

# **Orientalism *Beyond Belief*: Critiquing the Problematics of V. S. Naipaul's Islamic Excursion<sup>1</sup>**

Seyed Mohammad Marandi<sup>2</sup> & Hossein Nazari<sup>3</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to offer a critical analysis of V. S. Naipaul's second Islamic travelogue *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (1998), which chronicles the author's excursions to the 4 non-Arab Muslim countries of Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia. This critique is presented, firstly, through problematizing the author's theorization on the theme of Muslim conversion—which, according to Naipaul, has bred nothing but neurosis and nihilism in Muslim societies—and then through analyzing representations of the post-Revolutionary Iran of the late 90s. We argue that Naipaul's representations fall within an Orientalist frame of reference in which Iran and its people are portrayed through various tropes of Othering in a narrative fraught with disinformation, exaggerations, and reductive treatment of complex sociopolitical phenomena. Finally, Naipaul's reasoning in formulating conversion coupled with his myopic approach undermine the authenticity of his representations, resulting in what Said (1998) has dubbed “an intellectual catastrophe of the first order” (p. 42).

**Keywords:** Orientalism; Naipaul; Iran; Islam; Conversion

## **1. Introduction**

Iran has often been subject to diverse orientalist representations in mainstream Western culture. These (mis)representations are largely motivated by the two interrelated factors of the country being Oriental and Muslim and are often generated by Western writers—as well as native informers—whose association with the West and its civilization apparently enables them to produce authentic representations of the Iranian other. This privileged position itself is predicated upon

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<sup>2</sup>Corresponding author, University of Tehran; mmarandi@ut.ac.ir

<sup>3</sup>University of Canterbury; hossein.nazari@canterbury.ac.nz

the myth that encapsulates the essence of almost all Orientalist thought and discourse: the essentializing binarism of Western superiority vs. Oriental inferiority (Said, 2003).

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran has, undoubtedly, been one of the most significant and influential decolonizing movements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and, as such, has had a major appearance in Western cultural productions from the outset. In the realm of literature, a whole array of literary productions, particularly in the genre of travel narratives and more recently memoirs, has been produced by a significant number of Western, native, and hyphenated writers on Iran. The preponderance of such productions operates within an Orientalist discourse, theorized by Said in his seminal *Orientalism* (2003) as a regime of representations and “a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient” (p. 203). Such representations are perpetuated and reinforced each time they (re)appear in a new text or in the media primarily because they conform to the dominant discursive practices on Iran and Islam in the West and also to the existing latent Orientalism specific to Iran. As far as the questions of authenticity and credibility are concerned, such discursive practices are widely regarded as authentic and reliable accounts that reflect the literal truth about Iran (Marandi & Pirnajmuddin, 2009). This truth is revealed by Western—or Westernized—writers whose privilege of affiliation with a Western intellectual and cultural paradigm has afforded them the insight to get to know the reality about Oriental people and to offer an objective analysis of their characters and predicaments.

This critique examines the representations of Iran in one of the most controversial “nonfictions” of the Trinidad-born British-educated author V. S. Naipaul. We will begin by problematizing the author’s formulation of the theme of conversion and will proceed to examine his depictions of certain facets of post-Revolutionary Iran. *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (1998) relates the author’s journey across the non-Arab Muslim countries of Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia. Naipaul’s travelogue is, in effect, a sequel to and a reiteration of his first travel to the same four countries in 1979. In his first excursion, *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981), Naipaul sets out to witness how Islam actually functions within the Islamic societies he visits. In his second journey, he revisits the same four non-Arab Muslim societies to examine the theme of “conversion,” the ultimate outcome of which he contends to be nothing but “neurosis” and “nihilism” (p. 1).

Following the publication of his two Islamic travelogues, Naipaul has emerged as a major critical voice and a cognoscente on the issues related to the Muslim world, whose accounts “will ‘enable’ Western readers to gain an ‘insight’

into the life of Muslims” (O’Shea-Meddour, 2004, p. 59). Naipaul’s authority and enthusiastic reception in the West was soon followed by official recognition, leading to a knighthood in 1989 (“Knights Bachelor,” 1989) and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001 (one month after 9/11). The Nobel Prize press release described him as a “modern *philosophe*, carrying on the tradition that started originally with *Lettres persanes* and *Candide* (“Nobel Prize,” 2001). Be that as it may, this study will illustrate how, as O’Shea-Meddour (2004) has observed, Naipaul’s “Islamophobia has been disturbingly misinterpreted as expertise” (p. 57) and reductionist treatment of complex sociohistorical phenomena construed as incorruptible scrutiny.

