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THE SECULAR ETHIC AND THE PITFALLS OF V. S. NAIPUAL'S NON-FICTION

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1. Introduction

So what then are the inter-relations between literature, ethics and the secular in contemporary cultural practice? And how does V. S. Naipaul's non-fiction fail in terms of the secular-ethic, proposed by the inter-relations between the literary, the secular and the ethical? Any response to the above questions will depend on a) the way one conceptualizes the literary, the ethical and the secular and b) reading Naipaul in and through the matrix of the secular-ethic as cultural practice. Hence what I propose to do in this article is to divide the debates into three parts: the first will discuss the varied conceptions of the literary and its tensions with the secular and the ethical; the second will demonstrate by exposition as evidence – not by argument but by narrative – the pitfalls of Naipaul's writing with regard to the secular-ethic; and the third will argue by way of conclusion that Naipaul's writing is ideologically islamophobic bearing distortions of history, based on an overwhelming anti-Islamic discourse, which then makes his writing unjust and anti-secular. My argument rests in the first and third parts, while the second will bear the evidence of the same. My method here combines Michel Foucault's exposition of discursive power and Antonio Gramsci's explanation of hegemonic violence. My reading of Naipaul as a result will be "contrapuntal"[1] in nature, and will expose Naipaul's ideological pitfalls and biases as an explanation of his Islamophobia.

2. The Literary, the Secular and the Ethical

Literature through time has had a rather tentative, if uneasy relation with both the secular and the ethical. Today, the field is in dialectical relations with questions of free speech. While many suggest that all societies must permit free expression of views and ideas, including hate speech, others

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[1]Geeta Chowdry, "Edward Said and Contrapuntal Reading: Implications for Critical Interventions in International Relations," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 36, 1 (December 2007), 101-116.

claim that free speech must constrain irresponsible and instigating discourse through processes of self-censorship. The controversies that surrounded the Salman Rushdie affair demonstrate how the self-censorship perspective, though dissenting with the Islamic fatwa, acknowledged the failure of judicious choice in Rushdie's writing.

I wish to historicize at this juncture the arrival of enlightenment and modernity in the 19th century as the cultural location that marks a paradigm shift in the tension between the literary and the ethical on the one hand and the secular and the religious on the other. Literature in the period of European enlightenment was perceived as universal and retained the idea of moral force as against the free expression of interests and intentions. Literature though replacing the moral teaching of religious theology because of the onset of the secular as idea and practice, was no longer mimetic in the Aristotelian sense; and when holding the mirror up to nature could neither identify nor purge the errors of society; by contrast it formed the instrument, the signpost, and the ethical underpinning by which the social fabric would be guided into humanist culture. Thus the humanist ideal, equal and fair, formed the ethical core of the literary and the literature of enlightenment projected values of humanism, namely reason, rights and individuality as the moral substance of literary thought and action.

The enlightenment was, however, accompanied by the arrogance of capital and colony. The Eurocentricism of colonial nations, particularly that of England, India's ex-colonial power, imposed an humanistic ethic onto an assumedly uncivilized society in India through the institution of English literary studies. Such an imposition altered the nature of the moral high ground of literary humanism. What was liberatory in its idealism became in practice an instrument of imperial hegemony and power in the Gramscian sense, for literature was structured as an institution in order to subjugate rather than liberate. What was perceived as the achievement of universal morality ended up being an act of colonial repression. Hence the so-called literary ethic turned into an immoral, anti-people pretext that subjugated a free people. However as a complex cultural back-loop it provided marginalized and subjugated people the instruments of anti-colonial resistance and cultural and social transformation.

In the anti-colonial period much literature was mixed up with the religious as even oppositional Indian-English texts against colony were predominantly inflected by Hindu ideas. This local language and anti-colonial English resistance literature was highly sanskritized, sometimes deeply anti-dalit and gruesomely anti-minority. Bankim Chandra

Chatterjee's "Anandamath" (1882), a deeply anti-secular novel, stands as an example. It clearly targeted Islam, rather than Britain, and called for a Hindu nationalism, based on what Etienne Balibar called a single "fictive ethnicity."[2] But the emerging Indian nation in its birth was profoundly mixed in character; and as Said posits, its peoples were but "[H]uman agglomerations,"[3] loosely stitched together with imagined histories and cultures, but "mixed"[4] as cultural communities. No single race or history or character could define India as nation. In fact no nation, today in the world could do so either. All nations are in fact multiple, as the UN remarks, in its nation-defining documents;[5] which propose therefore redefinitions of the literary, the ethical and the secular in the current context. Consequently one revisits these terms in their origin to conceptualize for this article the prism of reading for Naipaul's writing.

