinary global reach of classical nineteenth and early twentieth-century European imperialism still casts a considerable shadow over our own times.” (4) He further tells us, concerning the definition made by Joseph Conrad of the Empire, that the enterprise of Empire depends upon the idea of having an empire. In an extension to Said’s delineation of Empire Tiffin and Lawson, in their book *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality* (1994), tend to see Empire in hegemonic terms. To describe Empire, in that sense, is to “analyze where and how our view of things is inflected (or infected) by colonialism and its constituent elements of racism, over-categorization, and deferral to the centre... The hegemony of Europe did not end with the raising of a hundred national flags... its legacy of division and racism are alive and well in political, media and legal domains.” (Tiffin and Lawson, 1994, 9)

What concerns us, in this study of Naipaul’s travel books about the Islamic World, are questions of ethnicity, race, displacement, and diaspora which underlie the kind of response implied in V. S. Naipaul’s work towards Islam, Arabs and Muslims. As a post-colonial person and writer, Naipaul is affected by these modes of existence. These questions are of utmost importance in our speculation about Naipaul’s upbringing, education and assimilation in the British assertive colonial, hence

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imperial culture. He is a Caribbean, of Hindu origin whose family migrated from India a century ago. His country experienced the process of colonization and decolonization. All that shaped his growing up in a post-colonial country, and deeply configured his literary production.

Post-Colonial theory recognizes race as an important factor in the production of post-colonial literatures. “Race is particularly pertinent to the rise of colonialism, because the division of human society in this way is inextricable from the need of colonialist powers to establish a dominance over subject people and hence justify the imperial enterprise.” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1998, 198) Because of this relation between race and colonialism this is a justification of the binary distinction between the ‘civilized’ and the ‘primitive’ and the necessity for the hierarchization of human types. The differences among people, as Kwame Anthony Appiah tells us, are “like differences among communities within a single society,” they “play a central role in our thinking about who “we” are, in structuring our values, and determining the identities through which we live.” (Lentricchia and McLaughlin, 1995, 287). And in the last century and a half racialism and nationalism have played a central role in our thinking about differences of race and nationality. In the two cases, the production of literature is bound to nationality and race.

The other term connected to ‘race’ is ‘ethnicity’ which has been used extensively since the 1960s “to account for human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry rather than the discredited generalizations of race with an assumption of a humanity divided into fixed, genetically determined biological types.” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1998, 80). If the term race implies division, superior and inferior people, ethnicity refers to “the fusion of many traits that belong to the nature of any ethnic group: a composite of

shared values, beliefs, norms, tastes, behaviours, experiences, consciousness of kind, memories and loyalties.” (80) In that sense ethnicity is more a positive term than race which plays a major part in the study of national literatures. It intersects with notions of race, marginality, imperialism, and identity. This intersection and blurring of demarcations “leads to a constantly shifting theoretical ground, a ground continually contested and subject to more heated debate than most.” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1995, 213)

There are two other terms, which are of utmost importance in our study, ‘diaspora’ and ‘exile’. The first of the two is of Greek origin; it means ‘to disperse’. Diasporas are “the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions.” (Ashcroft , Griffiths and Tiffin, 1998, 68) What concerns us here is that the diasporic experience is a central historical fact in the process of colonization, and determines the relations between the colonizer and the colonized during and after the retreat of troops from the formerly colonized countries. “Colonialism itself was a radically diasporic movement, involving the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions of Europeans over the entire world.” (69) These wide spread migrations make their effects on the descendants of these diasporic movements, questioning the ‘essentialist’ models of cultures and “interrogating the ideology of a unified, ‘natural’ cultural norm, one that underpins the **centre/margin** model of colonialist discourse.” (70)

The other term interrelated to ‘diaspora’, and highly charged in its meaning and postcolonial experience, is exile. It involves “the idea of a separation and distancing from either a literal homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin,” ( 92) which is the case of V. S. Naipaul and many other Third World writers and intellectuals. Naipaul’s writing exude with the sense of Exile, displacement and

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نظرة ف. س. نايبول إلى الإسلام في كتب رحلاته: دراسة ما بعد كولونيالية

Views. Politics. Naipaul insists that his writing transcends any particular ideological outlook, remarking that "to have a political view is to be prejudiced. I don't have a political view." His fiction and especially his travel writing have been criticised for their allegedly unsympathetic portrayal of the Third World. Naipaul has mentioned some negative aspects of Islam in his works, such as nihilism among fundamentalists.[citation needed] He has been quoted describing the bringing down of the Babri Mosque as a "creative passion," and the invasion of Babur in the 16th century as a "mortal wound." [citation needed] He views Vijayanagar, which fell in 1565, as the 'last bastion. Naipaul is unsparing in his view of the Caribbean as blighted by the legacy of slavery and imperialism"indeed as a region with no real past or useful tradition to draw upon. An Area of Darkness (1964) describes Naipaul's travels to India. His harsh portrayal of this country shocked many readers; some critics accused him of arriving in India with a rigid bias in favor of Western tradition and ideology. (His second book on the subcontinent, *India: A Wounded Civilization* [1977], generated similar criticism.) Naipaul returned to an African setting four years later with his most acclaimed novel, *A Bend in the River*. The *Novels of V. S. Naipaul: A Study in Theme and Form*. New Delhi: Prestige Books/ Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies, 1990. Khan, Md. Akhtar Jamal. *V. S. Naipaul: A Critical Study*. VS Naipaul in Dhaka in 2016. Born. Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul[<sup>nb 1</sup>] (1932-08-17)17 August 1932 Chaguanas, British Trinidad and Tobago. Naipaul won the Booker Prize in 1971 for his novel *In a Free State*. In 1989, he was awarded the Trinity Cross, Trinidad and Tobago's highest national honour. He received a knighthood in Britain in 1990, and in 2001, the Nobel Prize in Literature. that allowed him to study at any institution of higher learning in the British Commonwealth; he chose Oxford. Education in England. At University College, Oxford, Naipaul's early attempts at writing, he felt, were contrived. Naipaul, from the beginning of his adolescence on, has shown a steady attitude towards the third worlds way of life. He has articulated, in Fawzia Mustafa's word, "the same nervous energy" in all. psychological, mental bound to the West. Due to his harsh criticism on Islam and third world countries, and due to his stand point of being inbetween the two. cultures, his work has always been the object of radically divergent views, depending on the perspectives of the readers. As Fawzia Mustafa states, "For a colonial, ashamed of his cultural background and striving like mad to prove himself through promotion to the peaks of a "superior" culture whose values are gravely in doubt, then satire, like the charge of philistinism, is for me nothing. One of Naipaul's best and most prescient books. Naipaul travels through islamic Asia - Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia in 1980, just after the Iranian islamic revolution. The book contains his observations on Islam after meeting a lot of people in all these countries. Naipaul prophetically concludes many of the things which are fashionable today about islamic fundamentalism after 9/11. His main thesis is that Islam, from its Shia incarnation in post Islamic-Revolution Iran to the animist incorporating version of Indonesia, offers only ideas; it fails to provide structure, institution I approached Naipaul's account of his travels through Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia with some trepidation, expecting a screed based on what I have read about him and of his writings.