## 2. Constructing (Non)fictional Authority

The best preamble to introducing Naipaul’s second Islamic travelogue is the one he has penned as the prologue to his narrative because it contextualizes the composition of his itinerary and its overarching theme of conversion.

Almost the whole gamut of Naipaul’s assertions on authorship and the theme of conversion, which he presents in his prologue, is profoundly problematic. The first set of Naipaul’s assertions addresses the questions of authorship and authorial intention. The travelogue opens with the proclamation that “This is a book about people. It is not a book of opinion. It is a book of stories” (p. 1). It goes without saying that Naipaul’s narrative is largely based on his interviews with various people. Nevertheless, the author’s choice of interviewees, as O’Shea-Meddour (2004) has observed, is far from “representative. In fact, Naipaul’s style of narration is characterized by a highly selective approach towards his interlocutors as well as the foregrounding of those parts of the conversations that serve to corroborate the author’s preconceptions and interpretations of the events he describes. Instances of such partial selectivity will be presented in the ensuing discussions of the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. In a similar fashion, Naipaul avers that, compared to his first Islamic travelogue, *Beyond Belief* is:

Less of a travel book. The writer is less present, less of an inquirer. He is in the background, trusting to his instinct, a discoverer of people, a finder-out of stories. These stories . . . make their own pattern and define each country and its promptings. (pp. 1-2)

Notwithstanding Naipaul’s (1998) positioning of himself as an observer in the background, it is almost impossible to overlook “the extent to which Naipaul’s preconceptions determine both his choice of conversation partners and his presentation of his conversations with them” (p. 835). It is apt, for instance, to point out the fact that among the many people Naipaul interviews in Iran, not one seems to

be genuinely sympathetic to the Islamic Revolution and its leader or the Iran-Iraq war. Such impressions of apathy or opposition to the Revolution and the war are contrary to the evidence of such public expressions of support, as the participation of millions of people in demonstrations against the Shah, the enormous number of volunteers fighting against the Iraqi invasion of Iran, and the millions of people who attended Ayatollah Khomeini's funeral, not to mention the continued public support displayed in the anniversaries of the Islamic Revolution. This alleged lack of support is, further, contradicted by Naipaul's description of "the excitement of the immense crowd at Friday prayers at Tehran University (crowds so great that their footsteps roared like the sea, and dust could be seen to rise above them as they walked)" (1998, p. 134).

Naipaul's (1998) authoritative view of his narratives as the definitive account of the countries he (re)visits is also manifest in the following excerpt:

It may be asked if different people and different stories in each section of the book would have created or suggested another kind of country. I think not: The train has many coaches and different classes, but it passes through the same landscape. People are responding to the same political or religious and cultural pressures. The writer has only to listen very carefully and with a clear heart to what people say to him, and ask the next question, and the next. (p. 2).

The fact remains, however, that in his choice of interviewees, Naipaul is predisposed to converse with people from a certain ideological mindset that often favors secularism and westernization. When, on very rare occasions, he interviews people who are more sympathetic to Islam and the Revolution, he finds in them unmistakable contradictions, confusions, delusions, diversions, pain, and regret. Thus, rather than being positioned on a wide spectrum of various ideological and political affiliations, an entire nation is reduced to the two Naipaulean antitheses of the unsympathetic opposition vis-à-vis the deluded, the confused, and the hypocritical. It seems fairly strange, for instance, that Naipaul sets out to find out as much as he can about the war but never actually engages in a conversation with any of the martyrs' families. He prefers to feel pity for them, though, every time he mentions the war but it seems he does not want his preconceptions challenged by engaging in a serious dialogue with them. Furthermore, Naipaul's analogy, that is, comparing his interviewees to train passengers is, at best, misguided and naïve. To begin with, different people are not observing, or experiencing, a monolithic landscape, as both religion and sociocultural sea changes—such as revolution and war—can leave totally different imprints on different societies and individuals. Moreover, even if all people were hypothetically experiencing the same landscape, it

goes without saying that they would still have very different reactions to and views about the same phenomenon.

In a similar vein, Naipaul's assertion (1998) that *Beyond Belief* is not "a book of opinion," but "a book of stories" (p. 1) is problematic. As O'Shea-Meddour (2004) has observed, the statement is meant to guarantee that "'the truth' will be presented to us in an undistorted manner" (p. 59). Naipaul's let-the-facts-speak-for-themselves pretense, however, seems far from scrupulous because even a cursory perusal of the text would reveal that it is fraught with all manners of theorization, judgment, and commentary. One could only grant that compared to Naipaul's first Islamic travelogue, its sequel contains relatively fewer opinions. As far as Iran is concerned, Naipaul's assertions on almost every aspect of the Iranian and Islamic culture, religion, history, and politics permeate the entire chapter. In this light, Greer (1998) has observed that Naipaul:

