

NAIPAUL'S REPRESENTATIONS OF ISLAM AND CULTURE IN *AMONG THE BELIEVERS* AND *BEYOND BELIEF*

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul has often been under criticism for his dark, pessimistic and sometimes brash portrayals of Third World countries, specifically postcolonial societies like India, Trinidad, Africa and even South America. He has been critiqued for these same reasons for his Islamic travelogues, *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981) and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted People* (1998). It is the aim of this article to show how Naipaul's multiple roles as a traveller, travel writer, an ethnographer, an intellectual, an interpreter, a narrator, and a Western representative, together with his new literary style that is a fusion between ethnographic and travel writing, play a crucial part in his interpretation and representation of foreign cultures. It is concluded that Naipaul's portrayals are undertaken with a moral and social responsibility of representing those subaltern peoples who are without a voice, which arises from his own experiences as a colonial subject.

Keywords: Culture, Ethnography, Islam, Portrayal, Representation, Travel Writing, V.S. Naipaul

Introduction

Theories of representation are as complex as the study of culture and religion. 'To represent someone or even something has now become an endeavor as complex and as problematic as an asymptote, with consequences for certainty and decidability as fraught with difficulties as can be imagined' (Said 1989, p. 206). Culture and religion are also complex subjects. Culture is an intricate system of living practiced by a group of people, small or large, inherited by tradition from generation to generation, which evolves constantly, while Asad notes that 'there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific but because the definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes' (Asad 1986, p. 29). Thus to undertake a comparative study of cultures and religions, one of the prerequisites would be to approach the study with an unbiased, unprejudiced and ethical view. As with Islam, Sayyid points out that '[t]here are not many Islams, one for each national or ethnic group or socio-economic group, but rather many interpretations of one Islam' (Sayyid 2003, p. ix). Islam, which 'denotes more than fourteen centuries of history, a billion and a third people, and a religious and cultural tradition of enormous diversity' is not merely a religious doctrine but a distinctive identity for all Muslims

regardless of their nationalities (Lewis 2003, p. 3). Although followers of Islam are from various nationalities and countries, they refer to themselves as Muslims and not as Iranians or Arabs, as they tend to see Islam as 'a religion subdivided into nations' where they are united as one under the religion (Lewis 2003, p. xx). For centuries Islam has been a way of life where 'all Muslims attach themselves and are attached by others, to one Islam' (Sayyid 2003, p. viii).

However the togetherness and 'attachment' amongst the Muslims is seldom understood by non-Muslims. This is because followers of other religions especially from the 'Western World', see themselves as 'nation[s] subdivided into religious groups' and address themselves as Americans or Germans based on their country of origin (Lewis 2003, p. xx). Thus while Westerners identify themselves by nationality or culture, Muslims identify themselves by religion. This disparity in beliefs among Islam and the rest, together with the lack of understanding has caused the religion (Islam) to be misunderstood across the globe. For example, after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the United States by some radical and extremist Muslim group in 2001, a great deal of confusion and allegations has emerged regarding the role of Islam. To most Americans, Islam is now associated with terrorism and 'To say that terrorism is Islamic, is an absurdity in the sense that Islam is a religion like other religions with an ethical and moral standard, and is opposed to terrorism as such' declares Edward Said (2002, p. 307). This negative stereotype of Islam due to allegations and misunderstandings has spread across the globe even through various works of literature.

Naipaul's Islamic Journey

V.S. Naipaul, at first glance, has also portrayed a disconcerting stereotypical image of Islam in his works *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1979) and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (1998), depicting his travels to four prominent 'non-Arabic' postcolonial Islamic countries 'gripped by Islamic fundamentalism' (Michener 1997, p. 64). Naipaul's first journey of just seven months to Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan, was sparked by the Islamic revolution in Iran: 'the explosive clash between religious and political traditionalism and technocratic progressivism' (Barnouw 2003, p. 54). Naipaul was intrigued by the revolution and found it interesting. But more than that, he was puzzled by the reactions of Iranians on American television towards the revolution in Iran. He was confused by their passionate and overwhelming support for the new Islamic state and Islamic laws in Iran, because he wondered how these seemingly patriotic Iranians, who commended the overthrow of the Shah and the fall of US imperialism, had ironically chosen the United States as their home instead (Naipaul 1982, p. 12). Hence, it was then that Naipaul decided that he needed to travel to Iran. He undertook the journey to discover and understand the culture of the Islamic people in Iran and then the other three different non-Arabic Muslim countries.

