

“TREACHEROUS TRAVELOGUE: REPRESENTATIONS OF MALAY MUSLIMS IN V.S. NAIPAUL’S *AMONG THE BELIEVERS*”

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ABSTRACT:

This article analyses representations of Muslims, in general and Malaysian Muslims, in particular, based on the travelogue by the Indian-Trinidad author, V.S. Naipaul and responds to some of the claims made by him. Naipaul’s two travelogues, *Among the Believers* (1981) and *Beyond Belief* (1997) are based on his visits to four Muslim-majority countries, namely Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia. *Among the Believers* is the first narrative of Naipaul’s visits and *Beyond Belief* is the sequel of the same countries he again revisited. The analysis is based on the theory of *Orientalism* (1978) by Edward Said but elaborated further to include the concept of Islamophobia as an extension of the same theory. This is in order to dissect contemporary phenomenon which now involves non-Europeans as the practiser of Orientalism. However, this article focuses on only *Among the Believers* in the way Naipaul misrepresents the Malay Muslims in his travel to Malaysiabased on meetings with a few Malay Muslims of different backgrounds. The article concludes that Naipaul’s narrative is mostly superficial and prejudiced interpretations of the religion and its people colored by his enmity towards Islam, in general. The implication of the study indicates that Naipaul has failed to be an objective observer as his narrative brush is tainted by his own Orientalistideology and Islamophobic views.

Keywords:

travelogue, Orientalism, misrepresentations, Islam, ideology, Islamophobia

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INTRODUCTION

VidiadharSurajprasad Naipaul or simply V.S. Naipaul has been considered one of the best writers writing in English. However, he has also been noted as a controversial writer after the publications of his two travelogues about four Muslim countries and about Islam and Muslims in general. Depending on perspectives he has been commended for his “moral integrity, fearless truth-telling and loyalty to the proof of evidence” (qtd. in O’Shea-Meddour, 2011; Garcoa-Rubio et al., 2019; Minh, 2019). Hiscritics, such as Gayatri Spivak, however,describe him as “a false native informant” or a man “incapable of restraining his loathing for the Islamic world and its people”(qtd. in Al-Quaderi&Habibullah, 2012, p.22). These contradictions are borne out of his limitation of vision in making totalizing assumptions about Muslims and Islam with their diversified cultures and traditions. As Al-

Quaderi&Habibullah (2012) assert “all the negative qualities of the people whom he meets have their origin in Islam” (p.24)

V.S. Naipaul was born in 1932 in Trinidad to Hindu parents, and left for England to study and eventually settle there.His grandparents were indentured labourers who migrated to Trinidad from India to work on sugar plantations, not unlike the first immigrants from Indiato Malaysia who worked in rubber plantations owned by the British. Fortunately for him, his father’s love for writers was the main influence for his becoming a writer himself, the skill which he painfully developed when he was a student in Oxford, England. Naipaul died in 2018 in London, England. By glimpsing at his life background one can assume the sense of displacement/belonging of the author that may have a bearing on the consistently pessimistic themes of his novels, mostly set in developing countries and

the themes of hybridity and alienation that pepper some of his works (Paicu, 2011). We will not argue over his writing prowess especially in his fictions. The acknowledgement is evident by the Nobel Prize for Literature that he received in 2001 and the many other accolades to his name by renowned institutions. Our argument is when he starts writing nonfictions especially those related to Muslims and Islam that it shows his Orientalist ideology and Islamophobic views at work. However, since Naipaul was an Indian- Jamaican with British citizenship we have to contextualize his travel writings about Islam within the scopes of Orientalism and Islamophobia.