Asserts that it is not a book of opinion, which in the circumstances of his narrative is a bit disingenuous. Though he pursues his narrative in terms of people and their experiences . . . a distaste for the legacy of Islam and its destructive consequence fairly oozes from every chapter of the story. (p. 283)

The assertions about Naipaul's (1998) authorial role are apparently meant to indicate the author's learned awareness of the manners in which a narrator's obtrusive intermediation can undermine the nonfictional authority of a text. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that even though travel writing is generally perceived as belonging to the nonfiction genre, there is a consensus view among literary critics that the nexus between travel narratives and fiction is often a complex and intertwined one, wherein the boundaries are often indistinct and blurred. Thus, one could argue that, at least as far as Naipaul's nonfictions are concerned, the appellation nonfiction is misleading as it overlooks the fact that "travel writing is an established literary genre full of narrative conventions and fictional devices" (O'Shea-Meddour, 2004, p. 58).

Naipaul's (1998) final assertion about his role as the author is an attempt to further elaborate on his formulation of authorial authority in the formation of his narrative:

In these travel books or cultural explorations of mine the writer as traveler 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 . . . there are complexities enough in these stories. They are the point of the book; the reader should not look for "conclusions." (p. 2)

A close perusal of the text would reveal that Naipaul's (1998) alleged self-effacing modus operandi in his interviews and the leeway afforded to the characters to come to the fore of discussions is hardly ingenuous. One could argue that through Naipaul's preferential treatment of the interviewees, as well as the leading questions asked, interview subjects are persistently deprived of their full voices and stories, which, in turn, deprives the readers of the full picture of the societies and the religion Naipaul purports to present objectively. The result, indeed, is the construction of an image compatible with that with the Western reader has come to expect of Iran and its dominant religion.

### **3. Manufacturing Conversion**

Naipaul's (1998) next set of assertions focuses on the question of Muslim conversion. In his theorization of conversion, the principal assumption is that conversion to Islam has precipitated the degeneration of the four non-Arab nations into "nihilistic" (p. 1) Muslim societies suffering from a collective loss of identity, history, culture, language, and even mental stability. Naipaul's purportedly a posteriori assertion is predicated upon his contention that "Islam is in its origins an Arab religion" (p. 1). The misnomer "Arab," however, is inaccurate because it "gives the impression that Islam was meant only for the Arabs. A priori, it may also imply that those non-Arabs who converted to this faith were somehow illegitimate or inferior in doing so" (Anjum, 2002, p. 3). It is hard to overlook the naiveté of identifying any religion with a particular race or ethnicity. This racialization of Islam is particularly flawed when examined against the fact that much of the religion's appeal to early Muslims was its rejection of all modes of racial and class-based supremacism (prevalent among pre-Islamic Arabs) and its promulgation of a code of conduct that valued human virtues as opposed to ethnic identification (Alharbi, 2011). Thus, Naipaul's statement, quite ironically, serves to reinstate the very Arab racialism that Islam strived to combat at its inception.

The same logic is extended to conclude that "everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert" (p. 1); a contention that is historically unsound because Arab Muslims themselves were converts from their mostly idolatrous, polytheistic, and pagan faiths. Problematizing Naipaul's (1998) reasoning, Anjum (2002) has asked if, drawing on Naipaul's argument, it would be logical to "call the Europeans converted Christians or the American Jews as converts?" In a similar fashion, Ahmad (2000) has disputed Naipaul's definition of a convert, arguing that "If Iranians are converted Muslims, Americans are converted Christians, the Japanese and large numbers of Chinese are converted Buddhists" (p. 109). Naipaul's inference is further undermined by the verity of all existing religions having, at their outset, been founded upon conversion from one creed to another, hence, making all initial followers of any new religion converts by definition. In this light, as Ahmad

(2000) has argued, one cannot but conclude not only that “everybody is converted” but also that “Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, especially all the prophetic religions, developed through conversion and have produced an entirely distorted humanity. In that sense, his organizing thesis should not exclude anyone” (p. 109). Furthermore, the same arguments can also be extended to include atheists and nonbelievers who have converted to secular ideologies because the renunciation or rejection of religious faith itself implies allegiance to a secular creed in its own right. Therefore, Naipaul’s line of reasoning in his conceptualization of conversion, as Gilsenan (1998) has observed, rests upon “shallow stuff, which seems to imply that only some autochthonous group which has never converted can have ‘their own’ faith” (p. 3).