There is no more anything like literature at all. Instead what is called literature is but social practice, a whole way of seeing the world,[6] a representation of experience, a terrain of meaning-production. Hence literature as representation carries either a productive social consciousness or a failed ideology. Hence as social practice, literary texts are either underpinned by the secular consciousness or religious ideology; which is why one emphasises that the secular, could not dislodge religion from the social system completely. Belief and its differing practices functioned variously within social spheres and inflected literary representations. Literature turned into being the handmaiden of cultural hegemony; and it invoked custom and ritual and recast religious values and practices as cultural forms. Revisit here, any early Indian-English text and, notice, such recasting of religious values easily. Be it, Tagore's "Gitanjali" (1910), deeply inflected by Hindu Bhakti traditions or U. R. Ananthamurthy's "Samskara" (1965) – a critique of caste ideologies, no doubt, but only an insider-critique and perceived as modernist India's literary texts – they nevertheless take recourse in Hindu traditions, as if Hinduism marks Indianness in the 1900's. In the British imperium yet, almost parallel to our

[2]Etienne Balibar, "Racism and Nationalism" in *Race, Nations, Classes: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, London: Verso, 1994, 49.

[3]Edward Said, "An Ideology of Difference" in *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969-1994*, London: Vintage, 1995, 81.

[4]Said, "An Ideology of Difference," 81.

[5]Said, "An Ideology of Difference," 81.

[6]Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, New York: Encore Editions, 1985, 55.

Indian-English experience, the highly Victorian ideal of Universal humanism, which was rather a skewed Protestant Christian morality and a bourgeois ethic, chose to become orientalist, both in what it chose to study or translate in India. Such practice was aimed at confining literary texts as only an instrument of civilizational power. Hence it valorised almost irresponsibly other literary texts as inferior to theirs, thus creating an unethical contrast between its own representation in the literary and others elsewhere. With the arrival of post-modernity and later cultural studies, things changed. The literary was but a field in which reading constituted meanings and hence all meanings thereby emerging were inflected by the ideology of either the dominant centre or the silenced margins. Besides, the literary could exist only as an inter-site, a cultural and linguistic space from which multiple meanings, differing ethics and equally varied self-perceptions, emanate.[7] Thus to mark in the ethical and the secular within the literary is a deliberate effort; to ignore them as insignificant and insufficient would be failure; as the former may produce a social practice of equality and justice, while the latter, a severe fascist right-wing oppression.

The inenumerable[8] nature of our communities as nations today necessitates a plural orientation to the *secular* which may have to be written into the literary assiduously. Since nations and their societies are plural, only the plural as secular is workable both as literary representation and as cultural practice. Consequently, *cultural syncretism* becomes the productive paradigm for literary texts as social practice in the current context. This implies that religio-cultural ideas are not abrogated, but are given equal and fair representation within a particular literary text.

The secular has been defined as a) the abrogation of all the religious expression from every public activity (Post-Christian Europe and Canada), b) *sarva-dhrama-samabhavana*, the play and celebration of all religious communitarian activities in the public sphere (India in particular) and c) the incorporation of religious principles as secular values (nations in Eastern Europe and the Americas). But these perspectives are to be read in relation with far deeper questions of identity, community and nationality and should not notoriously gloss over social custom and hierarchy. Since Literature as social practice is integral to identity formation, the meaning

[7]Aniket Jaaware, *Simplifications: An Introduction to Structuralism and Post-Structuralism*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001.

[8]Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India" in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed., Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, New Delhi: OUP, 1993, 40-68.

of the *secular* in literary texts depends entirely on its contemporary social function. In the Indian context, the abrogation of all faiths cannot be carried out as the underlying consciousness of any literary text because of India's multi-religious tendency and its rather belief-based culture; a celebratory plural ambivalence, within the inter-site of the literary and the social can project plural identity formations within literature as social practice; it can provide *minority-reassurance*, integral to the social function of secularism in cultural politics[9] today. Hence the projection of a syncretic culture and the assurance of minorities would form the ethic by which literary texts shall represent its consciousness.

The ethical then in literature is drawn from the dialectics between two associated Greek concepts, namely *ethos and ethnos*, the former meaning character and aspiration of a *people* and the latter, the *race or nation*.[10] The ethical is different from the ethnic as, if nation is emphasized more than people, the ethic and the ethnic – that is the spirit and beliefs of a people and the nature and structure of community respectively – will remain in conflict with each other. While ethos implies consent of a people to their norm of social contract and morality, ethnos concerns questions of ancestry, origin and history, which could turn anti-moral and unequal. Hence the notion of ethics is "the science of morals"[11] and emerges out of a dynamic, constantly re-inventing, resolution between ethos and ethnos.

Cultures develop norms and prohibitions that include reason and rights as invaluable social ethics freed from religious complicity as well. Jawaharlal Nehru,[12] in particular, interpreted this paradigm for the Indian context, when promoting the scientific temper in thought and action. The celebration of varied beliefs, with a preferential assurance to minorities, rather than a brute mobilizations of majorities,[13]written into the production of a cultural norm of equal consent constitutes the secular ethic in Literature. Thus the secular ethic in literature rests on three major aspects: a) the enfranchisement of the

[9]Anuradha Dingwaney and Sunder Rajan, "Introduction" in *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, eds., Anuradha Dingwaney, Sunder Rajan, and Rajeswari New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007, 1-42.

