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**NAIPAUL'S VIEWS ON ISLAM IN *AMONG THE BELIEVERS*:  
AN ISLAMIC JOURNEY**

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**Abstract:**

*V.S. Naipaul's Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey (1981), a large scale work is on the theme of Islamic conversion in the countries like Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia etc. In fact Naipaul has always been criticized for his alienated vision in his supercilious representation of Islamic world. But he has always been clear about the iniquities of the world as well as the futility of the revolutionary movements either in Hindu religion, in Islamic religion or in any other religion of the universe.*

**Key Words:** *Alienated vision, iniquities, futility.*

Although there is no lack of true purpose but the movements are intellectually shallow and has no real hold of people anywhere. The bitter personal failure of some people brought them into the movements rather than an exalted political, religious or social vision. It is all shabby and foolish. Naipaul seems to imply that the Muslim conquest of the subcontinent is in a large measure responsible for its current dilapidation. Here in this iconic book Naipaul discusses the prominent role of Islam in the lives of individuals. Individuals' dialogues also answered some of the questions with which Naipaul arrived there during 1981. The individuals he joined in these Muslim countries came from different economic and social backgrounds and expressed different views towards their religion i.e. Islam- pessimism, despair or hope regarding the future, unwavering belief in the faith as the bearer of truth- but in his eyes, they were victims of Islam as an Arabian imperial conquest. "Jihad" for them is religious war; people could deal with this religious war as an act of terror which is too frightening for people to manage. "Hate Oppression" he says "But fear the oppressed". The thing he sees in the current terrorism is the exulting in other people's death. Here he came to know about the people who killed the children in Russia and were smiling.

But overall in some Islamic countries the conditions created by the newly developed industries open new ways to the individuals and set new objects for their lives. In fact *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* is Naipaul's classical account of Islamic fundamentalism. Here the believers are the Muslims he met on those journeys, young men and women battling to regain the original purity of their faith. To Seafin Roldan-Santiago "It is a mature reflection of someone who has 'fully arrived' to his western identity. It has given him an opportunity to place and compare this western prejudice against the alternative cultural, religious and political ideologies offered by Islam fundamentalism" (V.S.Naipaul's *Vulcanisation...Paradigms* 192).

Naipaul finds individuals talking about Islam as a way of life in practice. They confront the real world; they speak of their values and their choices. Now they very frankly respond to the opportunities that their government has offered them to be prosperous and progressive but it has also to be said that religion has given them the important first push. So that we can say that in *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* the central issue is Islam. In this book he shows how, in spite of the barriers of language and cultural differences, he was able to reach out to people and to comprehend the central role of Islam in their lives.

In the words of Lillian Feder:

The method he employed combined studying the past history of Islam and the current observance of its various adherents: the shiites of Iran : the Sunnis, the shiites, and the

dissident Ahmadis of Pakistan; and the new fundamentalists of Malaysia and Indonesia. Characteristically, he tries to apprehend subtle religious and political manifestations of Islam through the eyes of people he has either arranged to meet or has encountered by chance. Sometimes, especially starting out in Iran, he is frustrated, lacking the language and the temperament to gain access to a society in which religious devotion penetrates every feature of life (*Naipaul's Truth* 59).

Naipaul's *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981) indicates Naipaul's approach to a comprehensive study of Islam in the four countries he visited or the many others where it prevails. Here in Iran and Pakistan Naipaul met the people who came from various economic and social background and expressed divergent attitude towards Islam. Purabi Panwar states:

The books he produced as a result are *Among the Believers* (1981) and *Beyond Belief* (1998). Of these, the former, as Naipaul puts it, is "an exploration of the details of the faith and what looked like its capacity for revolution," and the latter postulates that since Islam is an Arab religion and since all non-Arab Muslims are converts, they are supposed to reject and eradicate their earlier history and heritage. He adds that in these countries "people develop fantasies about who and what they are... In the Islam of converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can easily be set on the boil." Islam, of course, began as an Arab religion, but what Naipaul conveniently ignores is that large numbers of non-Arab Muslims have not rejected their 'history and heritage', and that Islam adapted to different countries of converts, assimilating their local customs, traditions, languages and cultures. He in fact erases the difference between Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, and uses them as interchangeable terms which they are not ("Introduction" 20).