Naipaul’s (1998) extends his theorization of conversion, arguing that “Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands” (p. 1). Characteristically, no concrete details or evidence are presented to specify the alleged imperial demands of Islam. Nevertheless, even if one were to concur with Naipaul’s assertion, the fact remains that far from being an exclusively Islamic agenda, the same holds true for all other religions and secular ideologies. Along these lines, Gilsenan (1998) has remarked that “quite apart from the intellectual emptiness of Naipaul’s writing, you wonder at the willful censoring it takes to pass over in silence the history of different forms of imperial and eagerly conversionist Christianity in Africa, the Americas, and Asia” (p. 9). Like much of Naipaul’s (1998) argumentation, the statement attests not only to his ignorance of Islam, but also his lack of familiarity with, or deliberate circumvention of, other religions.

Further developing his thematization of conversion, Naipaul (1998) proceeds to infer that “a convert’s worldview alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic” (p. 1). Once again, conversion is overemphasized as the principal determinant of a convert’s worldview and identity. Furthermore, attributing the alteration of one’s worldview solely to conversion is simplistic as it overlooks the role that a complex nexus of socioeconomic factors plays in the formation of one’s character and ideological paradigm. Moreover, as far as Iran is concerned, the existence in the country of many sites sacred to all Shia Muslims—such as those in the cities of Mashhad and Qom—invalidates the reductive view of Muslim holy places. On a broader plane, one could argue that even a local mosque is considered holy in Islam. Indeed, the irony of Naipaul’s statement is that he has travelled to some of these sites in both of his Islamic excursions. More importantly, it should be noted that most of the land that is called Arab today did not have an Arab identity at the time of the birth of Islam—a fact that further highlights the author’s historical nescience. Also, based on Naipaul’s

logic, one might ask if Christians and Jews could be equally criticized for having their holy places in the occupied Palestinian territories? Furthermore, whereas it is true that the language of the Qur'an is Arabic, it remains unclear how this fact *per se* implies a problem. Naipaul's line of reasoning, then, raises significant questions about what he deems Arab linguistic sovereignty in Muslim lands: Are we to conclude, by implication, that if the Qur'an were revealed in a language other than Arabic, it would not be problematic? Also, can the same logic be extended to fault Judaism, for instance, for regarding the Hebrew language as sacred? Or what is one to make of the fact that the Bible was once sacrosanct only in Latin (Sutherland, 2015)? Naipaul's assertion is further undermined by the fact that none of the native languages of the four non-Arab countries he visits have been supplanted or overtaken by Arabic. As far as the influence of Arabic on native languages is concerned, the fact remains that the native languages of the same countries are also significantly influenced by the languages of their Western colonizers.

The next array of assertions is even more problematic:

[A convert's] idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand year can remain unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of the converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easily set on the boil. (p. 1)

Similar assertions reappear throughout the text: "Converted peoples have to strip themselves of their past; of converted peoples nothing is required but the purest faith (if such a thing can be arrived at), Islam, submission. It is the most uncompromising kind of imperialism" (p. 72).

The idea of a convert's inexorable repudiation of his own past, history, religion, and culture suffers from the same logical lacuna as Naipaul's (1998) arguments regarding the Arabic language and Muslim sacred places. No evidence is offered, for instance, to prove that Iranians have rejected their pre-Islamic past. Such generalizations are, further, contradicted by Naipaul's reference elsewhere in the text to what he sees as Iranians' pride in their Persian past. This pride is manifest, among other things, in the fact that pre-Islamic Persian art and culture continue to flourish in contemporary Iranian cultural, architectural, and literary landscapes, to name but a few. Furthermore, descriptions of the peoples of the four countries he has visited vividly illustrates that they have retained much of their pre-Islamic history and culture which they do not deem as conflicting with their Islamic faith. There are

many pre-Islamic ceremonies, occasions, and customs still alive in Iran, as well as other countries, which are commonly and widely practiced. Nowruz, the Persian New Year, to which Naipaul also refers in *Beyond Belief*, is one such pre-Islamic occasion that was approved of and even encouraged by the Prophet (Shahbazi, 2009). In fact, Naipaul is informed by his guide, Mehrdad, that the Nowruz celebrations are so fundamental a part of Iranian culture that he speculates whether, Arash, one of the war veterans Naipaul interviews, had overstayed his time off the war front only to celebrate the occasion with his family. Furthermore, even if one were to hypothetically agree with Naipaul's arguments about the influence of Islam in the convert Muslim societies, one could not concur more with Greer (1998) that:

Islam is not the only force undermining older cultures in Indonesia, Iran, and Pakistan. From Naipaul's account it is almost inadvertently clear that the impact of Western culture was a major factor in the breakup of these civilizations. The shock of East-West confrontation in colonial times left fractures that—though Naipaul barely acknowledges this—fatally weakened older cultures and disoriented the populations that they served. (p. 282)