However, Naipaul admits that he began his journey with little understanding of Islam or the people: 'What I knew about Islam was what was known to everyone on the outside. They had a Prophet and a Book; they believed in one God and disliked images' (Naipaul 1982, p. 11). He rationalizes that he did not need to have first hand knowledge of the religion as he had 'wanted an open mind' (Jussawalla 1997, p. 71), to be able to

observe and absorb what he saw without any preconceived notions or knowledge. But his lack of understanding has had some negative implications on his perceptions and subsequently his representations of the Islamic religion, its people and their cultures leading him to make several generalizations about Islam such as:

In this religion of fear and reward, oddly compounded with war and worldly grief, there was much that reminded me of Christianity... The glories of this religion were in the remote past; it had generated nothing like a Renaissance. Muslim countries, where not colonized, were despotisms; and nearly all, before oil, were poor (Naipaul 1982, p. 12).

Almost twenty years later, in *Beyond Belief*, he again makes accusations and wild statements such as that Islam is the most imperialist movement in history for '[i]t makes imperial demands' (Naipaul 1999, p. xi). Although critics like Daniel Pipes said that *Beyond Belief* was 'a pleasure to read' and that it offered 'an unusual opportunity to assess the progress of political Islam' (Pipes 2010), others like Edward Said, Barathi Mukherjee, Derek Walcott, and Chinua Achebe were enraged and disappointed by Naipaul's unchanged generalisations of Islam because it has added on to the great deal of existing misconceptions and misunderstandings on Islam, the people and their culture. In his review of *Beyond Belief*, Said lashes out at Naipaul for his portrayal of Islam:

Naipaul... [a] very talented writer whose novels and non-fiction (mostly travel books) have established his reputation as one of the truly celebrated, justly well-known figures in world literature today ... is a man of the Third World who sends back dispatches from the Third World to an implied audience of disenchanted Western liberals who can never hear bad enough things about all the Third World myths. ... [because] for Naipaul, Islam is worse than most other problems of the Third World (Said 1998).

However it must be noted that Naipaul's unkind depictions are not limited to the Islamic nations and includes most Third World societies like India, the Caribbean and Africa. In *An Area Of Darkness*, a book on his much anticipated first visit to his ancestral homeland, India, much to the chagrin of critics, Naipaul was able to only focus on the filth and squalor of India, and found it to be an 'area of darkness' where he saw only 'dereliction' and a degenerating society which was 'defecating' everywhere (Naipaul 2004, p. 21). Similarly, *Guerrillas* and *A Bend in the River* 'hold up an utterly desolate vision of the world' while *Mystic Masseur* and *Suffrage to Elvira* 'served mainly to highlight the social tensions inherent in the colonial world which he portrayed' (Mohan 2004, p. 117-118). Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian scholar also shares Said's sentiments when he declares:

I do admire Mr. Naipaul, but I am rather sorry for him. He is too distant from a viable moral centre; he withholds his humanity; he seems to place himself under a self-denying ordinance, as it were, suppressing his genuine compassion for humanity (Achebe 1997, p. 90-91).

Thus it is clear that Naipaul is admired for his literariness and his intelligence, but abhorred for his perceptions and outlook of Third World societies. It is also evident that Naipaul sees and portrays the cultures, religions, and the people of almost all postcolonial societies with great anxiety and tends to focus on their poverty, squalor,

political turmoils and social decadence, and his unfavourable views are certainly not limited to only Islam. Although Said is also a diasporic writer like Naipaul, who has been in exile, in search of his identity and has had his fair share of rootlessness and colonial anxieties, Said has a more compassionate approach towards postcolonial societies, compared to Naipaul. Said attempts to always understand and sympathize with their conditions and struggles, while Naipaul tends to show contempt. In his essay 'Reflections on Exile', Said deliberates on the reasons for Naipaul's unsympathetic depictions of postcolonial societies:

[T]he possibility of anger, desperate bewilderment, and bitter sarcasm has always lurked in Naipaul's work, because the possibility derived as much from his compromised colonial situation as it did from what, as a result, he wrote about. His subject was extraterritoriality – the state of being neither here nor there, but rather in-between things...that cannot come together for him; he wrote from the iconic point of view of the failure to which he seems to have been resigned (Said 2001, p. 99).

Said explains here that the bitterness and negativity in Naipaul's works could be due to two aspects: one, his position as a colonial and the anxieties that come with it, and two, the issues and subjects that he writes about – the subjects themselves are problematic and depressing in nature. And when he writes about these subjects, Naipaul has to think and feel from two dispositions: as a colonial subject being a descendant of indentured labourers in Trinidad, a colonial empire; and as a colonial subject with a Western education and perspectives. And these positions usually leave him in the middle, in an in-between state of being 'neither here nor there'.

