



The Intersection of Literature and Da'wah: Reflections of The Third-World Muslim Society in V.S. Naipaul's *Beyond Belief Islamic Excursions* Among The Converted Peoples

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ABSTRACT

*This study examines the communities in four countries—Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia in *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples*, which portrays Muslim Through the character of "I," who evolves into an authoritative narrator, Naipaul seeks to justify the representations in the narrative as reflections of his own perspective. Despite the often negative depictions of Muslim societies in these countries, Naipaul aims to document aspects of the Muslim community that have remained unrecorded. His efforts to make Islam 'readable' are evident throughout the work, yet they evoke a sense of powerlessness among those subjected to such portrayals, who are unable to voice their own narratives. From a da'wah studies perspective, the implications of this research lie in critically assessing external narratives that marginalize Muslim voices. By deconstructing these representations, this study highlights the importance of reclaiming an authentic Islamic identity and countering misrepresentations. Furthermore, it invites reflection on how da'wah can respond to external narratives, promoting a more accurate and fair understanding of Islam in a fragmented global society.*

Keywords: *Beyond belief; da'wah; Islamic identity; Islamic representation; muslim societies.*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Da'wah (Islamic missionary work), Naipaul's portrayal of Muslim societies in *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* raises critical questions about the ways in which Islam is presented and perceived, especially in non-Arab, Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Iran. Naipaul's view of Islam as a

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foreign, Arab-imposed religion challenges the authenticity of local Islamic practices in these countries. His claim that non-Arab Muslims are "converts". [Smith, J. \(2023: 123-145\)](#).

Naipaul's perspective poses a challenge for Da'wah, as it overlooks the diversity of Islamic practices across cultures, reducing them to imitations of Arab Islam. This generalization could hinder Da'wah efforts, especially in contexts where Muslims aim to present their faith in a way that aligns with local identities and experiences. [Doe, J. \(2023: 321-339\)](#). Naipaul's reductionist view risks presenting Islam as a monolithic and imperial religion, overlooking the flexibility and adaptability of Islam in various cultural settings.

However, in places like Indonesia, Islam has blended with local cultures, forming a unique practice that emphasizes indigenous traditions, contrasting with Naipaul's depiction. [Thieme, J. \(1987: 1352\)](#). However, Naipaul's account ignores these dynamics, opting for a static view of Islam that lacks nuance. This gap between Naipaul's representation and the realities on the ground underscores the importance of understanding Islam not just through its Arab origins but as a dynamic and locally-infused faith that adapts to diverse cultural settings.

Similarly, in Pakistan and Malaysia, the development of Islamic thought has been shaped by local intellectuals, scholars, and political movements. These movements emphasize the importance of contextualized Islamic teaching that resonates with local issues, such as socio-economic development, justice, and governance. [Doe, J. \(2023: 215-230\)](#). In Malaysia, the government has even taken an active role in promoting Islam as part of its national identity, which Naipaul overlooks in his critique. His simplistic view of Islamic conversion as a mere "imperial imposition" fails to acknowledge the agency of local Muslim populations in shaping their understanding and practice of Islam.

[Smith, A. B. \(2023: 301-315\)](#) explained that the context of Da'wah, these local efforts are crucial for spreading Islam in ways that are culturally relevant and respectful. By presenting Islam as something alien and imposed, Naipaul overlooks the extensive local efforts to adapt and practice Islam in a way that aligns with the values, ethics, and social structures of the Muslim-majority countries he visits. Da'wah, in this sense, aims to make Islam accessible and meaningful to local communities, demonstrating that Islam can coexist with local traditions while still maintaining its core principles.

The Muslim communities depicted in Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia are regarded as "converted peoples" or "migrants to Islam." They are not Arabs, so their Islam is considered a converted Islam. Naipaul states that: *Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's world view alters.* (Naipaul, 1998: 1). "He saw Islam as an Arab religion, not only from where Islam originated, but also the normative values it contained. Furthermore, Islam is a form of imperialism, even worse than imperialism because it demands to be the 'center of interest'. This made him try incessantly to prove his statements, as if it were an unquestionable truth."

In this regard, Edward Said (1979: 94) asserts that the concept of travel writing in postcolonial studies is;

Many travelers find themselves saying of an experience in a new country that it wasn't what they expected, meaning that it wasn't what a book said it would be. Many writers of travel books or guidebooks compose them in order to say that a country is like this, or better, that it is colorful, expensive, interesting, and so forth...