[10]Christopher Miller, "Theories of Africans: The Question of Literary Anthropology," *Critical Inquiry* 13, 1 (Autum 1986), 120-139.

[11]Miller, "Theories of Africans," 120-139.

[12]Sunil Khilnani, "Nehru's Faith" in Anuradha Dingwaney and Sunder Rajan, eds., *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, Ranikhet/ New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007, 89-103.

[13]Partha Chatterjee, "The Contradictions of Secularism" in *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, 155.

minorities,[14] through wide-ranging literary texts as social representation, b) the projection of a social consciousness through the literary that insists on the inescapability of 'difference'[15] and above all c) the quest for 'good faith,'[16] which means the equal and distributed representation of the marginalized and the minority in literary texts. It is precisely from this matrix of literature and the secular-ethic that I wish to read and engage with Naipaul's Non-fiction in order to explain its pitfalls.

3. V. S. Naipaul: A Brief Profile

V. S. Naipaul, born in Trinidad of Indian parentage, received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001, almost serendipitously soon after 9/11, with the Nobel citation praising him for "his analysis of the Islamic world."[17] While Naipaul illuminates the complexity of living between homeland and migrancy in his fiction, he is notorious for his "islamophobic assumptions"[18] in his Non-fiction. His narratives mourn "a wounded civilization," namely "Hindu India," destroyed, as it were, by medieval Islamic invasion.[19] Naipaul carries a vastly faulty view of history which is further clouded by his equally facile perspective of Islam as a religion and culture of aggression and violence.[20] His literary vision, if any, as social practice lacks a secular-ethic, for while it claims to be objective and equal, is "fraught with serious misunderstandings"[21] about Islam. But Naipaul wills this misunderstanding, distorting history in order to install this bias as narrative truth and fails to correct it, providing no space for an alternative representation of Islam. Yet Naipaul has received praise for his "moral integrity," "fearless truth-telling" and "new levels of understanding Islam."[22] Perhaps this is so because it is symmetrical with an overwhelming anti-Islamic rhetoric all over the Euro-American world. For example, Ninan Koshy in his *The War on Terror: Re-ordering the World* explores the infamous Huntington thesis, quoting the following: "the clash

[14]Dingwaney and Rajan, "Introduction," 2-4.

[15]Said, "An Ideology of Difference," 81.

[16]Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" *Massachusetts Review*, 18 (1977), 782-794.

[17]William Dalrymple, "Trapped in the Ruins," *The Guardian*, 20 March 2004, 4.

[18]Dalrymple, "Trapped in the Ruins," 4.

[19]Dalrymple, "Trapped in the Ruins," 4.

[20]Dalrymple, "Trapped in the Ruins," 4.

[21]Al-Quaderi Golam Gaus and Habibullah Md "Travels in Absurdity: Islam and V. S. Naipaul" *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies* 3, 1 (2001), 23.

[22]Al-Quaderi, "Travels in Absurdity," 22.

of civilization will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines between nations... Contemporary global politics is the age of Muslim wars... The Age of Muslim wars had come home to America..." Koshy shows through his book how the conceptions of Islam and terrorism were sparked by the hegemony of Huntington's view across Europe and America. Huntington repeatedly articulated it through 2000 and 2003 in articles in Newsweek and other public fora,[23] and his work is influential in shaping the American policy on the Middle East. It silenced paradoxically even the most vocal radical Islamic critique against Islamic fanaticism and absolutism[24] because such critique faulted American hegemony as well. This might sound like naiveté but is true. As Said points out: "much dominant anti-Islamic discourse was unnuanced and was based on "downright ignorance." It turned a "horrendous pathologically motivated suicide attack ... into a proof of Huntington's theses."[25] Bernard Lewis, another famous orientalist thinker, also echoed this perspective of Islam as violent and filled with rage.[26] Naipaul, I argue, belongs to this long line of islamophobes, largely because, despite his reductive tendency, he won praise, not from alternative thinkers like Edward Said but from mainstream ones. Thus, the politics of ideology in literature with its many serious failings and consequences does affect writing about peoples and places. Such cultural politics in literature as social practice is what constitutes an anti-Islamic cultural geography; Naipaul's non-fiction, which attempts to configure Islam, its people and its places, is one such cultural geography.

Before I progress into providing evidence of Islamophobia, let me define the same: Islamophobia is the fear of Islam, as represented by thinkers such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington. It characterizes Islam as necessarily irreconcilable with enlightenment and modernity and uses intellectual reductiveness and cultural stereotyping to establish Islam's presumed barbarity and ignorance. It claims rhetorically that Islam by its nature is violent and bloody, given to differing oppressive structures and repressive regimes of power**.**

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[23]Huntington quoted in Ninan Koshy, *September Eleven: The War on Terror: Reordering the World*, New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2003, 21-22.