Naipaul, neither here nor there

The state of being 'neither here nor there' is constituted as part of the identity crisis that arises in postcolonial subjects due to their sense of alienation and displacement. The sense of homelessness, displacement, alienation, and deracination is prominent among postcolonial societies because they have been uprooted from their native lands and relocated to completely alien environments, cultures and civilizations. The subjugation and the 'forced transportation of millions of people as a labour force' from their homeland, as slaves or indentured labourers, was carried out in Africa, Asia, Australia and the Caribbean for almost 500 years and created what is called the 'black diaspora' (Spencer 2006, p. 64, 69). The 'migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or "voluntary" removal for indentured labour', 'may' eventually 'erode' the 'active sense of self' of a colonized person (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1993, p. 9). 'I had no knowledge of my past,' declares Naipaul, '[t]he past of our community ended, for most of us, with our grandfathers' (Naipaul 2004, p. 20). Thus, the postcolonial subject's identity becomes 'fragmented, permeable and multiple' (Leon 2009, p. 12) and a crisis in self-image emerges causing the constant search for identity. With that, a loss of history and cultural denigration on an enormous scale due to the displacement of 'traditional cultures' leaves a 'deep scar on the psyche of the colonized people who find themselves in the excruciating state of betweenity' (Mohan 2004, p. 5). Helen Hayward, in her book *The Enigma of V.S. Naipaul*, describes Naipaul's stance as both a colonial and a colonial subject, often being in between in his works:

Part of the complexity of his work proceeds from its entertaining contradictory attitudes towards its material. There is an unresolved and important ambivalence in his attitude towards the history of empire: he conceives the colonial rule both as a system of base pillage and as a lost ideal of order, and he views the metropolitan centre at once as fulfilling and betraying an ideal. At times he seems to reconfirm imperialist assumptions, while at other times he offers to refute them... He moves between the stance of insider and that of outsider with regard to the societies he portrays, and blends, in an unsettling manner, sympathy with irony, cruelty with compassion, in the treatment of certain characters. These ambivalences are interpreted as the product of his situation of cultural dislocation (Hayward 2002, p. 4).

Even Edward Said, who 'grew up as an Arab with a Western education', similar to Naipaul's background of being Indian with a Western education, admits that he has always felt that he 'belonged to both worlds, without being completely of either one or the other' (Said 1994, p. xxx). This state of 'betweenity' or as Said puts it, the state of being 'neither here nor there' is where Naipaul finds himself often, contributing severely to his sense of displacement.

All free settlers or indentured labourers show 'clear signs of alienation even within the first generation of settlement' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1993, p. 9). This is also evident in Naipaul's father Seepersad's reflection in his book *Gurudeva and Other Indian Tales*: 'The difficulty lies in the fact that you are too much of a majority to assimilate, too much of a minority to dominate' (French 2008, p. 173). Identity crisis, displacement, exile, homelessness and marginality are central themes in all of Naipaul's fictional and non-fictional writings – in his novels and travelogues. The focus on these themes arise from Naipaul's own sense of alienation and his constant quest for his own identity that stem primarily from his lack of connectedness as a child with his migrant, diasporic Indian family in Trinidad, who worked in the sugar plantations where they formed their own separate Indian community, as he explains in an interview in 1971:

[I come] from a place which is not real, a place which is imperfectly made, and a place where people are, really, quite inferior, because they demand so little of themselves. They are colonials, in a type of perpetual colonial situation. Coming from such a society, I didn't really have views of my own; I didn't know what I thought about anything, because the world was out of my hands. (Jussawalla 1997, p. 25)

Naipaul hated living in such a culturally and intellectually destitute state in Trinidad, that he was unable to 'understand other societies' and thus became historically and socially ignorant (Jussawalla 1997, p. 64). He portrayed his distaste for his family and community in *The Middle Passage*, while in *A House for Mr. Biswas* he depicted themes of exile, displacement and the search for identity. Charles Michener observes that 'Naipaul is, of all the great Western writers of exile, the most rootless' and is in 'kinship with the "very top" escape artists of modern literature – Conrad, Joyce, [and] Hemingway' (Jussawalla 1997, p. 65).

Travel writing, ethnography and representation

Naipaul who inherited his literary aspirations from his father, draws most of his dark depictions from Conrad, the first modern writer introduced to him by his father. Naipaul found it 'remarkable' that Conrad was able to 'look at the world with the utmost

seriousness' and had given a face and identity to the 'Asiatics' (Asians) who until then had only been given background roles in novels and 'simply didn't exist as individuals' (Jussawalla 1997, p. 80). Thus, Naipaul adapts Conrad's literary style of writing; to incorporate realism and write exactly what he sees to let the 'story speak for itself' so that the 'writer does not come between his story and the reader' (Naipaul 2004, p.163).