As far as the alleged maladies of neurosis and nihilism in convert Muslim societies are concerned, O'Shea-Meddour (2004) has demonstrated that Naipaul's (1998) discourse of the mind derives from his "allegiance to nineteenth-century fiction", wherein "mental instability became a preoccupation" (p. 67). Thus, in Naipaul's Orientalist worldview, mental derangement, skepticism, identity crisis, and violent predilections become defining denominators of all converted Muslims. Drawing on Naipaul's earlier logic, then, one cannot but conclude that the converted members of all other faiths must also be afflicted with the same mental and psychological disorders concomitant with their conversion. Similarly, one is tempted to ask if Muslim neurosis and nihilism is a corollary of conversion to Islam, what is one to make of the same malaise in the secular nonconvert societies—or is one to repudiate their existence altogether?

#### **4. Portraying Iran: An Orientalist Pastiche**

In *Beyond Belief*, Naipaul's (1998) quest takes him to Iran after his visit to Indonesia. The subtitle of the section on Iran, *The Justice of Ali*, hints at the Shia version of Islam practiced in Iran, and—as one would have come to expect from Naipaul's prologue—the manner in which it has allegedly distorted the identity and culture of the converted Iranians. Be that as it may, in the descriptions of the status quo in Iran of the time, the author's failure to pursue the asserted theme of conversion is impossible to miss. Instead, what the text offers is a reiteration of the same representations of Iran, Islam, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which Naipaul had previously presented in *Among the Believers*, only with the addition of discussions

around the Iraqi-imposed war. Thus, one could argue that both travelogues are almost thematically identical, with the latter lacking in anything that would substantially complement the former. The only difference, perhaps, is that in *Beyond Belief* the author's attitude towards both the country and its main religion has grown even more cynical and belligerent. In lieu of elucidating how Islam has allegedly severed Iranians from their pre-Islamic Persian past and how Iranians have metamorphosed into a nihilistic and neurotic people, Naipaul launches a virulent diatribe on the manner in which the fundamentalism and fanaticism bred by the Islamic Revolution and the imposed war have wreaked havoc on the Iranian society—topics to which he has already devoted the entire chapter on Iran in his first Islamic travelogue.

The chapter on Iran in *Beyond Belief* opens with a flashback to the author's observations of the Indonesian capital. Naipaul (1998) draws a close parallel between what he sees as the elegance and opulence of Jakarta and that of prerevolutionary Tehran, generated as a result of what he refers to as "the new wealth" (p. 143). Recollecting the *nouveaux arrivés* of Indonesia, he speculates on what Iran might have been like in the pre-Revolution era, "so grand and overwhelming that it seemed wrong to see the sham or to imagine the great city collapsed or decayed" (p. 144). Such romanticization of prerevolutionary Iran as a Westernized and progressive polity is characteristic of many of literary productions on post-Revolutionary Iran, which engage in "distort[ion] of historical facts" (Behdad & Williams, 2010, p. 291). Glamorization of the past is also one of the denominators of Orientalist depictions of Muslim countries in which all that is "glorious" belongs to a long bygone past (Keshavarz, 2007, p. 70; Said, 2003, p. 35), which, in the case of Iran, is either the age of the Persian Empire or the reign of the last Shah. What, however, makes Naipaul's claims sound absurd is the fact that he had never visited the country under the Shah.

Idealization of prerevolutionary Iran is often contrasted with the post-Revolution era as a time of social decay, mayhem, and violence. This is articulated, among many other instances, in Naipaul's juxtaposition of the "revolutionary shabbiness" of Iranian urban landscapes with the "glittering time of the Shah" (p. 142). Naipaul's views of the Islamic Revolution are rooted in the Orientalist belief that Orientals, not least Muslims, are essentially incapable of a revolution founded on non-Western political doctrines. This belief is best expressed in Vatikiotis' (1972) *Revolution in the Middle East and Other Case Studies* (1972), wherein he contends:

All revolutionary ideology is in direct conflict with man's rational, biological and psychological make-up. Committed as it is to a methodical metastasis, revolutionary ideology demands fanaticism

from its adherents. Politics for the revolutionary is not only a question of belief, or a substitute for religious belief. It must stop being what it has always been, namely, an adaptive activity in time for survival. (p. 8)

Unlike its European and American counterparts, the Iranian Revolution is depicted not as a result of complex sociopolitical dynamics, but as merely driven by unbridled mass sentiment and religious fervor and is rendered anachronistic. Furthermore, the Revolution and the succeeding governments are not portrayed as made up of individual people with different viewpoints and agendas dealing with internal dissent and foreign intervention, sociopolitical changes, or internal dynamics. Instead, they are represented as a monolithic and homogeneous entity, rather than as the struggles of a traditional society undergoing a major sea change and a sociopolitical paradigm shift.