This article will analyze the writings of V.S. Naipaul based on his travelogue *Among the Believers- An Islamic Journey* (1981). The travelogue is selected because of its relevance to the issue of Orientalism and its perspectives on Islam, and more specifically, on Islam in Malaysia. This discourse strives to uncover the principal doctrines of Orientalism and Islamophobia and what the text's seemingly innocent, neutral and rational comments and descriptions reveal about the real Orientalist nature of that body of knowledge which finds its echoes through novels, analyses, intellectual discourses and travel writings. Naipaul's travelogue is chosen because of two reasons. The first is due to his adversative views of other cultures which he claims to have no real interest in. Secondly, he shares the same intellectual perceptions as other Orientalist Western writers of the superior culture of the West and the inferior culture of the East. Although Naipaul is of Indian origin (who grew up in Trinidad) his writings, especially on Islam reverberates with the resonances of Orientalists' views. In general, Naipaul's serious and cynical style of traveler's tale only serve to misrepresents Islam as destructive, anti-modernity, repressive and hypocritical.

ORIENTALISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

Orientalism is a body of knowledge of Western scholars and intellectuals about the East that embodies the Manichean binary dichotomy of the superior-inferior and civilized- barbaric stance of the West over the East. It developed, at first, out of the encounter of the West with the Arabs especially during the Crusades that saw the alliance of Christian powers defeated by Muslim armies in the struggle for control of the Holy Land in Jerusalem between 1096-1271. However, during European colonialism of the world at the beginning of the fifteenth century Orientalism began to be utilized as scholarly endeavor by Western academicsto understand the conquered natives. There were two reasons for this endeavor. First, in order to quench their thirst for knowledge especially during the Age of Enlightenment during the 17th and 18th centuries. More importantly, it also served the military objective because Orientalism, as a body of knowledge, was able to be repurposed as a form of understanding the conquered natives in order to tighten the colonial stranglehold upon the local populations.

The ideology of Western Orientalism is discussed by Edward Said in his seminal text *Orientalism* (1978) and has garnered numerous discussions, papers, seminars and even polemics of the ideology. To Said (1978), Orientalism is a specific kind of knowledge about specific places, peoples and civilizations. For the Orient idioms became frequent, and these idioms took firm hold in European discourse. Beneath the idiom there was a layer of doctrine about the Orient; this doctrine was fashioned out of the experiences of many Europeans, all of them converging upon such essential aspects of the Orient as the Oriental character, Oriental despotism, Oriental sensuality, and the like. (p.203)

Thus, Orientalism is a European way of perceiving the non-European worlds based on his previous experiences of fear and wonder, and of

truths and distortions. But, after the ascendance of European power during colonialism, it became a way of categorizing the European and non-European worlds into the Manichean binary opposition of good/evil, civilized/barbarism, mature/childish, rational/superstitious dichotomies. The consequence is illustrated by Said (1978) who states that “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the ‘Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (p.2). This connotes the idea that there is a mainstream idea of thought of the West regarding the East which, compared to the West, will always play the subordinate role. This Western epistemological thinking is persuasive due to its seemingly intellectual analysis of the Orient which is supposedly written by ‘experts’ of the areas of study.

The representations of the Orient, after frequent repetitions, become facts and then institutionalized. Further, the ‘facts’ are accepted into the mainstream mode of thinking of Western intellectuals. Later, it became a tool of domination for the colonial West as an excuse for its extended hegemony of the world. As Said further emphasizes, “...in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (p.3). In this sense the knowledge about the Orient is no longer neutral. It now serves as a tool for dominating and controlling a way of thinking as a means of controlling the body. Orientalism now, as a specific form of knowledge, becomes a psychological fortress for the colonizers against resistance from the colonized subjects. For the colonized subjects it is the mental wall that is hard to overwhelm and even after decades of independence, the Third World, as most of the colonized lands are labelled, still lingers in the cultural limbo of uncertainty. Some former subjects still consider their former colonizers as cultural

masters, not realizing that their minds are tied to a new chain of enslavement.

But how do we define people such as Naipaul who was hardly the white-skinned, blue-eyed and blond-haired European? Since Orientalism was an ideology or an idea it does not necessitate the race of the individual as requirement to be an Orientalist. Orientalism is able to transcend race to retain the ideology the way a male can be a feminist so long as he believes in the equality between the sexes. And in contemporary context, Orientalism has been incarnated into Neo-Orientalism which specifically focuses on Islam and the Muslims as the binary opposition. As Anees (2015) mentions, there is “an attempt to present neo-Orientalism in a theological garb — as opposed to Orientalism as a way of depicting people of the East in a condescending manner (“the other,” “the savages”). In this respect, Orientalism has been transformed to suit contemporary purpose of the West (and also non-West). As stated by Samiei (2010), Orientalism has been “reconstituted, redeployed, redistributed in a globalised framework and have shaped a new paradigm which can be called ‘neo-Orientalism’ (p.1148). This issue will be further discussed when we dissect the travelogue and identify ideas reminiscent of Orientalism in Naipaul’s narrative.