[24]Koshy, *September Eleven*, 23.

[25]Edward Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation* 2 October 2001, 1. <www.thenation./ article/clash-ignorance> (9 March 2013); also Koshy, *September Eleven*, 23.

[26]Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," 1.

4. Naipaul's Darkness: His View of Islam in India

I begin my evidence here with Naipaul's earliest non-fictional account about India in his *An Area of Darkness* (1964). India is his own experience of "darkness." It "extended to the land"… "though for a little way around" offered some "light"[27] after all. His India remains a vague background that makes him culturally Hindu, without beliefs but with strong caste attitudes, that include food taboos,[28] ritualistic adherences and a mortal dislike and fear of Muslims.[29] In an interview with Taru Tejpal in 1999, Naipaul speaks about India with a culture of "a defeated people." Its "period of darkness,"[30] namely Muslim conquest, was not about Islamic "arriving"[31] but historical devastation. He argues, "They [Muslims] speak of the triumph of the faith, the destruction of idols and temples, the loot, the carting away of the local people as slaves, so cheap and numerous that they were being sold for a few rupees."[32] Naipaul's overt socialized distrust for Muslims as represented in his non-fiction links to his public opinion in Tarun Tejpal's interview about Islam and its conquerors provides proofs of a skewed fear of Islam and its people.

The image of the Muslim developed through *An Area of Darkness* projects an ideological, loathing for everything Islamic, that India and its history could offer. It is Hindu India's diasporic socialization in Trinidad that marks the dominant perception that "… Muslims were somewhat more different than others. They were not to be trusted; they would always do you down..."[33] Within the book, however, Naipaul provides no reason except the melodrama of customary Hindu upbringing[34] for sensing such a threat. His quest for his India, organizes in memory more 'the pleasing piece of theatre' of caste, in 'the thread ceremony of the new born' and the 'garb of a Hindu-mendicant scholar' with all its caste-fervour than any studied knowledge of Hindu thought or history. Notice how Naipaul's own cultural loss in migration inaugurates his representation of the writer's self in his quest for India's ancient cultural history.

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[27]V. S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, London: Picador, 1964, 27.

[28]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 28.

[29]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 28.

[30]Tarun Tejpal, "Christian Didn't Damage India Like Islam: Interview with V. S. Naipaul," *Outlook India* (15 Nov 1999), 1-5.

[31]Tejpal, "Interview with V. S. Naipaul," 1-5.

[32]Tejpal, "Interview with V. S. Naipaul," 1-5.

[33]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 28.

[34]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 29.

This narrative of mourning bearing much cultural baggage of Indian-Hindu social divisions leads to the perceptions that all Islamic people are a "threat."[35] They cause fear and corrupt Hindu culture. Naipaul's views on Islam through his text are deeply marked by his fear of Islamic food[36] and depended on a highly ritualized caste-order that expressed itself through food taboos, if not through religious belief: "food was one thing and caste was the other."[37] For Naipaul, although caste in Trinidad was imperceptible, caste later began to represent "latent qualities,"[38] which in time became "attractive and touching."[39] Hence for Naipaul, the fear of Islam was determined by difference in custom, not by belief, which indirectly fed and fostered his prejudices about the 'other,' namely the Muslim. This anxiety over Islam and his loss of India are dependent on the functioning of caste practices, without religious belief, thus making his fear cultural, not religious, as customary practices mark the difference.

Another aspect of his anti-Islamic prejudice concerns his configuring and refiguring Islamic people in India. Kashmiri Muslims, for Naipaul, preserve an empty, inane laziness,[40] punctuated by momentary lapses into sexual indulgences of Muslim dancing girls for sale.[41] That apart, they seem to represent a cruelty that to him is abhorrent. Notice his damming criticism of his guide and companion, as a cruel and bloodthirsty jihadi: "… his history only began with his conquerors; in spite of travel and degrees he remained a medieval convert, forever engaged in the holy war."[42]

His next depiction is of places as Islamic spaces. "Kashmir was coolness and colour… it was dust in sunlight," filled with small hills and large mountains, unceremoniously opening to the "disorder in the bazzar" and smelling of "months-old dirt and human excrement."[43] This description is juxtaposed with frightful characterizations of Islamic men with "ferocious beards," praying and blessing before going away to Mecca. This juxtaposition is pathetic fallacy that Naipaul performs, in his non-fiction which imposes upon the natural world an eeriness that bears

[35]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 28.
[36]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 29.
[37]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 31.
[38]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 32.
[39]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 33.
[40]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 132.
[41]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 131.
[42]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 158.
[43]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 114-115.

the writer's subjectivity. Then there is the reference to the Pandava fort in the ruins at Srinagar[44] juxtaposed rather efficiently in advance with refiguring converted Islamic people as lacking memory of Hindu ancestry,[45] as represented by his Islamic attendant and companion.