As Keshavarz (2007) has aptly noted, in the (neo-)Orientalist accounts on the Middle East, it seems that Muslim societies like Iran “have been disembodied of their treasures, which have been replaced with unrelenting religious fanaticism” (p. 70). In *Beyond Belief*, building on his earlier depictions of the odd life of Tehran, Naipaul commences his descriptions of the capital by a flashback to the time of the Shah where the city supposedly enjoyed an elegant and glamorous lifestyle that was apparently shattered in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. The life of Tehran after the revolution, Naipaul tells us, had been “miraculously suspended,” the cranes “arrested” on unfinished towers, “bad meals in empty restaurants” where “sullen black-tied waiters whispered and grumbled together, like people who knew their talents and style were no longer needed.” In short, we are told, there were “premonitions of decay” everywhere (p. 144).

Paramount in any discussion of postrevolutionary societies is the fact that, as Keshavarz’s (2007) axiom has it, “in general, revolutions do not present their perspectives politely and peacefully. They throw them at you. Where peaceful means have not failed, a revolution does not take place. In Iran of the 1970s, peaceful means had failed” (p. 10). Even though Naipaul (1998) refers to the fact that the Revolution was what “the people of Iran had passionately wanted and voted for in a referendum” (p. 152), he does not represent it as a result of the collective will of a nation and characterized by complex sociohistorical dynamics, but rather as a catastrophe miraculously befalling the country.

Symptoms of what Naipaul (1998) perceives to be postrevolutionary havoc and mayhem are pervasive in Naipaul’s descriptions of interior spaces. Almost in every corner of the hotel where he is staying, he observes both people and objects that he can associate with the Revolution or interpret politically:

The hotel porters were all in open-necked shirts; this was one of the badges of the revolution. The collars had sagged into irregular folds below the jacket lapels, and looked at this dead time like a kind of grubby low ruff. Many of the porters were unshaved; this was Islamic. Some were shiny-faced and dirty. This was a form of social defiance: the two styles of revolution, the political and the religious, running together. And when later I came down again, to look for a hotel safe box, the porters were sitting unabashed and sullen and unhelpful on the upholstered chairs in the central part of the lobby, like a little conclave of the oppressed in whose name hotels like the Hyatt had been taken over. (p. 135)

Drawing inferences based on physical features, impressions, and personal preferences is characteristic of Naipaul's (1998) style of narration. Throughout his narratives, Naipaul can be seen forming judgments and making generalizations about people and then associating them with their alleged ideological or political affiliations. The man who brings up his lunch at the hotel, for instance, is "surely from start to finish," and looks at him "with absolute hatred, and never said a word. Still some revolutionary rage, I thought" (p. 135). Such is also Naipaul's description of Mr. Parvez, an Indian who works for the English-language paper *Iran News*, as someone whose Shia passion had apparently drawn him to Iran from Bhopal and India. Much to his surprise, however, Naipaul discovers later that not only is he not a Shia Muslim, he is, in fact, quite averse to them, too.

On a different occasion, Naipaul (1998) informs that Mr. Parvez and a host of other people were under the impression that after the revolution "things would pick up again, and the liberated country would soon once more be the boom country it had been at the time of the Shah" (p. 143). This, however, is contradicted—at least as far as political freedom and the freedom of speech are concerned—by the same Mr. Parvez:

And Mr. Parvez was used to censorship. In the Shah's time . . . there used to be an intelligence man from Savak, the Shah's secret police, in the office of the *Tehran Journal* . . . . The Savak man would come at three in the morning with a English-speaking team and they would go through everything, even the advertisements. In its reports of anti-government demonstrations or marches the *Tehran Journal* wasn't allowed to use the words 'student' or 'youth.' 'Hooligans' was the word that had to be used. In 1975 this day-to-day censorship was stopped. But the government still controlled; the top people in the newspaper were told what to do. There was no formal censorship now, Mr. Parvez said; there was

only self-censorship. Journalists now knew how far they could go. In the Shah's time, they didn't. Nowadays they could go surprisingly far. (p. 151)

The passage not only contradicts Naipaul's (1998) glamorization of the Shah's reign, but also his assertion elsewhere that "the result of the revolution is nothing. Nothing has changed; the deficiencies remain" (Rowe-Evans & Naipaul, p. 29). If anything, the passage attests to the fact that despite undeniable shortcomings, the post-Revolutionary Iran is far more democratic and tolerant than the Shah's reign was.