In fact in *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*, a classical account of Islamic fundamentalism, the believers are the Muslims battling to regain the original purity of their faith in Islam. Here Naipaul concentrates on his own observation and focuses on Islam rather than on Muslims. Naipaul wanders here and there and chats with students, taxi drivers, munching dry fruits and nuts, asking mild but pointed questions. During these meetings, he tries to understand by seeking the multiple viewpoints the historical, social and personal roots of their faith. Naipaul is also concerned to:

What I knew about Islam was what was known to everyone on the outside. They had a prophet and a book, they believed in one God and disliked images; they had an idea of heaven and hell-always a difficult idea for me. They had their own martyrs. Once a year mimic Mausolea were wheeled through the streets; men 'danced' with heavy crescent moons, swinging the moons now one way, now the other; drums beat and sometimes there were ritual stick fights (*Among the Believers* 12).

Here Naipaul comes to know about their rejection of the educational opportunities and social freedom which America offered them. This expectation of "alien, necessary civilization going on- is implicit in the act of renunciation" (*Among the Believers* 17) and is a major subject of this book. This is what Lillian Feder writes about:

The loss of history as damaging to the growth of a society and to the "individual talent" of its members is a familiar theme in Naipaul's writings, but in the non-Arabic Muslim world he perceives this loss as fatal. Because of its tyrannical laws, the substitution of theology for education, the suppression of all individuality, he finds that "no colonization had been so thorough as the colonization that had come with the Arab faith (*Naipaul's Truth* 135).

So Naipaul provides the past history of Islam as well as the current observance of its various adherents: the Shiites of Iran, the Sunnis, the Shiites and the dissident Ahmadis of Pakistan and the new fundamentalists of Malaysia and Indonesia. In fact, he tries to comprehend subtle religious and political manifestations of Islam in these countries.

Behzad, Naipaul's guide, a translator, communist and his mouthpiece in Iran clearly tells him how it is possible even in Iran, "to do without religion". To him "Islam was a complicated religion". He explains: How had that happened? How in a country like Iran, and growing up in a provincial town, had he learned to do without religion? It was simple, Behzad said. He hadn't been instructed in the faith by his parents; he hadn't been sent to the mosque. Islam was a complicated religion. It wasn't philosophical or speculative. It was a revealed religion, with a Prophet and a complete set of rules. To believe, it was necessary to know a lot about the Arabian origins of the religion, and to take this knowledge to heart (*Among the Believers* 7).

Further, Naipaul adds:

Islam in Iran, Shia Islam, was an intricate business. To keep alive ancient animosities, to hold on to the idea of personal revenge even after a thousand years, to have a special list of heroes and martyrs and villains, it was necessary to be instructed. And Behzad hadn't been instructed; he had simply stayed away (*Among the Believers* 8).

To Naipaul, in Iran Islam is a complicated religion. He is in favour of revolution but not of "religious revolution". He is in favour of "Jihad", we like to translate it as "holy war" but not in favour of "religious war". Naipaul's ideal of revolution is the exaltation of the poor and downtrodden. During this period in the Islamic countries like Iran, Pakistan, etc the individuals like Behzad are compelled to spend nearly all their life under the Shah, a holy person with certain authorities. To Naipaul:

Behzad was not religious, was communist, and had been kept away from religion by his communist father. Behzad's father had been imprisoned during the Shah's time, and Behzad had inherited his father's dream of a "True" revolution, such a revolution hadn't come to Iran; but Behzad, employing all the dialectic he had learnt, was forcing himself to see, in the religious fervour of Khomeini's revolution, the outline of what could be said to be true (*Among the Believers* 42-43).

During his visit to Karachi, he finds individuals more conscious about Islam than in Iran. Here he finds "life of struggle." Naipaul also accounts this attraction of Islam to university students. He expresses his despair about life in Pakistan. "In some countries, you can believe in the life of struggle. You can believe there will be results. Here there is only luck" (*Among the Believers* 194). Naipaul observes that here the ideal of revolution is totally motivated by narrow religious fundamentalism.