Naipaul then shifts to depicting Northern India as a civilization destroyed by Islamic conquest; "mosque over temple: ruin on ruin" suggesting the destiny of ancient but vulnerable[46] Hindu India. He then makes his most rabid indictment of the Taj Mahal: "… a building wastefully without function; it is only a despot's monument to a woman, not of India, who bore a child every year for fifteen years."[47]

Accompanied by reflections on Mogul 'plunder,' 'personal despotism' and 'oppressive' rule, Naipaul's resentment of Islamic invasion apparently reduces Islamic art, architecture, even the romance and its rulers into cultural stereotypes of violence. Other thinkers, including William Dalrymple, a scholar of Islamic India and a popular novelist, observe differently. While Islamic conquest was real to the Hindu Kingdoms of Medieval India, the destruction of temples and their replacement with mosques were often political choices not religious ones. They were often done to quell revolt; much destruction was caused by neighbouring unruly Hindu rulers as well. Besides, the dialogue between religions did alter the way both Hindu and Islamic rulers viewed themselves. As rulers, some Hindu kings called themselves 'sultans' and appeared in exotically Islamized attire in public; much art too thrived in a kind of Islamic-Hindu syncretism.[48]

Naipaul's unjustified confusion with history thus displaces subjective prejudice as objective history, distorting in the process all history. The distortions act as premises for Naipaul's stereotypes of Islamic people in India, embedded in Naipaul's Islamophobia. Re-writing history is essential but it cannot employ ideological distortions to foster communal intolerance. Shahid Amin, the Subaltern studies historian, discusses such re-writing in his "On Re-telling the Muslim Conquest of North India."[49]

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[44]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness,* 175.

[45]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness,* 158.

[46]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness,* 255.

[47]Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness,* 258.

[48]See, Dalyrmple, "Trapped," *The Guardian* 20 March 2004, 4.

[49]Shahid Amin, "On Retelling the Muslim Conquest of North India," in *History and the Present,* eds., Chaterejee Partha and Ghosh Anjan, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006, 24-44.

He writes about warrior-saints particularly Ghazi Miya, the nephew of the plunderer, Mohamed Ghazini, and Hindu nationalism's worst villain. Unlike his uncle, Ghazi Miya is celebrated as a saviour of cowherds against the plundering by their own Hindu king, Raja Sohal Deo, a cruel ruler who destroyed the Yadava tribal community. In the deep districts near Benares, this Miya is a highly adored Sufi Sant to whom all go to pray for succour and salvation.[50] Such re-writing while never condoning Islamic conquest provides alternative views of syncretic Indian history. Naipaul's writing does not contribute to such understanding of history.

5. Naipaul's Wounding of Civilization

Naipaul returns to India in the 1970's during the political unrest in the emergency. He calls this time in his *India: A Wounded Civilization* "the depth of an Indian tragedy."[51] It is an India of "decadent Gandhianism" that hungers for political power, with a "censored press" and "secret arrests."[52] Neither the political activist nor the government differs from each other in their ideological orientations. He debunks the marriage between Marxism and Gandhianism,[53] proposed and mobilized by Jaya Prakash Narayan, as his hope lies in "an India essentially returned to itself: a vision of Ramraj."[54] With a critique of Gandhi, Naipaul's tongue-in-cheek commentary, ironical and mournful,[55] transforms his anti-Islamic discourses into analytical history, when he compares his representation of Ramraj with that of India's Islamic cultural history: "And India is again at the periphery of this new Arabian world … when the new religion of Islam spread in all directions and the Arabs … overran the Indian kingdom of Sind … India has shrunk since the Arab incursion."[56]

For Naipaul, then the failure of Ramraj is determined by the Islamic conquest of the medieval period. For him, that failure in Indian history culminates in the 1970's tyranny of the emergency. Indeed for him, "Five hundred years after the Arab conquest of Sind Moslem rule was established in Delhi as the rule of foreigners, people apart; and foreign rule – Moslem for the first five hundred years, British for the last 150 – ended

[50]Amin, "On Retelling the Muslim Conquest of North India," 37.
[51]V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, London: Picador, 1979, 126.
[52]Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, 127-128
[53]Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, 134-135.
[54]Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, 136.
[55]Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, 139.
[56]V. S. Naipaul, "Foreword" in *India: A Wounded Civilization*, ix.

in Delhi only in 1947."[57] Yet India remained truly vulnerable, despite the euphoria of the early Indian Republic. But soon the hunger for power by Indian patriots destroyed the hope of Ramraj, which then ended in despotic rule in the emergency. He writes: "...independence meant more than going away of the British; that the India to which Independence came was a land of far older defeat" – referring to Islamic conquest – and that the emergency was a "chilling sense of a new dissolution" – suggesting that the civilization's defeat culminated in the emergency.[58]