Naipaul who had initially used the novel form in his earlier works has since changed his writing style because 'the novel as a form no longer carries conviction' (Naipaul 2004, p. 15). Naipaul claims that as a novelist he is no longer able to extract true responses from his objects of study and so the truth about the world goes unrepresented. Naipaul also feels that different types of experiences call for different writing forms and to represent his new kind of experience, the novel form is not appropriate. He feels that '[f]iction works best in a confined moral and cultural area, where the rules are generally known' and to write about countries like India (grappling with various social and political problems), the novel form would be inadequate because then he would need to use 'all that apparatus of intervention' and that would mean he was 'falsifying precious experience' which would in the end make the novel inaccurate (Naipaul 2004, p. 24). Thus, Naipaul now finds travel writing more appealing to him compared to his earlier techniques:

Both fiction and the travel-book form have given me my way of looking; and you will understand why for me all literary forms are equally valuable. It came to me, for instance, when I set out to write my third book about India...that what was most important about a travel book were the people the writer travelled among. The people had to define themselves. A simple enough idea, but it required a new kind of book; it called for a new way of travelling (Naipaul 2004, p. 194).

Naipaul's new way of travelling and letting people define themselves is by using the interview method, where the conversations between him and his subjects are recorded as they are. *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief* was written by employing the interview and observation-participation approach, where Naipaul lets his subjects speak, and he himself assumes the role of a manager of narratives. Naipaul used these ethnographic techniques (originally employed by anthropologists studying indigenous cultures) in order to portray the culture and religion of the Islamic nations truthfully.

Ethnography is a qualitative research procedure for analyzing, interpreting and describing a culture or society, which involves participation and observation by the ethnographer or writer. Ethnography is also seen as 'an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon' that has spread its 'authority and rhetoric' to places where the 'culture is a newly problematic object of description and critique' (Clifford 1986, p. 3). This could explain why Naipaul has chosen to use ethnographic techniques of participant-observation and interview, in the Islamic countries, as they all seem to be dealing with some kind of cultural, religious and/or political conflicts. An ethnographer 'presents languages, cultures, and societies in all their opacity, their foreignness, their meaninglessness; ...and gives meaning to the meaningless. He decodes the message. He interprets' (Crapanzano 1986, p. 51). Apart from interpreting a culture to represent it, an ethnographer has an even more complex role to play; he needs to represent the 'foreign' □ in this case foreign culture, and he also needs to 'make sense' of that foreignness in order to 'make his message convincing' to his readers (Crapanzano 1986, p. 52). To understand this point, we must comprehend that the journey of ethnographers and

travel writers of current times is initially initiated by a certain need within the traveler's self to study a culture unknown to them (usually the primitive other) and in this 'need to move, to travel, lie some of the central motifs for life and literature □ the traveler on life's journey, ...the path and flow of experience', where the travel is 'tied in' with 'varied cultural, social and economic practices' (Leon 2009, p. 21). And for Naipaul, 'the most important thing about travel, for the writer, [is] the people he [finds] himself among' (Naipaul 1997, p. xii).

Travel literature and ethnography are quite interrelated as there seems to be a fusion between the characteristics of travel writing and ethnography since both are mixtures of observations and interpretations. Marcus and Cushman offer a primary difference between travel writing and ethnographic accounts:

[T]he marked absence in the latter [ethnography] of the narrator as a first-person presence in the text and the dominance instead of the scientific (invisible or omniscient) narrator who is manifest only as a dispassionate, camera-like observer; the collective or authoritative third person...replaces the more fallible first-person [in travel writing] (Wheeler 1986, p. 57).

But the difference described by Marcus and Cushman above is often merged in today's works, where the narrator as an observer has equal presence in the text. Thus, Marcus and Cushman's conclusion that 'travel books today are considered a minor form of ethnographic writing' (Wheeler 1986, p. 52) could not be more accurate as it is obvious that there is only a very fine line separating travel writing and ethnography in contemporary times. In his book *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin*, Rob Nixon too proposes that Naipaul's writings should be seen as a fusion between autobiography and ethnography as his works generally reflect the bias and limitations posed by those two disciplines (Nixon 111). Naipaul has clearly amalgamated these two genres, creating a 'mixed-genre' text (Marcus 1986, p. 189), especially evident in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*.

Ethnography, representations and interpretations, the major methods of portrayals of other cultures and societies are all subject to some kind of inevitable external influence and prejudice related to the writer and his surroundings, which are the 'bias and limitations' mentioned by Nixon above. All ethnographic findings are influenced by how an ethnographer chooses to interpret them and his interpretation is generally subject to external influences like his own cultural understanding and worldview. Thus '[e]thnographic truths' are 'inherently' seen as only partially true because several external factors contribute to the end product of any ethnographic findings (Clifford 1986, p. 7). As an 'ethnographer's translation/representation of a particular culture is inevitably a textual construct', the ethnographer has the final authority in determining the meanings of his study and subjects (Asad 1993, p. 163). Thus those meanings are definitely influenced by the ethnographer's language, background and cultural understandings, which in turn influence how the culture is represented. Clifford explains the complexity of this technique quite lucidly here:

Ethnography is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity,

inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes (Clifford 1986, p. 2).