Intertwined with discussions of the Revolution are descriptions of Ayatollah Khomeini, the first leader of the Islamic Revolution, persistently portrayed in a negative light. What is noteworthy about such references to Ayatollah Khomeini is the absence of any reference to his public speeches, books, or any other verifiable statements. We hear from Ali—a property tycoon who confesses that he has "learned to live a double life" (p. 168)—that the reason for the "out-of-control government," "anarchy," and "terror" was "Khomeini himself" (p. 173). What he offers as proof of his statement, however, are highly dubious personal encounters: "Sitting together on the ground in Khomeini's house", he reminisces, he witnessed how when some clerics had come to ask for money for their students and religious organizations in their own towns, Ayatollah Khomeini had ordered them to "go to your own towns. Find the first man who is rich or the first man who has a factory or a huge farm. And force him to pay you" (p. 173). Ali's stories, or arguably Naipaul's rendition of them, can hardly be trusted fraught as they are with over-exaggerations. He claims, for instance, that after the revolution, "if you were cleanly dressed, they didn't like it. They would attack you" (p. 173) and that the revolutionary guards broke into people's houses to see if they "watched TV" or to search for "women's dresses" and "men's neckties" (p. 173). That the Islamic Revolution, like any other revolution in the world, brought about certain restrictions and a measure of radicalism is indubitable. Nevertheless, the idea of attacking cleanly-dressed people and other similar statements are patently absurd.

Ali's lawyer's analysis of the political doctrine of Ayatollah Khomeini is no less extraordinary. According to him, Ayatollah Khomeini knew that "the majority were not educated. They wanted to get money and things. They didn't want revolution. They wanted money, and Khomeini knew that . . . so he made disorder in the country and let them loot. He did what they wanted" (p. 174). Not only does the statement demonize Ayatollah Khomeini as a Machiavellian demagogue, it reduces the Iranian nation to an irrational and intellectually impoverished herd, and the doctrine of the Revolution to plebian materialism. As far as Ayatollah Khomeini's views on the people are concerned, as Marandi and Pirnajmuddin have argued, the

twenty-one-volume collection, *Saheefeye Noor*, which contains all of Ayatollah Khomeini's writings and his public speeches, includes numerous references to how he held people in high esteem and deemed their social and political participation to be of paramount significance (2009).

### 5. Inscribing the Imposed War

Conspicuously absent in Naipaul's (1998) narration of the war is the fact that, lured by the United States into attacking Iran (Paul, 2002), Iraq waged the longest war of the twentieth century against Iran. This, indeed, stands in stark contrast to Naipaul's positioning of himself as an impartial observer seeking out the truth. His attitude towards the war is, characteristically, one of denigration and derision. He is also equally dismissive of the fact that the war was waged and continued with full backing of the West, which, among other things, provided Saddam Hussein with chemical weapons—an incontrovertible fact that has been voiced by many prominent American political pundits such as Chomsky (1998), Paul (2002), and Kinzer (Goodman & Kinzer, 2008).

In *Beyond Belief*, Naipaul (1998) persistently represents the war as a lost cause. In this, he is under the influence of his guide and interpreter, Mehrdad, who tells him that “it was a war that was lost” (p. 142). Much of the information that Mehrdad furnishes Naipaul with is dubious and founded on twisted logic. This is especially true of the war. In the martyrs' cemetery, we hear from Mehrdad that “no one from the families [of the martyrs] comes [here] anymore” (p. 142)—a claim which a simple visit to the mentioned cemetery on weekends would refute.

No less absurd is the manner in which Naipaul (1998) introduces Mehrdad's sister:

Mehrdad's sister was in her early thirties. She was educated and not bad looking, but there was no husband for her: there was a shortage of men because of the war. She had a job in a publishing house. In that she was lucky; many young women didn't have that opportunity of leaving the house; it wasn't easy in revolutionary Iran for unmarried women to have a social life or even to move about. (p. 136)

The passage is only one, among the many, instances which serve to reveal the extent to which Naipaul's (1998) inferences are predicated upon gossip, dubious information, and problematic reasoning rather than any solid evidence. More significantly, however, the excerpt is especially noteworthy for the manner in which it yokes Orientalist notions of Muslim women to the social and political status quo of Iran. To begin with, Naipaul's statement that it was unlikely for Iranian women to leave the house or have a social life reinforces the tropes of incarceration often

associated with Muslim women and conjures up Orientalist images of the harem. Furthermore, Naipaul's assertion is contradicted by the many instances where he refers to the active social and political participation of young Iranian women from different backgrounds. The passage also reveals Naipaul's ignorance of the many Iranian women who played quite a crucial role, both at and behind the war fronts during the Iraqi invasion (Koolae, 2014).

