

Islamic Milieu in Sir V.S. Naipaul's Works with Special Reference to among the Believers: An Islamic Journey and Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples

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ABSTRACT

Honoured with the prestigious Nobel Prize and the Booker Prize for English literature, Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul is one of the masters of modern English travel writing. He has also a uniquely authoritative position as an interpreter of the Islamic societies. In the world of travel writing, there is no other writer who can excel him in quality and quantity. The Islamic countries are well displayed through the two travel books on Islam-Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey and Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the converted peoples. Naipaul travels across the Islamic countries with a view to studying their socio-cultural, religious, political and economic aspects of the Islamic countries. He deals with the theme of Islam, its faith and fundamentals. He intends to study how the followers of Islam are following this religion in its true spirit. He makes an attempt to express his impression of Islam and the Islamic world. His attitude towards life in the Islamic countries is highly realistic, unprejudiced and unbiased.

Keywords: Islam, arts, religion, backwardness, socio-culture, realistic, believers, unbiased etc.

V.S. Naipaul, a prolific dissenter and one of the finest living novelists writing in English, is a renowned literary figure of the 20th century English literature. Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey is his attempt to open out the Islamic country. It is a classic account of his journeys to the four Islamic countries- Iran Pakistan Malaysia and Indonesia. The believers are the Muslims he met on those journeys, young men and women battling to regain the original purity of their faith. In fact, this travelogue investigates the Islamic revolution and tries to highlight the fundamental zeal that has gripped the young in Iran and other Muslim countries. It is, undoubtedly, regarded as one of the finest travel records by an artist who has been recognized as a modern master. On this great achievement of Naipaul, Martin Amis remarks,

“He remains our most exhilarating explorer, with a corpus of travel writing which now surpasses that of D.H. Lawrence or Graham Green.”

Naipaul's main purpose of visiting the four Islamic countries was to comprehend the Islamic world and present the same to his Islamic readers. Mentioning his chief aim, he himself writes, “I want to see Islam in action.” He was, indeed, ignorant of the true spirit of Islam. The true followers of this religion were very few. According to Mr. Sherwani, “Islam was a complete way of life and for that reason was too hard for most people.” As Naipaul wanted to know and comprehend, perhaps, the essence of Islamic faith, he made friendship with Ahmed and came close to him, “my search for Islamic institutions and experiments- the search that had brought me to Ahmed-was still going on; and Ahmed was the rational man to whom I returned after venturing into other men's Islam.

In pursuance of his study of Islam, he came close to Mr. Mirza in Pakistan. The man was considered to be the representative of the Muslim in the field of religion. He wished to collect maximum information from Mr. Mirza about the Islamization of institutions. He says, “I had come to find out about the application of Islam to institutions, to government, to law.”

Naipaul's Islamic journey begins with Tehran (Iran) where he is found pushing a car with an effort to make a trip to the holy city of Qom. With the Iranian interpreter named Sadiq, Naipaul reaches Qom which is known as the holy city, a seat of Islamic culture and a university of highest Islamic studies in the land. In Qom he meets Ayatollah Khalkhalli, eminent handing judge of the revolution and Ayatollah Shirazi, a learned pious man. The writer comes in contact with another powerful religious leader Ayatollah Shariatmadari in Mashhad. He also studies the rigidity of the Islamic principles during the Ramzan. Akhtar J. Khan adds,

“He stays at hotels such as the Hyatt Ommar Khayyam. He traverses streets in Tehran, clogged with lethal traffic with names such as Revolution Avenue(formerly Shah Seza) where a hungry person in a hurry could buy a box of Out Fried Chicken (on longer from Kentucky).He could do so,that is, if he is a foreigner, or if night has fallen,for this is the month of fasting, Ramzan, and for a Muslim to be caught eating in public during the day, the punishment could be severe, a flogging at least.”

In Iran. Naipaul had with him Behzad as his guide and interpreter. Behzad was a student, a self-styled communist and a son of a communist. Naipaul stayed there for six months and returned from there with intensive knowledge of Islam as practiced by the Iranians. He found that most of the people were traditional, culturally backward and religious orthodox. They had an acquired way of life. At the end of the section on Iran, Naipaul states:

“That civilization couldn't be mastered. It was to be rejected; at the same time it was to be depended on.”

After having travelled for six months and having studied the principles of Islam in Iran, Naipaul visits Pakistan, a recently emerged country with its declared dedication to the adoption and existence of Islam. This non-Arabic Islamic country came into existence in 1947 and declared that it would constantly pursue the path of the ideal of Islam. From the time of its inception, Pakistan was for decades a poor country but at any rate 'an Islamic state. Akhtar J. Khan observes:

“In Pakistan, Naipaul searches in vain for rational answer Western' answer if you will, to questions such as the administration of justice, the rules of land tenure, and solutions to problems of economic development in the 'Islamic state." What he finds is public flogging... material law and an economy where the major industry is the export of people who go abroad to England, Canada, the United States, to wherever they can get in and get work and from where they can send money home, a 'remittance economy' as the author calls it.”