Thus it is clear that ethnography is a technique that makes discovery of the unknown by questioning and scrutinizing its subjects but in the course of discovery becomes part of the process. In her essay 'Fieldwork in Common Places', Mary Louis Pratt suggests that an 'ethnographer's trials in working to know another people now become the reader's trials in making sense of the text' (Clifford 1986, p. 42). Thus, ethnography and its complexities influence the interpretation and representation of a culture.

Stuart Hall explains that representation is 'an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture' and language is used as the primary form to represent a culture and to give it a particular meaning, relying on two systems of representation which have 'different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts' (Hall 2003, p. 17). Language, as Hall perceives, encompasses the 'writing system', the 'spoken system' and 'visual images' (Hall 2003, p. 18). The first system of representation, Hall explains, is when one uses objects, images, people and events that one sees, to 'correlate' to one's 'mental representations' or concepts of things that are real as well as 'obscure and abstract' that pre-exist or have already been 'formed' in the interpreter's head (Hall 2003, p. 17). These objects, images and concepts that pre-exist in the interpreter's mind would have been acquired from the interpreter's own cultural values and understanding, knowledge and experience, which allow him to produce meaning. Thus language is crucial in 'translating' the concepts and ideas of the different 'conceptual maps' into a common language in order to 'correlate' the concepts and ideas with 'written words, spoken sounds or visual images,' to produce meanings (Hall 2003, p. 18). These words, sounds and images which 'carry meaning' are known as 'signs', and these signs 'represent the concepts and the conceptual relations between them which we carry around in our heads and together they make up the meaning-systems of our culture' (Hall 2003, p. 18). On his first trip to Iran in *Among the Believers*, Naipaul observes the importance of language:

Without Behzad, without the access to the language that he gave me, I had been like a half-blind man in Tehran. And it had been especially frustrating to be without the language in the streets... Now with Behzad, the walls spoke: many other things took on meaning; and the city changed (pp. 6-7).

People who belong to the same culture generally have the same broad conceptual map, derived from mental representations shaped by commonly owned cultural values and cultural knowledge. Thus, because of a shared background people from a particular culture tend to interpret the world in similar ways, be it interpreting their own culture or that of others. Their outlook and perceptions could possibly be the same. This could also explain why people from different cultures interpret an object, word, event or image of another culture in very diverse ways. Also what this signifies is that the way an object or culture is represented, is very much dependent on its interpreter: his cultural background and his existing mental concepts or thoughts, for its meaning, for its representation.

Stephen Spencer also discusses similar views as Hall, both drawing their ideas from Roland Barthes' theory on the process of signification and its idea of signs and semiotics. Spencer articulates that in an attempt to understand or 'make meaning' of

something, there are definitely a 'range of interpretations' that are possible, which depend on the interpreter's 'subjective identity, ethnicity, class, gender, generation, education, experience and state of mind' (Spencer 2006, p. 14). He also suggests that meanings often 'reside within the reader' which are 'largely dependent on the context' in which it is being read (Spencer 2006, p. 14-15). What Spencer is trying to explain here is that when one looks at a rose, if he were a Shakespearean enthusiast, he may identify the 'rose' as a symbol of love. But if the interpreter had never before seen a rose, it would just be an unknown flower with thorns. Hence, he says that the interpreter's 'cultural understanding' helps him 'decode the intended meaning' of a text (Spencer 2006, p. 15). This applies to objects, culture and images as well. Spencer's theory here personifies Naipaul's cultural understanding or the lack thereof. It exemplifies Naipaul's understanding of the jasmine flower. Naipaul was unable to recognize the flower for many years, as he was unable to connect the image and the scent of the flower, with its name. Naipaul attributed this to his lack of cultural understanding and his limited social background while growing up. Thus it is clear, that an interpreter's identity, knowledge and understanding are influential in his understanding and interpretation. However, this also means that there will be differences in outlook and even issues of inaccuracy when that object or culture is represented by someone from outside that society. This difference in perceptions and outlook is apparent in Naipaul's representations, as he is usually the outsider in the cultures that he portrays. For example, Naipaul's views on India are very different from those of R.K. Narayan. Although both are of Indian descent, Naipaul is from an immigrant society in Trinidad, while Narayan is a native in India. While Naipaul only sees dereliction and defecation, Narayan sees 'rebirth and growth' (Narayan 2000, p. 205). Although both writers have powerful narrative and observational skills, Narayan writes with humour and irony, while Naipaul is mostly satirical. Naipaul admits this difference between him and Narayan:

To get down to Narayan's world, to perceive the order and continuity he saw in the dereliction and smallness on India, to enter into his ironic acceptance and relish his comedy, was to ignore too much of what could be seen, to shed too much of myself: my sense of history, and even the simplest idea of human possibility (Naipaul 1979, 21).