Equally extraordinary is the claim about the dearth of men in the aftermath of the war. A simple look at the databases of the country's population indicates that in 1997, when Naipaul visited Iran for the second time, Iran had a population of well over sixty million people, whereas in 1980, when the war erupted, the figure was less than forty million. Therefore, one wonders if men were literally that difficult to find after the war—which implies significantly fewer marriages should have taken place—how can one account for the ever-increasing rate of population growth of the country in that period?

Naipaul (1998) reiterates the same claims on another occasion when he describes the time he went to a park with his guide:

Mehrdad took me late one afternoon to a pleasure park not far from the Hyatt. Young men and women went to the park to look at one another; the guards also walked there, to catch them out. The girls, in small groups, were in black gowns and chadors. They were easy to see; black now, in this park, the quite startling color of female sexuality, making signals from afar. Mehrdad, thinking no doubt of his sister immured at home, said that the girls, some of them already women, were older than they should have been, because men were scarce after the war. (p. 137)

Once again, Naipaul's (1998) monolithic judgment undermines the credibility of his statements. To claim that young men and women went to parks merely "to look at one another" sounds extreme and is more an insult to the intelligence of an entire population. Moreover, through attributing the "quite startling color of female sexuality" (p. 5) to the girls' black chadors or gowns—which, if anything, implies the girls' observance of Islamic hijab—he is implying the existence of a pent-up sexuality among the girls. Nevertheless, one could argue that such value judgments actually reveal more about the observer than the observed.

It was mentioned earlier that Naipaul's (1998) narrative provides a platform only for those voices that are compatible with his views on Iran and Islam. This is nowhere better articulated than in the description of a war veteran of whom Naipaul

remains deeply suspicious for reasons that characteristically remain unbeknownst to the reader:

The veteran, if indeed he was that, was a small, neat man with a neat black beard and bright, unreliable eyes. He thought he had been sent to us to lie, and he lied and lied about everything. He was an architect; he was a doctor; he had held dying martyrs in his arms. There was no concrete detail in anything he said and I doubted whether he had even been at the front. (p. 163)

It is hard to overlook the dramatic irony in Naipaul's (1998) description, which fails to provide any "concrete details" (p. 158) regarding the discussion between him and his interlocutor. The veteran, instead, is represented as an inveterate liar because one can conclude his replies did not corroborate Naipaul's assumptions about the war. That is why Naipaul does not dissimulate his preference for Arash—the first war veteran he interviews—and deems the highly exaggerated pieces of information he offers as reliable. Arash, who has run away from the war fronts three times, states, for instance, that he remembers an occasion when the "chanting" (p. 158) had gone on for 6 hr—a claim that simply defies reason. Naipaul then, oversimplifying things and giving a dangerously misleading twist to the ritual as a hypnotic and trance-inducing ceremony concludes that "the chanting filled the men with thoughts of death and martyrdom and going to paradise and having freedom" (p. 158). Arash also claims that in Tehran "nobody cared about the war," a claim countered by the increasing number of people who volunteered to go to the war. The effect of Arash's views on the war is immediate: Naipaul takes a liking to Arash for his "openness" and sees him even as a "good man, whose goodness could have been used in other ways" (p. 163). No such compliments are lavished on the second veteran. Rather, Naipaul tells us, "we decided he was a trouble-maker and got rid of him" (p. 163).

## 6. Conclusion

Even though *Beyond Belief* purports to be a work of nonfiction, produced as a result of first-hand observation and objective analysis, as Gilseman (1998) has observed, Naipaul's "sheer ignorance, or ignoring, of all the different varieties of thought, symbol and practice in which often eclectic forms of Islam have been enmeshed in Asia leaves only strident assertions in place of an argument" (p. 12). That Naipaul's (1998) underlying thesis of conversion, as was demonstrated, is seriously flawed, renders the validity and authority of his observations and inferences even more problematic. It is, therefore, small wonder that Said (1998) has dubbed *Beyond Belief* "an intellectual catastrophe of the first order" and has deemed Naipaul's diatribe against Muslim societies a result of his "obsession with Islam"

which “caused him somehow to stop thinking, to become instead a kind of mental suicide compelled to repeat the same formula over and over” (p. 42).

Finally, that *Beyond Belief* was so enthusiastically welcomed in the West speaks volumes about the pervasive Islamophobia and Iranophobia in the context of which such works of “twisted vision” (O’Shea-Meddour, 2004, p. 70) can pass for authentic accounts of Muslim Others. It is, therefore, incumbent upon informed cultural, social, political, and literary critics and intellectuals, especially of Muslim and native backgrounds, not only to lay bare the inherent contradictions, fabrications, and falsifications of such Orientalist discourses, but also to strategically utilize their familiarity with the religion and their respective cultures to offer an alternative discourse that speaks to the complexities and diversities of misrepresented cultures, and through which the suppressed voices of the discursively silenced societies could eventually be heard.

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