In Pakistan, with his guide, Naipaul visits the foothills of the Himalayas and witnesses the troubles of the northern tribal life. He comes to know that people have been leading a hard life since their birth and their ancestors had been accustomed to such circumstances. There Naipaul meets Nusrat who was a journalist and ran an article reprinted from the Arabian Arab News about a great Arab woman. The article offended the Shia community so much that the newspaper had nearly been wrecked as well as down shut down. Naipaul himself was present in Pakistan when this event took place. Akhtar J. Khan states:

“Nusrat, the bustling, competent journalist and communist whose dream was to publish a book of his columns, as Art Buchwald had done, had gone grey and had developed a perpetual, worried look.”

As a result of Arab conquest in the 7 and 9th centuries, Sind (in Pakistan) adopted Islam and became its part, It is worth noticing that the main purpose of the said conquest was not the introduction of Islam or its spread in Pakistan but it was only to loot property, slaves and their women. Islam gained ground so strongly than its followers increased in number day by day. Gradually, Islam reached Malaysia only by contacts. It was carried there through merchants and missionaries. Naipaul traces its roots in India since merchants from the Indian sub-continent visited Malaysia frequently.

With his Malay guide Shafi, Naipaul visits Malaysia where he finds the people conservative and superstitious. They believed in blind -faiths, omens and existence of evil spirits. They also performed rituals in order to avoid or remove the effect of evil stars or misfortunes. They depended largely on a 'Bomoh' for performing their rituals. They had no developed scientific viewpoint. Khan says:

“There, the faith, at a double remove from its Arab roots, mingled with vestiges of a Hindu culture, still visible to this day in the shadow puppet plays and in the traditional court dances of the Malay people as well as in the archaeological monuments of Bali and Java.... To this day, Malay construction workers will not work on a building where a worker has died until. appropriate rites of exorcism have been performed by a village 'Bomoh' or medicine man. But more a new

auditorium on the beautiful and ultramodern university campus is not properly dedicated until it has been ritually purified by a 'Bomoh'."

In Malaysia, Naipaul visits the multi-cultured area which presents a brilliant and colourful mixture of Malay, Chinese, Indian, Occidental, Eurasian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Christian. In other words, it reveals a country frequently colonized, culturally, religiously, economically or politically for centuries. As a result, the so called 'bhummitras', the sons of the soil or the indigenous Malays feel like strangers in their own land. Actually, they do not want to be dispossessed like the 'red Indians' or the native Americans of North America. This rage mingles with the resentment for the 'purity of the new Muslim movement and overflows in race riots like those in 1969 or in more recent episodes of idol-smashing at Hindu temples.

In the course of his travels to the four Muslim countries. Naipaul reaches Indonesia which evokes its rich past and several strands of its cultural Islamic history. In Indonesia, Islam which had come in the 15th century, was a formal faith. Its pre-Islamic past that in Malaysia seemed to be only a matter of village customs, appeared as a great civilization. Moreover, the Hindu-Buddhist past that had last for 1400 years gave Indonesians or Javanese the feeling of their uniqueness. In Indonesia, Naipaul comes in contact with Sitor Situmorang who was a marginalized poet and the reminiscence of Naipaul's own fruitless search for its roots in Trinidad and India. Like Naipaul, Sitor also makes a journey to his ancestral home. But having recovered the past, as it were, Sitor could "no longer go back there; he couldn't pretend to be what he had ceased to be." 18 [In the meanwhile, Naipaul comes across a Koum, a sort of burial priest who reminded him of a Hindu priest at the cremation of the dead. Some of other individuals Naipaul met there are Barbara, Prasojo, Umar Kayam and Mr. Imaduddin etc. As whole, Naipaul's characters represent all classes of people in the society. Kh.. KunjuSingh remarks:

"In it, Behzad, Sitor Situmorang, Shafi, Nusrat, Ahmed, Prasojo, Masood, even Tamil taxi driver in Kuala Lumpur are all well-defined, warm human portraits, for all Naipaul's implied distance from their attitudes and ways of thinking."

The second and final travel book regarding the Islamic countries is *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* (1998) which is a travel sequel to *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981). It is a classic account of V.S. Naipaul's reminiscences about his excursions among the converted people and the real life stories collected in the four Islamic countries namely Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia. It is on the theme of Islamic conversion in these non-Arab Islamic countries.

Sion which is better described in *Beyond Belief*. After seventeen years, his second journey to the same four Islamic countries for over five months is occasioned by an urgency of confirmation whether his impression is justified or not. His first journey among the believers' was tentative, inquisitive and experimental in nature. It was made when he had no practical idea of Islam. He was more and less an explorer deep into an area completely unknown to him. The tour of the so-called Islamic countries was for him a new venture calculated to expand his idea of knowledge. His personal contact with the Islamic people called 'believers' was an important phase in evocation. In fact, his accumulated knowledge of Islam in the converted areas places him on a secure ground in order to make good stories of people and their culture. In the prologue of the book, he clarifies the nature of his study and says:

"This is a book about people. It is not a book of opinion. It is a book of stories. The stories were collected during five months of travel in 1995 in four non-Arab Muslim countries - Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia. So there is a context and a theme."