What makes this representation erratic is the premise of his claim, namely that "Indian history telescopes easily,"[59] into one long night of conquest. To telescope Indian history would be anti-historical, as short-changing complexity would invite distortions. As the narrative progresses, Naipaul suggests that India as a modern nation has become too weak to resist or overcome the conquest of Islam. To him, India seems trapped in the feudal Islamic past and within the malaise of Islam today. Somehow all Islamic people are squalid, simply surplus and regressive – to summarise his "Foreword" to this book.[60]

6. Ramraj: Naipual's Fascination

To Naipaul, Ramraj is a powerful cultural-political alternative to such a malaise. He returns to India with greater vigour in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, the third book in his trilogy. Naipaul now praises Ramaraj's current alienating ideological project, now integral to right-wing Hindutva discourses when he argues: "to be ruled by Ram's law is to know bliss."[61] No small wonder then that Naipaul visits the BJP offices and valorises the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya.[62] He calls it a "passion."[63]

But worse still is his propensity to draw artificial cultural boundaries between the so-called North and South India. As in his earlier works, Naipaul positions the Vijayanagara Empire of the South against a more decadent, inescapably luxurious and highly violent Delhi Sultanate. The southern empire remains in his imagination the last bastion of Hindu rule, which fought marauding Muslim conquerors that presumably destroyed Hindu civilization. But Naipaul's imagination, as Dalrymple suggests, is

[57]Naipaul, "Foreword," ix-x.
[58]Naipaul, "Foreword," x.
[59]Naipaul, "Foreword," x.
[60]Naipaul, "Foreword," x.
[61]V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Million Mutinies Now,* London: Vintage, 1991, 181.
[62]Dalrymple, "Trapped," 4.
[63]Dalrymple, "Trapped," 4.

orientalist, informed by imperial Britain, than by enabling historical research.[64] Recent studies, Dalrymple argues, indicate that Vijayanagara was actually "Islamicised" and its Hindu kings borrowed much statecraft from Islamic rulers. According to Dalrymple,

> Far from being the stagnant, backward-looking bastion of Hindu resistance imagined by Naipaul, Vijayanagar had in fact developed in all sorts of unexpected ways, adapting many of the administrative, tax collecting and military methods of the Muslim sultanates that surrounded it – notably stirrups, horse-shoes, horse armour and a new type of saddle, all of which allowed Vijayanagar to put into the field an army of horse archers who could hold at bay the Delhi Sultanate, then the most powerful force in India.[65]

Dalrymple's argument rests on what the historian Wagoner cites in his work and echoes the perspectives Shahid Amin refers to about Hindu-Islamic hybridity. It is because Naipaul telescopes history, erases some of its uncertainties and rejects recording nuances, that his narrative becomes tautological. Naipaul's history falsifies much and lacks credibility. It is his tautology that makes his writing Islamophobic, failing to provide equal and fair representation to Islam and Hinduism, thus faulting in the realization of a secular ethic.

8. Naipaul's Believers

Naipaul's Islamophobia becomes untenable, even absolutely ridiculous, when he writes about South Asia and West Asia. True, much of South Asia and West Asia, particularly Iran, Indonesia and Pakistan are apparent theocracies or semi-theocratic democracies. Notice how he describes conversion as the reason for such violent nations: "People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easy set on the boil."[66] He knows that these conversions could be perceived as "crossover from old beliefs." He is sympathetic to Christianity but not Islam as the continued crossing over is "extra drama ... like a cultural big bang,"[67] implying its violence and radical change-over. Naipaul however appears to love Christian nations, as he says so with no nihilistic faulting here in his

[64]Dalrymple, "Trapped."4

[65]Dalrymple, "Trapped."4

[66]V. S. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998, 1.

[67]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 2-3.

discourse.[68] When Naipaul pillories the Asian nations, he has clearly shifted his episteme, from his radical anti-imperial stance to an imperialized one, re-enacting Huntington's "clash of civilization."[69]

In *Among the Believers* (1981) Naipaul's central argument suggests that Islamic communities have woken from "medieval culture" to the prospect of "oil and money" and to a "great new civilization" that they both "reject and depend on."[70] Since much critique has prevailed over *Among the Believers*, suffices it here to argue that Naipaul's perspectives are ethnocentric, making Islam out to be anti-modern, violent and dehumanizing. As we move into *Beyond Belief* (1995) these attitudes are whetted further. Ten years after his initial visit to these regions, Naipaul re-installs his Islamophobic vision as he provides unsubstantiated "opinions," while refiguring himself as a world-citizen, travelling the world, writing about peoples and transcribing their voices.[71] He claims these are "narratives," where only people speak, not the writer. Yet hiding behind literary conventions, he cheats readers with a false sense of objectivity, while he historicizes Islamic people through his jaundiced and prejudiced intellectual prism. The "Prologue" to his narrative explains: "This is a book about people. It is not a book of opinions." But consider a few lines later the interpretation: "A convert's world view alters... He rejects his own;" he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story."[72] This is opinion, indeed and is determined by the teleology of anxiety, where the end justifies the claim. South East Asia may have Islamized but have they Arabized? Hence it is his internal "anxiety," bordering on "disgust" over highly modernized Islamic people, that prefers vulgar moralizing to cultural complexity, condemning Indonesian Muslims as un-Islamic.[73]

Beyond Belief (1995) begins in Indonesia in Naipaul's encounter with 'Imaduddin,' former exile, and political dissident, now a leading scientist for the new technology mission in Indonesia. This scientist

[68]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 2.