Another term that we need to understand is Islamophobia. What is Islamophobia and how did it originate in the West? A simple definition of Islamophobia is it is “a form of racism as well as unfounded fear of Islam” (Marranci, 2004, p.105). While racism is bias and hatred based on the skin colour, Islamophobia is based on someone’s faith, specifically Islam. As an ideology it is easier for the West to merge the established knowledge of Orientalism with Islamophobia as the method of Othering the Muslims. To understand this identity construction of the Muslims by the West, we need to go back in history. At this stage we need to recognize that Islamophobia has always persisted in

the Western psyche since the defeat of the Christian armies by the Muslim civilization during the Crusades (1095-1291). The defeats of the Crusaders were also part of the motivation for European powers to colonize Muslim countries which started with the Portuguese Vasco da Gama's discovery of the sea route to the East as the land route was controlled by the Muslims.

In the twentieth-century, Islamophobia was less apparent due to the Cold War between the West led by the United States and the Soviet Union, mostly through the leadership of Russia. The war formally ended in 1991 when some of the Soviet satellite states elected non-communist leaders that caused a ripple effect which led to the unravelling of the communist bloc. Mikhail Gorbachev's attempt to stem the downward spiral of the Soviet economy with the policies of glasnost and perestroika merely led to the breakup of the communist bloc and eventual victory for the Allies. However, once the Cold War was over the propaganda arms and tools of the West were directed at the old enemy- the Muslims. In the more contemporary history, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 brought the sentiment of Islamophobia to the fore of Western consciousness due to the threat it provided against Western (read United States) hegemony in the Middle East. Earlier, the Saudi oil embargo against the United States in 1973 due to its support for Israel during the Yom Kippur ensured the mistrust of the West against Islamic countries (Al Muhsin & Mustafa, 2020).

So how do we contextualize Naipaul within this framework? While Indian-Trinidadian by ethnicity, Naipaul's ideology was white as he was raised in England. And as a neo-Orientalist and a BJP Hindu sympathizer (Singh, 2006), Naipaul has every compulsion to write negatively about peoples he despises. Therefore, it is not unexpected that he appreciated the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992 in India as the rewriting of history through

ordinary people (Sasidharan, 2018) indicating his celebration of Hindus erasing the Muslim identity of India. It is within this context that the two travelogues by Naipaul were published and not without reason that the first country he visited was Iran right after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Combined together with his Western education and hatred for Muslims, it is unsurprising that his essentializing discourse of the Muslims and Islam as the subaltern Other is similar to the repertoire of images of Orientalism and Islamophobia.

AMONG THE BELIEVERS AND ISLAM IN MALAYSIA

Narratives are an essential part of human civilisation. One of the most important reasons for this is the fact that narratives are second only to our experience in understanding our world. Since we cannot experience everything that we wish to experience we have to rely on others to describe their experience to us, therefore, enriching our own experience. For example, our understanding of war as glorious or hellish will only be through the eyes of those who experienced it personally or who lived during the war period. Thus, we are presented with two stark contrasts of war if we read "Dulce Et Decorum Est" (1920) by Wilfred Owen and "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854) by Lord Tennyson. Needless to say, both poems provide us with the second-hand knowledge of war through someone's narratives. Additionally, some stories are also immersive and memorable to the reader irrespective of perspective of the writer. Thus, whether the stories are truthful or merely lies they will remain in the memory of the reader. As Ramin and Masoumi state "different narratives help us understand the story from different view -points and thus provide the reader with a complete perspective" (p.1). Unfortunately,

some narratives, like those of Naipaul's, are tainted by treacherous chronicles.