What Naipaul says in the prologue clearly points out the differences of his purposeful travel accounts from the so-called travelogues. He writes:

"I find it strange that the travel form in the beginning so far away from my own instinct should have taken me back there, to looking for the story: though it would have undone the point of the book if the narratives were falsified or forced. There are complexities enough in these stories. They are the points of the book; the reader should not look for conclusions."

Truly speaking, *Beyond Belief* is a compilation of Naipaul's interviews with the converted people he met on revisiting of the four Islamic countries gradually Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia. The book is not entirely unbiased. One can almost listen to anti-Islamic thoughts of the author, not in whispers, not hidden but in shouts, revealed. Jerry Brotton remarks:

“Beyond Belief is controversial and uncompromising reading which has been angrily denounced by the Muslim community. However it is an excellent antidote to so much current travel writing which uncritically reproduces myths of the exotic orient, and should be read by anyone who wants to begin to travel throughout the non- Arabic Muslim world.”

Structurally, the book is divided into four sections namely Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysian.

During his Indonesian visit, Naipaul comes to realize a sad thing from a struggling young man named Mariman who was "one of the seventeen children of his father's two families living in the same village." Here, Naipaul satirizes the Islamic polygamy and over family planning:

“...the Muslim pattern of multiple marriage and easy divorce was not just a matter of masculine libido: it led to damaged families. It led to a kind of semi-orphaned society. A family abandoned by a father in order to start a second or a third. It was a story that came up again and again. That was what lay behind Mariman's home sickness...”

The second section of Beyond Belief deals with Naipaul's second visit to Iran in 1997. There he meets many Iranian believers who were also beyond their Islamic belief. Some of them are Mehrdad, Mr. Jaffrey, Pervez, Ali and Paydar etc. Mehrdad who serves as Naipaul's guide and interpreter is a university student. He is also a bit intellectually observant. He tells Naipaul about the eight year revolutionary war with Iraq. This revolutionary frenzy has now totally subsided and yielded place to nation-building giving the Iranian people an Islamic Republic. The author makes Mehrdad remember:

“... at the beginning of the revolution, the cry was the communist one of 'Nun, Kar, Azadi; Bread, Work, Freedom within a year it had changed to "Bread, Work, and an Islamic Republic.”

The third section of the present book depicts Naipaul's re-visit to Pakistan in 1996 after seventeen years. It also makes an inquiry as to how old Islamic principles are brought to bear upon speedy modern development of the world. Iran had their classical past. Islam was for them a fresh beginning, but Pakistan had no such heritage. The creation of Pakistan was a step towards consolidation of the somehow dispersed and disarrayed values of their faith. Their conversion of faith was completed around 1200 A.D. in the north-west of the sub-continent. Naipaul writes:

It was nearly four hundred years later that north- west India began to be penetrated... by A.D. 1200 (giving very rough dates) the Muslims were a power in the north of the Sub-continent; in 1600 this power was at its peak; by 1700, with the decline of the Mugal empire Muslim power in India was more or less broken.”

The fourth and final section of Beyond Belief reveals Naipaul's visit to Malaysia after sixteen years in 1996. There he meets many Islamic believers who were also beyond belief i.e. beyond the Islamic purity of faith. Some of the believers are Syed Alvi, Shafi, Nasar, Nadezha, the Bomoh's son and so many more. They all were the 'believers."Syed Alvi was a Malay playwright. His play writings began early from his school days in Kuala Kangsar where his contact with a religious man Sheikh Tahir must have made a deep impression upon Syed Alvi's mind so much that Alvi made Sheikh Tahir the subject of his first juvenile play.

Upon his earlier visit to Malaysia Naipaul met Shafi, a shy young man, who was much involved in the Muslim Youth Movement. Now Shafi thought that he must have been somewhere in position after long sixteen or seventeen years. But all this was a vain. Naipaul states:

“To be a Malay like Shafi, half in and half out of the old ways, was to feel every kind of fear and frustration. It was too much for a man to bear on his own, and in 1979 Islam was being made to carry that general rage. Malays of Shafi's generation had become passionate believers; and their belief was given edge by Islamic missionaries....”

Thus, Naipaul finds that the people of the so-called four Islamic countries- Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia were poor, fragmented, backward, dispirited and confused. They were beyond their faith. Neither the advocates of religion nor the rulers of the country could bring them a positive difference. Even the benefits of science could not protrude the dark spots of these countries. As a whole, Naipaul's journey to the Islamic countries is highly appealing, convincing, thought provoking, attention-drawing and suggestive. His attitude towards life in the Islamic countries is highly realistic, unprejudiced and unbiased.

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