[69]Akeel Bilgrmai, "Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on the Enlightenment and Enchantment," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, 33 (19-25 August 2006), 3591-3603.

[70]Edward Said, *Reflections in Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, New Delhi: Penguin Books 2011, 114.

[71]Wendy O'Shea Meddour, "Gothic Horror and Muslim Madness: in V. S. Naipaul's *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 21, 1 (2005), 59.

[72]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 1.

[73]O'Shea Meddour, "Gothic Horror and Muslim Madness," 59.

visualizes a modern and self-sufficient Indonesia. Naipaul wrangles with the quiet ability of the man to conjoin Islam with modernity. And after mushy parsimonious narrative, the final Islamophobic insight appears: "The ambition was stupendous: to complete the Islamic take-over of this part of the world, and to take the islands to their destiny as the leader of Islamic revival in the twenty-first century."[74]

O'Shea Meddour argues that Naipaul's Gothic horror mode is responsible for his reactionary behaviour.[75] But it is Naipaul's intense desire to condemn Islam itself that shows up. True, despots and their cohorts are megalomaniac, but to suggest that all Islam can only produce despotism is blatantly irresponsible. It is precisely such subtle but intentional misrepresentations, veiled, clever attacks on a people and a religion that produces what Achebe calls the lack of good faith.[76] There are enough sustained critiques of Indonesian tyrannies to prove that power-hungry military men can destroy otherwise truly democratic states or nations. But Naipaul's claims are different; he merely displaces his crude views of Islamic conquest in India onto Indonesian peoples and their society.

His horror over Islam and his tautological intent, squaring all to one source and in this case, the violence of Islam, narrates the gendered struggles for a free press that a woman's magazine endures. Naipaul's main narrative rarely exposes his uncritical arrogance. It is the narrative slippage, the marginal generalization, often tucked away, that features his anti-Islamic prejudice.

> Things were now more clouded; traditionalism and pragmatism had different associations. The changes that had come to the limited colonial society after twenty years of independence ... had made a woman's magazine possible… But now religion, the stresses of the half-converted country, and the great new wealth, had given an unexpectedly backward twist to things.[77]

His conviction that converted peoples are more backward than others mars the narrative potential of a travel writer. All this civilizational rhetoric is explained by his mourning of colonialism, Muslim invasion and the fall of Hindu India: "So while Islam was arrested in the west, in the east it was spreading over the cultural-religious remains of greater India. India has

[74]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 24.

[75]O'Shea Meddour, "Gothic Horror and Muslim Madness," 62.

[76]Chiuna Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" *Massachusetts Review*, 18 (1977), 782-794.

[77]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 108.

been ravaged by centuries of Muslim invasion…"[78] Naipaul extends his argument about Muslim Conquest by referring to Java earlier as the "last Hindu empire"[79] and the conversion of "Kali Jaga." The Hindu empire fell in 1478; the greater India, he refers to, is "put out."[80] He then associates Kali Jaga with the "Hindu-Jain saint, Gomateshwara."[81] Notice the conflations between Hinduism, Islam and Jainism here and the telescoping of history again. This historicity narrates the notion of greater Hindustan, that neither modern India, nor modern Indonesia can provide any argument or value for. It is in this respect that the mourning here becomes ridiculously over-stated, "dilettante,"[82] uncouth, and ill-equipped.

With Iran, the narrative becomes different and it appears sober, but deteriorates beyond redemption when he describes Mohurram "Shia mourning month as "the blood month."[83] The violence returns with debilitating candour, when Khalkhalli is described. Revolution is "blood and punishment"[84] and that becomes symbolically Iran and Khalkhalli: "In fact, that double idea of blood, fitted the revolutionary Iran: with all his Iranian graces, his scientific education and his social ambitions, he had his own dream of blood. His hero was Stalin."[85] Islam and the Islamic are imaged as barbaric, despite modernity and science inflecting Iran and its culture.