The travelogue *Among the Believers* is an account by Naipaul after a six-month journey to four different Muslim countries after the Iranian Revolution of 1978 whose effect reverberated throughout the world. His first visit was to post-evolutionary Iran, followed by Pakistan, Malaysia and finally Indonesia. In these trips he met an assorted number of people of each country. His encounter and discussions with them form the major part of the content of *Among the Believers*. This travelogue is admittedly interesting to read but it is merely a triumph of style over substance. While it makes for an exciting reading the travelogue lacks academic and objective rigor to make numerous claims about Islam and the Muslims. There are numerous sweeping generalizations made in this travelogue through a very narrow path of experiential interpretation and occasionally deliberate historical amnesia.

The undertone of *Among the Believers* speaks much about the Naipaul's naivete (or refusal to acknowledge) about Islamic history at best, or prejudiced perception of the religion and its followers at its worst. As Wendy O'Shea-Meddour explains about the travelogue, it is "Islamophobia ...disturbingly misinterpreted as expertise" (p.57). Even before he set out to write about his travel across some Islamic regions, he had a preconceived view about Islam. Naipaul writes

The doctrine, or what I thought was its doctrine didn't attract me. It didn't seem worth inquiring into; over the years, in spite of travel, I had added little to the knowledge gathered in my Trinidad childhood. The glories of this religion were in the remote past; it had generated nothing like the Renaissance. Muslim countries, where not colonized, were despotisms; and nearly all, before oil, were poor. (p.16)

There is ambivalence in Naipaul's construction of his travel impression constitutive of the essential form and boundary of the Muslim community. On the one hand, he claimed that he was not very interested in the doctrine and who admitted he did not manage to add more knowledge to it in his travels. On the other hand, he was suddenly very authoritative on the history of Islam and was even able to make generalizations about the religion and its diverse populations. To the perceiving mind these statements already indicate his fallacious mode of appropriation and codification of the knowledge about Islam and Muslims bordering on latent enmity.

To say that Islam had generated nothing like a Renaissance speaks much about the intended malice and the biased view of the writer. Additionally, Naipaul's comment was uncannily similar to Lord Balfour's understanding concerning the Muslims indicating the Orientalist strands of both authors. Balfour stated that

They are a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves. Their great moments were in the past, they are useful in the modern world only because the powerful and up-to-date empires have effectively brought them out of the wretchedness of their decline and turned them into rehabilitated residents of productive colonies(p.35).

As we have mentioned earlier, the similarity of view of both authors is due to the fact that both follow the same strand of Orientalist ideology and the political philosophy of colonialism. At the height of European colonialism of the world the view was prevalent among some European scholars and leaders to justify invading and oppressing other peoples that colonialism had advanced human civilization and brought benefit and prosperity to the world.

Thus, how true are the statements by the authors? Islam, as a religion and as an organized form of government, has existed for more than a thousand years. It had many a glorious moment and was noted for its multi-cultural tolerance as exemplified in Islamic Spain itself. Unlike what is propagated by the less reflective Western writers that Islam was spread by the sword, the Western scholar Thomas Arnold states that the early Arab conquest of Spain was not followed by the persecution of its native inhabitants. In fact, it is “their tolerant attitude towards the Christian religion that facilitated their rapid acquisition of the country” (p.134). This is in contrast to the destructive effect of Western colonialism of the world under the pretext of the civilizing mission which Young (2001) explains “caused extraordinary suffering in human terms, and was singularly destructive with regard to the indigenous cultures with which it came into contact” (p.6). Additionally, the last Islamic caliphate was the Ottoman empire which only disintegrated after the First World War of 1914-1918. To say that the glories of this religion were in the remote past only serves to reveal both Naipaul and Balfour’s shallow understanding of world history.

In contrast to the views of Islam as devoid of the Enlightenment period, the postcolonial scholar Said (1978) states:

During the early rise and expansion of Islam, Christian authors witnessing the Islamic conquests had scant interest in the learning, high culture, and frequent magnificence of the Muslims, who were as Gibbon said, “coeval with the darkest and most slothful period of European annals” (p. 59).