Helen Hayward, in her comparisons between Naipaul and Narayan, notes that 'Naipaul tends to write satirically and from a viewpoint external to that of his characters. Narayan's attitude to his subjects is generally more elusive and shifting, but he clearly writes from within his community' (Hayward 2002, p.126). Thus, although both writers are of Indian descent and are victims of British imperialism, their perceptions and outlook are distinctively different, obviously because of the difference in their cultures and backgrounds resulting in differences in mental concepts and representations.

But Vincent Crapanzano feels otherwise on this point. After studying three prominent ethnographic texts: Clifford Geertz's portrayal of the Balinese cockfight in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's depictions of the Roman carnival in *Italienische Reise* (1789), and George Caitlin's *O-Kee-Pa: A Religious Ceremony and Other Customs of the Mandan* (1867), he argues that the ethnographer's position is only 'purely rhetorical' according to the 'constitution of the ethnographer's authority' (Crapanzano 1986, p. 53). He argues that as a consequence, the ethnographer's presence does not alter the way things happen and neither does it influence his observations or

interpretations, and the ethnographer takes an omnipresent stand, which makes him almost invisible to his surroundings, in order to assume his authority, connect to his readers and distance himself from the 'foreign events' he is observing (Crapanzano 1986, p 53). Naipaul seems to feel that he has done just that - take an omnipresent stand in his writings, and in that, his writings seems to support Crapanzano's ideas and oppose the theories by Hall and Spencer. Naipaul declares in the Prologue of *Beyond Belief* that 'in these travel books or cultural explorations of mine the writer as traveller steadily retreats; the people of the country come to the front; and I become again what I was at the beginning; a manager of narrative' (xii). However, a careful reading of *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief* demonstrates that this is not entirely true and much of his personal views, prejudices and his genuine concern for the societies, shape his portrayals of culture and religion in the travel texts. Perhaps this is because although 'representations, their production, circulation, history, and interpretations, are the very elements of culture' (Said 1994, p. 66), these representations are 'not fixed and eternal... but the products of history' (Spencer 2006, p. 1).

Thus it is difficult to represent a culture, as '[c]ulture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and many other capabilities and habits acquired by...society' (Murphy 1986, p. 15). However, culture, in the postcolonial context, is 'an environment, process, hegemony in which individuals ... and their works are embedded, as well as overseen at the top by a superstructure and at base by a whole series of methodological attitudes' (Said 1983, p. 8). Said's definition of culture conforms to Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony which implies that the dominating culture presides over and assumes an authority in the way local culture is practiced, through dominance by consent. Thus, when studying a culture it is quite impossible to detach and exclude the burden of imperialism and hegemony on the culture of a postcolonial society. Said too feels that the study of culture would be 'lacking in seriousness' if the 'imperial experience' is not linked or taken into consideration in its 'global setting' in literature (Said 2002, p. 247). But again as with representation, there are certain biases which influence certain cultural truths. For example the studying of only men in a certain culture and then concluding that their behaviour represents that of the entire community – women and children included, could be misleading (Clifford 1986, p. 18). Clifford explains that 'all constructed truths are made possible by powerful "lies" of exclusion and rhetoric. Even the best ethnographic texts – serious, true fictions – are systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control' (Clifford 1986, p. 7).

Naipaul is also a subject of various roles or positions, cultures and prejudices as both a colonial and a colonized, which form his outlook of people and their countries. Numerous influences form Naipaul's prejudices and his way of looking, although he always attempts to 'understand and document the difficulties of other cultures through his difficulties at understanding his own multiethnic background' (Barnouw 2003, p. 1). The 'capacity to represent, portray, characterize, and depict' other cultures and societies, resides in the powers of the narrative technique such as 'recording, ordering and observing' and lies just as much on the 'representer's world as on who or what is represented' (Said 1994, p. 95). Naipaul, as an ethnographer, utilizes his authority over his representations as a 'manager of narrative' (Naipaul 1999, p. xii), and in the process determines whom he interviews, why he interviews them and for what reason,