But his re-figuring Pakistan beats all. First the distortions: he claims that Pakistan was "a criminal enterprise" as when Hindus and Sikhs, rich and wealthy, left at partition, old "debts were wiped out;" "fortunes were made or added overnight;" the new state merely plundered its way into existence.[86] His telescoping history condemns Pakistan for re-writing British law. "Islamic appendages," "political manipulation," anti-women laws, "Koranic punishments," "public floggings" – all suggests a "backward-looking" ethnicity and national culture,[87] "tribal," "feudal" and

[78]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 140.
[79]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 139.
[80]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 140.
[81]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 140.
[82]Al-Quaderi, Golam Gaus and Habibullah, Md "Travels" 2001, "Travels in Absurdity: Islam and V. S. Naipaul" *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies* 3, 1 (2001), 24.
[83]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 208.
[84]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 214.
[85]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 214.
[86]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 267.
[87]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 268.

"half-slave" in parts.[88] And then the indictment of Mohammed Iqbal for his idea of Pakistan:

> The case of Pakistan was made … in 1930 by a poet Mohammed Iqbal. Iqbal came from a recently converted Hindu family … only someone who felt himself a new convert could have spoken as he did…What Iqbal is saying is that Muslims can live only with Muslims … it would have implied that the good world the one to be striven after was purely a tribal world … every tribe in his corner.[89]

The bias over recently converted peoples returns. But Iqbal's parents were Kashmiri pundits, apparently living in an ambivalent dialogue with Islamic peoples. Syncretism thrived in 19th century Kashmir. Besides, Iqbal produced a convergence between modern philosophy and Islamic reconstruction. He proposed a theory of self, so far absent in Islamic philosophy.[90] Yet Naipaul would conclude, by re-installing his anti-Islamic prejudice as history: "In its short life, Iqbal's religious state, still half-serf still profoundly uneducated, mangling history…undoing the polity…has shown itself dedicated only to the idea of a cultural desert here…"[91] Thus, for Naipaul, Pakistan's contribution to the world remains inchoate, nothing more than a decertified blotch of contemporary modernity.

9. Conclusion

In my view, Naipaul's effort in his non-fiction is to write or rewrite cultural histories about people and places that he encounters through their narratives of experience. He employs a wide variety of modes that apparently are exceptional. These are but facades and chiefly so, when he uses the Gothic in his non-fiction related to Islam as a means to unfolding horror and angst as the surrealist painters and the early Victorian and later stream of consciousness novelist do. As stated earlier, O'Shea Meddour remarks that Naipaul's reactionary behaviour, the Gothic component, includes having "unpleasant physical reactions," when he notices Imaduddin's crowded table with symbols of modernity, the laptop, and the Koran and its commentaries at once.[92] Naipaul continues to perform acts of displacement, moments of pathetic fallacy, in his writing; he transports

[88]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 268.

[89]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 269.

[90]For details, see Muhammad Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* London: Luzac and Company, 1908.

[91]Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Excursions among the Converted Peoples*, 381.

[92]O'Shea Meddour, "Gothic Horror," 60.

his anxieties onto the context and constitutes the atmosphere as "oppressive."[93] This outright fear becomes the literary convention that turns Islamophobic, for it is continuous with his claims in *Among The Believers* (1981), where he interprets Islamic nations as suffering from the paranoia of contradictions, of desiring modernity and rejecting it at once.

This tendency in Naipaul's writing is driven by his episteme, which is his biased way of seeing the world. His view is clearly determined by an ideological frame that narrates the Islamic world from his socialization in childhood when everything Islamic was inferior and therefore abhorrent.

This episteme is marked by a limited "vision,"[94] as Al-Quaderi and Habibullah suggest. These critics mark among other things a) the "lack of integrity," characterised by "random categorisation" and "totalizing assumptions"[95] and b) his "obsession with Islam"[96] inflected dramatically by his "empathetic identification with" Hindutva ideology[97] and his confusion between his "nativist and non-nativist"[98] location as a writer. This mode of reading people and communities, places and spaces as an apparent objective agent, as outside the object of reading and as appropriating the "language of real life"[99] embeds plentiful lack of historical knowledge as Dalrymple, Said, Wagoner, Amin and many other critics of both Islamophobia and post-coloniality show by their discourse.

His totalisations, his generalisations, his tropology emphasise a cultural stereotyping, profoundly breeding a right-wing identity-politics which is enclosed by its non-egalitarian approach and purpose. What fails as secular-ethic in Naipaul's writing is his inability to represent difference with good faith, thus blunting and destroying what could otherwise have been a truly alternative view of cultural history.

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[93]O'Shea Meddour, "Gothic Horror," 60.

[93]Akeel Bilgrmai, "Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on the Enlightenment and Enchantment," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, 33 (19-25 August 2006), 3591-3603.

[94]Al-Quaderi, Gaus and Habibullah, Md "Travels," 23.

[95]Al-Quaderi, Gaus and Habibullah, Md "Travels," 23.

[96]Al-Quaderi, Gaus and Habibullah, Md "Travels," 25.

[97]Al-Quaderi, Gaus and Habibullah, Md "Travels," 26.

[98]Al-Quaderi, Gaus and Habibullah, Md "Travels," 24.

[99]Karl Marx, "The German Ideology" in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed., Hazard Adams, London/New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc, 1971, 632.