In support of this view, a Western scholar, Gaarder & Brevis (1996) writes that “all through the Middle Ages, the Arabs were predominant in sciences such as mathematics, chemistry, astronomy, and medicine. Nowadays we still use Arabic figures. In a number of areas Arabic culture

was superior to Christian culture” (p.174). To deny that part of history is to deny one’s own intellectual objectivity. Hence, this renders the author’s exploration of the subject of Islam and its adherents as being biased in judgement. So with this negative perspective of Islam Naipaul set about his journey among the believers of Islam, picking up issues here and there, joined with some facts and some hearsays, starting with the revolutionary Iran, and covering countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Malaysia and Indonesia, while always being skeptical about the religion and always providing the reader with the foreboding evil of the religion and the hypocrisy of the followers. Concerning Malaysia, Naipaul, too, touches much about the religion, local politics as well as the characteristics of the Malay natives, topics which were intertwined but, to Naipaul boils down to one thing- the adverse effect of Islam on humanity. This is actually in line with the “history of popular anti-Arab and anti-Islamic prejudice in the West, which is immediately reflected in the history of Orientalism” (Said, 1978, p.26).

There are many faces of Islam in Naipaul’s writings. Before we go on, I think it is important to state that although this discourse attempts to describe the writer’s view on Islam in Malaysia, his general perception is much wider and broader than that. Naipaul’s comments and analysis seem to generalize Islamic teachings and its followers throughout the world (Al Muhsin et al., 2020). One grave error of Naipaul’s view is his correlating the practices and actions of a selected followers of Islam to the teaching of Islam itself. It is erroneous because the actions of Muslims in specific areas do not merely reflect the influence of Islam but also cover unique cultural, political and as in the case of Malaysia economic factors. Thus, by generalizing on Islam and the Muslims without putting all these factors into account would render his perspectives on a wrong intellectual footing.

One of Naipaul's implied notions of the Islamic culture in Malaysia is that it is at the periphery of civilization, as if it was an entity living in the darkness of barbarism where no universal laws applied, until recently. He writes, "money, going down, has created a whole educated generation of village people and drawn them into the civilization that once appeared to be only the outer edge of darkness but is now universal (*Among the Believers*, p.213). Naipaul further comments about how the young Malay Muslims are lost when they pursued their studies abroad to Western countries but "still look for manners and customs of home" (p.213). This idea puts Islam and the West at two opposing ends. To Naipaul, the West, being superior in terms of science and technology, is at the centre of civilization. The West is, to him, the beacon of universal values that include subjective abstracts and values such as culture, justice, dignity and morality, thereby, rendering the non-West cultures (and Islam) as being stuck with values of the past. Young (2001) corrects this fallacious notion of civilizational superiority of the West by stating that it "was the unfortunate accident of modernity, its only problem resulting from the fact the West mistook technological advance and power that it brought for cultural superiority" (p.5). So, what Naipaul and Burgess regard as Western civilization is a mere superiority in material strength on the part of the Western culture.

Another example where Naipaul stumbles along the cultural traps was his comment concerning the Mills and Boon books. This was during his conversation with two "brave" Muslim girls. He writes:

These short paperback light romances, known by the name of their English publisher rather than the name of the authors, have been successfully promoted in many countries of the Commonwealth. They meet the imaginative needs of people new to education and city life; they appear to instruct in

modern ways of feeling, and are read by university students, and even by men. (p.236)

After all the cynicism about Islam and its followers who, to him, tried to bring back "barbarian practices" into the modern world he was all praise for books written by Western authors meant for juveniles, which "instruct" the reader on "modern ways of feeling". What he was implying was the different mode of thinking of the Muslim girls and his so-called *modern* concept of living. There are a few questions that beg answers. Are there such things as modern feelings and old feelings? On whose criteria do we define *modernity*? Does that mean that Muslims are unable to have feelings? To read further about his conversation with the "brave girls" we get the impression that Islam was such a negative religion that it even restricted the natural feeling of love for its followers.