and then ascertains the final outcome of his study and how and in what manner the culture and the people he studies are portrayed. Although representation has also been 'characterized as keeping the subordinate subordinate, the inferior inferior' (Said 1994, p. 95), which gives the interpreter a sense of empowerment or authority, Naipaul's use of authority should not be perceived in a negative way. This is because the empowerment of authority is important to Naipaul as it enables him as an ethnographer to 'uncover the implicit meanings of [the] subordinate societies' that he is studying (Asad 1993, p. 163). For example, when Naipaul talks to Arash a taxi driver in Tehran, Naipaul notes 'Arash had spoken with great openness. But something was missing. The war he had told us about was a war without death, and with very little blood ... He wanted to talk about the war, but he didn't want to talk about death' (Naipaul 1999, p. 161). Since Naipaul is unable to get the answers he wants and feels that what he is hearing is not the complete truth, he then uses his authority to question and compel Arash further to get the answers that he needs. This is good because when he compels his subjects to reveal more, we are shown a clearer and truer picture of what actually happened. However, authority is only one of the 'conditions of power' which are 'inevitably enmeshed' in the process of 'cultural translation' or cultural representation, others being 'political, economic and military constraints' on a professional, national and international level; or commonly termed as imperialism or colonialism (Asad 1993, p. 163).

In this context, Naipaul also represents the Islamic societies in relationship with the hegemonic discourse of politics and power that he sees in all the countries in his Islamic journeys. And since the 'connection between imperial politics and culture is astonishingly direct' (Said 1994, p. 7), Naipaul in his portrayals, shows that culture and religion in the Islamic countries, have been manipulated extensively by power, politics and imperialism. This manipulation of power and politics in the name of Islam is evident in the reign of Ayatollah Khomeini. In *Among the Believers*, on his first visit to Iran during the Islamic revolution where an Islamic government was formed for the first time, Naipaul narrates the many facets of the revolution and its effects on the people, their religious views and culture. Ayatollah Khomeini, the new religious leader and head of the Islamic government was for the Iranians 'an interpreter' of 'God's will' whose 'sanctity and authority' became 'absolute', and was the supreme holder of power in both politics and religion who decided 'what was Islamic' and what wasn't (Naipaul 1979, p. 10). Khomeini instructed priests (mullahs and ayatollahs) to draft an Islamic constitution, the very first of its kind and through this political prowess, began to reject everything Western. He cancelled all 'prerevolutionary projects' and gave an Iranian contractor the highway project initially given to an American company. He also asserted his religious and political totalitarian authority through his 'hanging judge', Ayatollah Khalkhalli, who conducted 'Islamic trials' on all who opposed the state and Islam (Naipaul 1979, p. 10). Khomeini used the 'antagonistic relationship between Islam and the West', to his favour, to 'articulate Islam as the master signifier of a new political order', a resistance to the 'global western power' showing that Islam and its 'precepts' are indeed secondary to 'state interests' (Sayyid 2003, p. 12). Khomeini was 'fierce[ly]' unwilling to accept 'any style of politics' or 'rationality', because of his 'attachment to an Islam that was Iranian, fiercely contested, and idiosyncratically defended that seemed especially defiant' (Said 1997, p. 31). This show of authority and absolute power by Khomeini indicates that Islam had been used as a political tool to dominate and suppress the country and its people. This notion preoccupies Naipaul

the most during his journey throughout the Islamic nations. And this power play is evident again in Indonesia as well.

In *Among the Believers* and later in *Beyond Belief*, Naipaul narrates the story of Imaduddin, a lecturer in electrical engineering at the Bandung Institute of Technology in Java who was keen on helping his country by developing the nation through his religion, Islam. But the irony in Imaduddin is that he was educated in America, in the Western way, but was now preaching Islam to his fellow countrymen. Imaduddin's character reveals an ambition to take his people out of the clutches of conventional and orthodox ways of life. He teaches Islam to the local people as well as to students studying abroad in the West. After his six-year exile in the United States, Imaduddin with Professor Habibie, then Minister of Research and Technology, and a devout Muslim himself, promoted his orthodox idea through his mental training classes whereby students were informed that they could progress in life and develop the nation through Islamic teachings. The mental training concept was exploited by Habibie, for his political agendas, and he commanded Imaduddin to 'train' the people and '[m]ake them become devout Muslims' in order to make them submissive and 'not think about revolution' (Naipaul 1999, p. 17). Through his portrayals, Naipaul shows how political leaders and religious leaders use hegemony in the form of Islam to impose their own ideas and ideologies, and in the process, empower the minds and souls of the true believers of Islam, into following their (leaders) political ideologies. Naipaul also shows how these political parties who condemn Westernization, ironically acquire Western education and Western technologies for their own benefit. Using cultural and religious hegemony, the people were being suppressed, unknowingly by most, in their own countries, in the name of Islam, and this was evident throughout his Islamic journey.