During his visit to Malaysia and Indonesia, he finds that Islam is considered as another religion of India. Here Islam spread as an idea conveyed by merchants and priests. In the first chapter entitled "First Conversations with Shafi: the journey out of Paradise" of third part named "Conversations in Malaysia" Naipaul accepts:

Islam went to south-east Asia as another religion of India. There was no Arab invasion, as in Sind; no systematic slaughter of the local warrior caste, no planting of Arab military colonies; no sharing out of loot, no sending back of treasure and slaves to a caliph in Iraq or Syria; no tribute, no taxes on unbelievers. There was no calamity, no overnight abrogation of a settled world-order. Islam spread as an idea - a Prophet, a divine revolution, heaven and hell, a divinely sanctioned code- and mingled with older ideas. To purify that mixed religion the Islamic missionaries now come; and it is still from the subcontinent - and especially from Pakistan- that the most passionate missionaries come (*Among the Believers* 261).

Here the "mixed religion" means assimilated elements of Hinduism and Buddhism pervading in Malaysia and Indonesia, threatened by "Islamic missionaries" whose basic aim is to establish the new Islam modeled on Iran and Pakistan, where "every Muslim is a missionary for Islam" (*Among the Believers* 262).

Here in Malaysia, Islam for the prosperous and well educated individuals is "a weapon" which "serves their grief, their feeling of inadequacy, their social rage and racial hate" (*Among the Believers* 264).

The individuals here are equally interested in foreign technology for their dependent relationship with the developed world. Indonesia also enjoys wealth produced by oil. Naipaul adds:

Indonesia, like Malaysia, was a Muslim country. But the pre-Islamic past, that in Malaysia seemed to be only a matter of village customs, in Indonesia- or Java- showed as a great civilization. Islam, which had come only in the fifteenth century, was the formal faith. But the Hindu-Buddhist past, that had lasted for 1400 years before that, survived in many ways- half erased, slightly mysterious, but still awesome, like Borobudur itself, and it was this past which gave Indonesians- or Javanese- the feeling of their uniqueness (*Among the Believers* 347).

Naipaul confirms that more than thirty decades of oppression and degradation, wars and ultimate independence of Indonesian lives, their technological advancement and productivity inspire him. In fact, the Indonesian people have chosen two different ways to establish their identity. On the one hand, they return to Javanese traditional culture and on the other hand they adapt to Islam. In this way, they become able to make their "composite religion".

So here Naipaul on the whole observes that in the countries like Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia, Islam is in its two different perspectives. In Iran and Pakistan, Islam is motivated by a narrow religious fundamentalism whereas in Malaysia and Indonesia it is a "composite religion". Here the individuals adopted Islam as a weapon to improve their life style.

But Naipaul also accepts that the time before Islam was a time of blackness and here the history begins with Islam. To prove this Muslim theology, he provides the instance of the excavation of the ancient city Mohenjo-Daro, one of the archeological glories of Pakistan and the world. In this non-Arabic Muslim world, he perceives the loss of history as fatal. The ultimate result of this loss of history is the gradual dependency over the western civilization. Its technology may provide all the necessities of modern life. But on the other hand this dependency results in the lack of self-confidence and sometimes for the young, like Behzad in Iran or Masood in Pakistan, an inability to plan for their future. But overall they express their despair about life in Pakistan or in any other of these countries. In Tehran Naipaul states the contrast between contemporary Tehran and the Muslim civilization of past history. Here the Arabian faith has been totally rejected by the narrow fundamentalism of Muslim civilization. Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia arrived as another religion of India. But here Islam spread as an idea conveyed by merchants and priests. Lillian Feder here says:

During this first visit, he perceives the "mixed religion", which had assimilated elements of Hinduism and Buddhism, so vital in preserving the history and traditions of Malaysia and Indonesia, threatened by "Islamic missionaries", chiefly from Pakistan, whose aim is to "purify" the faith to establish the new Islam modeled on Iran and Pakistan (*Naipaul's Truth* 137).

And it is only because of their mixed religion and also because of their progressive approach and their adaptation to their new status that Malaysia and Indonesia had grown rich. The individuals here always tried to learn and to enjoy the culture other than their own. Now they are looking very optimistically towards the twenty-first century as well as towards the fulfillment of their dream.

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