This view by Naipaul about the "modern ways of feeling" directs us to one of the fundamental views of Orientalism. Orientalists, by drawing on *the survival of the fittest* theory by Charles Darwin, believe that humanity goes through a linear civilizational progress with the West leading the world in this progress. As Leiris (1959) states it is "a phase in the history of humanity is analogous to that of childhood in the life of the individual, with Europeans being at the adult stage" (p. 97). Within the context of the travelogue, the Muslims and Islam are imageries of exoticism, despotism, irrationality and backwardness when compared with the advanced, just, rational and moral West. This Western scholarship, as proposed by Western anthropologists, assumed that humans progress from the state of simplicity to a state of civilizational advancement, or as Lindqvist (1998) states, it was the progression of "intellectual and even biological superiority" (p.47). Needless to say, this assumption was due to the perceived infallibility of Western military strength and political domination over the perceived other

degenerate non-western cultures. So, Naipaul's notion of "modern ways of feeling" actually subscribes to this idea of the linearity nature of human history. However, contemporary anthropologists admit to the fallacy of the linearity of human history. What is evident instead is the fact that different cultures and societies possess different ways of life, sense of morality and perspectives on reality. We cannot equate material progress with human civilizational development. It is merely a different way of doing things. Thus, Naipaul's "modern ways of feeling" is merely different ways of feeling- it is neither superior nor inferior to other societies' ways of feeling and being.

The second face of Islam that Naipaul implies in his traveler's tale is of the religion of Islam as outdated that views material progress as an alien concept, and therefore, should be avoided. Throughout the tale he keeps highlighting his conversation with the Muslims who view secular knowledge as against the teaching of Islam or implied as such. He writes about the girls' disapproving attitude concerning science subjects in government schools. "Science, the girl in black said, now apparently disapproving of the government schools" (p.235). To Naipaul Islam was opposed to science and technology as a form of knowledge. Naipaul also refers to the rise of political Islam as "the promise of political calamity spread as good news"(p.215) implying that to revert back to the rule of Islam as the basic principle of life for its followers is going back to the dark hole of "barbarism" where only ignorance and destruction await them. Another issue which is highlighted by Naipaul in his tale is the sense of distress among the Muslims. To Naipaul, Islam was an aggressive religion, and the aggression was "a way of getting even with the world" (p.214) and the veil worn by the women was "a mask of aggression" (p.212).

Concerning Naipaul's referring to Islam as rejecting science and technology, there are two general types

of responsibilities governing Islam and its followers. The first is called *fardhuain*- the individual, mostly religious, responsibilities of each and every Muslim such as performing the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadhan, paying the zakat and performing the haj for those who can afford it. The other responsibilities are the *fardhukifayah*- whereby a section of the followers must pursue other matters relating to the world. This necessitates the pursuance of other forms of knowledge such as the sciences, defense, education and agriculture.

As for Naipaul's accusation that Islam is a religion of aggression, we need to understand that in Islam all Muslims are brothers and sisters. The oppression of a Muslim community in one country will be felt by Muslims in other countries as Islam unites the followers irrespective of race. Other groups of people may be united by nationalistic ties or by people of the same race or ethnicity. In Islam unity should be under the umbrella of faith. Thus, we are presented with the issues of the sense of distress and anger of Muslims although Naipaul never explains the reasons for these anger and distress. He never mentions the injustices perpetrated against Muslims (and other democratic countries) around the world, the despot Muslim dictators installed by Western powers and the political, economic and cultural hegemony imposed on them. Blum (1995) asserts that the reasons for Islamic and other Third World countries' 'rage' was this creed as practiced by the United States (and other former colonial Western powers such as France and Britain)

It is true now as ever that American multinationals derive significant economic advantages from Third World countries due to their being under-industrialised, under-diversified, capitalist-oriented, and relatively powerless.

It is equally true that the consequence of American interventions has frequently been to keep Third World countries in just such an underdeveloped, impotent state. (p. 13)

While the quote above is a generalization of the state of political and economic affairs of the world under the United States and other European hegemony, the statement also applies to Muslim countries under Western constant interventions that deny them the right to self-determination.