But despite the negativity he finds around him in the Islamic nations, Naipaul also portrays success stories of those who have managed to rise above the clutches of the government or their difficult circumstances. Naipaul tells of Paydar, an Iranian who was 'possessed by the idea of revolution from an early age' sparked by the need for freedom and his mother's poverty stricken sufferings that wrenched his heart (Naipaul 1997, p. 1). Paydar joined the Tudeh communist party that pledged to oust the wicked rulers and fight for justice and peace using Islam as a common ground, but later discovered that the party had adapted an 'Islamic camouflage' and functioned in the name of Islam for its own benefits, like all other political movements (Naipaul 1997, p. 179). After the party was formally outlawed by the government, and Paydar was jailed, he began to reflect on the revolution. He realised 'why he had been wrong' about the revolution and 'why revolutions were doomed to fail', and reasoned that everyone was 'full of greed, love, fear, [and] hatred' and carried his 'own history and past' and thus approached the revolution differently and expected different outcomes (Naipaul 1997, p. 180). Although Paydar's father had been an atheist and his mother believed in humans more than in God, he had chosen the path of Islam (or the revolution in the name of Islam) only to better his life, but he reflects:

I thought that ideologies are only a small part of our intellect which can help us in life. The main source lies in our cultural way of thinking. And natural behaviour of people like my mother. The revolution I worked for didn't understand me as an intellectual or my mother as a person (Naipaul 1997, p. 186).

Paydar realises that revolutions did not care about the individual differences and could not fulfill everyone's needs. Mr. Bhutto a jeep driver in Pakistan also eventually realizes the revolutions created in the name of Islam are not for the benefit of the people: '[t]hese maulanas [religious men] are using Islam as a tool. We are all Muslims [but] [w]e are not Muslims in their way' (Naipaul 1979, p. 199). Naipaul also portrays how people in Indonesia live as a multicultural society, absorbing and practicing the values of the various cultures and religions that they are a part of: 'People lived with everything at once; the mosque, the church, Krishna, the rice Goddess, a remnant of Hindu caste, the Buddhist idea of Nirvana, the Muslim idea of paradise' (Naipaul 1979, p. 350). And within his numerous ethnographic details of both the good and the ugly, Naipaul has made efforts at understanding Islam as a religion and the cultures and practices of its believers. Naipaul's empathy and genuine concern for the people is revealed in his observation on a dusty road in Pakistan:

So now, seeing them as the poor and the unrepresented, and not as people wearing a certain kind of costume or having a certain cast of features, I considered the labourers, the herdsman, and the idle people watching the log-loading, above the green-and-white river. And something of Mahmood's gloom and the jeep driver's hysteria touched me. I said, "What will happen to these people?" (Naipaul 1979, p. 199).

Naipaul observes these cultures with a personal concern for the people, the turmoil and issues that they are facing, rooted to his own search of identity, rootlessness and displacement in the face of the cultures (Indian, British, Trinidadian) that he belongs to. Powers of the narrative technique such as 'recording, ordering and observing' are core elements in the 'capacity to represent, portray, characterize, and depict' cultures. (Said 1994, p. 95). Naipaul as an ethnographer and travel writer, possesses this power, and thus uses his authority and position to give us an essentialist representation of the cultures that he studies.

Conclusion

Naipaul with his multiple roles; that of a traveller, travel writer, an ethnographer, an intellectual, an interpreter, a narrator, a distant observer, a Western representative; takes on both the role of the colonizer and the colonized. It is with these diverse but overlapping roles that he holds, and with his multicultural background and experiences, together with his colonial sense of displacement, alienation and the search for identity, that Naipaul gives in-depth, distinctive portrayals and representations of the postcolonial societies that he studies, including the Islamic societies in *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*. As with his other writings, Naipaul has again portrayed and represented societies without voices, societies which seem doomed to stay in destitution, societies which seem to be at the mercy of its own people intent on oppressing them for political power. So in his representations of that society, he highlights everything that needs change, progress, improvement and growth, hence the darkness in his portrayals. Naipaul may have made some generalizations about Islam and local cultures due to his ignorance, but inherently what he wrote was what he saw. Naipaul's rage is not against Islam, as a religion, but against Islam that is being used to fulfill the different agendas.

Naipaul's view and perceptions on India, which were extremely pessimistic, toned down tremendously and was more optimistic on his third visit to India, having seen

the improvements and development India was making in various ways. Thus when the change does happen, when the people do emerge from destitution, he is gratified, and he gives us a positive representation. So I hope, on his next visit to the Islamic nations Naipaul, will see an improvement in the situations that he was so concerned about, which I believe will give him the personal satisfaction of having been part of the call for change in those Islamic societies and there might be a mellowed down representation of Islam and the cultures there. Thus it is a conclusion that Naipaul takes it upon himself to portray these postcolonial societies with the responsibility of representing the unrepresented, with the hope of showing them and the world that there is a need for change and progress, which arises from his own experiences as a colonial subject.

Note

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