In Naipaul's conversations with Shafi, an ABIM (Muslim Youth Movement Malaysia) officer and the girls, the words "simplicity" and "village life" constantly crop up. Although the idea of "simplicity" was purportedly coming from Shafi's and the girls' but the consistent attention to them brought the negative perception to the reader that Islam is a religion of hypocrisy. On the one hand it asks its followers to practice simplicity and on the other hand it wants to have all the modern comforts. What was a simple life in Islam mean? From Shafi's explanation (as written by Naipaul) it was the return of the old ways of the village, not bothering even to have intellectual pursuits. The village life is the symbolism of that idealism. However, the constant longing for the "village life" does not mean Muslims reject the idea of modernity. It is more of an aspiration. It is a yearning for a more just and caring society similar to a village where there is a strong sense of camaraderie. If a misfortune befalls a family the other members of the community will come to its aid. It is a life where one does not feel alone. (the concept of individual/collective).

Another feature of the conversations Naipaul had with the Muslims is the lack of intellectual depth. He claimed to have met some middle-class Muslims and had conversations with them. They were government officers, a doctor, lawyer, two "brave" girls and a philosophy lecturer. Yet what he wrote about those conversations did not reflect them as mature and educated. There was no eloquence in the explanations especially concerning Islam. The positions were either dogmatic (al-Arqam) or full of hesitations as exemplified by Shafi and the two

girls. Based on his writing he must have met at least two groups of Islamists- the representatives of ABIM and the members of the Al-Arqam group which had its centre in Sungai Penchala, Kuala Lumpur. About Al-Arqam he states that "they were said to have rejected modern ways and modern goods" (p.251), a statement which contrary to the on-the-ground fact of the organization. Practice aside, Al-Arqam was one of the best organised communes that was able to spread its teachings out of the border of this country and it was one which was able to combine modern ways and technologies to full effectiveness. In fact, its vision of Islam was one which accommodated the modern technologies with the Islamic faith. As Fauzi (2010) states the establishment of Al-Arqam was to maintain independent Islamic educational institutions which remained steadfast to the sacred aims and objectives of Islamic education, without rejecting the necessity of producing graduates who are comfortable with mastery of branches of fardkifayah knowledge that would enable them to excel in different technocratic occupational fields (p. 57).

In its peaks it was able to capture the hearts and minds of mostly young middle-class students and intellectuals. No group which preaches mere religious sermons would be successful in attracting this young and educated class. This speaks much about their organizational abilities and attractive visions. And it was very successful in the economic sector. As Fauzi (2010) notes "[t]he success of DarulArqam was owed to a culture of entrepreneurship, economic independence and activism, which were instilled via a distinctive educational curriculum which uniquely integrated traditionally religious with modern subjects" (p.59). The success of DarulArqam testifies to its ability to merge religion with modernity.

As a matter of fact, both ABIM and DarulArqam had the same vision of embracing modernity while still practicing Islam. Thus, it is peculiar that

whenever Naipaul met people who strive to practice their religious faith they were always referred to as wanting to be “backward”. This is also evident when he was asked about the situation in Iran after the revolution that toppled the Western-backed dictatorship of the Shah of Iran. To Naipaul Iran was “a mess. No law. The factories aren’t working. The mullahs don’t know how to run the country” (p.258). And yet the country managed to survive eight years of a devastating war with Iraq (which was prolonged by Western powers providing intelligence and arms to both sides) and to become stable, and not to mention that it is now a democracy.

CONCLUSION

In reading Naipaul’s journey to the four Islamic countries we have to conclude that it is not an Islamic journey. It is not about a journey to understand and enlighten oneself about the subject of the author’s interest. To Naipaul the journey is more about affirming his already established ideology and perceptions about Islam and Muslims. It is about fulfilling his fantasy of a world which in the early part of the book he confesses to have no interest in but, nevertheless, able to provide images and representations of a population of 1.6 billion people who come from diverse ethnics and cultures. Such endeavor could only be possible through an ideology produced and signified by the discourse of Orientalism and prejudice of Islamophobia.

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