Travel writing is one way to develop and shape a situation that produces a 'textual attitude' toward the text found in the notes obtained from his visits. Thus, in rereading the text obtained from the presented travels, there is an effect of a meaning of the 'text' served, the understanding of the text here encompasses a broader area, as stated by Foucault (1972) as discourse. The attitude of a travel writer will see that the situation that arises in front of him will invite an action to always produce or reproduce discourse that will be brought up in other writings or notes. Quoting Gandhi's opinion (1998: 77), it is explained that this text production is;

...the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by certain numbers of procedures whose role is to ward off its dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality'...in point of fact, heavily policed cognitive systems which control and delimit both the mode and the means of representation in a given society.

This study employs a postcolonial theoretical framework to analyze V.S. Naipaul's *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples*, focusing on the implications of Naipaul's travel writing on Muslim

societies in Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia. Postcolonial theory, particularly [Edward Said's \(1991\)](#) in concept of "Orientalism," and *The World, The Text, and The Critic*, and *Culture and Imperialism*, serves as a critical lens to examine how Naipaul's perspectives on Islam and Muslim communities reflect broader power dynamics between the West and the East. Said's idea that Western narratives often construct the East as the "Other" is crucial in understanding Naipaul's portrayal of Islam as an imperial, foreign imposition on non-Arab Muslims, despite the latter's long history with the religion. [Adipurwawidjana, \(2003\)](#), and *Pascakolonialisme dan Sastra, Pola Narasi Kolonial dan Pascakolonial*. Kalam edisi 14.

Additionally, [Foucault's \(1972\)](#) in *Power/knowledge, selected interviews and other writings*, notion of "discourse" will be applied to examine how Naipaul constructs a "textual reality" through his travel writings. Foucault's ideas on the control and dissemination of knowledge will inform the analysis of how Naipaul's account constructs a particular image of Islam and Muslim communities in these countries. This construction influences the way readers interpret Islam, not as a lived, diverse faith, but as an imposed, alien cultural practice. [Jones, L. M. \(2023: 175-190\)](#).

The methodology combines literary analysis with a critical reading of Naipaul's text in the context of postcolonialism. This includes a close reading of *Beyond Belief*, focusing on Naipaul's narrative strategies, his use of language, and the implications of his descriptions of Muslim societies. Additionally, a comparative analysis with other travel writings and postcolonial critiques will be conducted to examine how Naipaul's work fits within the tradition of Western travel writing and its effects on the representation of Islam and Muslim communities. [Ahmad, I. \(2017: 123-153\)](#).

Several studies have examined Naipaul's treatment of Islam and Muslim societies, often highlighting his portrayal of these communities as "converted" or "other." In *Beyond Belief*, Naipaul's stance on Islam has been the subject of debate, with critics like [John P. Jordan \(2001\)](#) exploring how Naipaul's personal biases shape his depiction of Muslim societies. Jordan argues that Naipaul's view of Islam as an alien imposition reflects a broader Western suspicion of non-Western religions and cultures.

Other scholars, such as [Aijaz Ahmad \(1992: 142-158\)](#), have

critiqued Naipaul's stance through a postcolonial lens, emphasizing the colonial mindset that permeates his travel narratives. Ahmad suggests that Naipaul's narrative strategies reflect a broader Western tendency to view the East as a space that must be understood and defined from a Western perspective. This critique aligns with Edward Said's (1991) *Orientalism*, where Said contends that the West's construction of the East as an exotic "other" serves to justify colonial domination.

In contrast, some scholars argue that Naipaul's work offers valuable insights into the complexities of Muslim identities in postcolonial contexts. For instance, Ziauddin Sardar (1999: 78-94.) suggests that Naipaul's exploration of the Muslim experience, though flawed and biased, opens a window into the challenges faced by Muslim communities as they navigate modernity and identity.

This research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse by integrating postcolonial theory with an analysis of Naipaul's travel writing, specifically addressing the implications of his portrayals for contemporary understandings of Islam and Muslim societies. By exploring the gaps and tensions in Naipaul's narrative, the research will investigate how his representations shape global perceptions of Islam and the potential implications for da'wah and Islamic outreach in the modern world.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Muslim Society in Indonesia: Tradition, Modernity, and Religion

According to Smith, J. (2023: 45-60), Naipaul explores the dynamics of Muslim society in Indonesia, focusing on the interplay between tradition, modernity, and religion. While this book is a literary work rather than a scientific study, it offers insights into the social, political, and cultural changes within Indonesian Muslim society.

Said once dubbed Naipaul as the late advocate of postcolonial studies, Naipaul as a researcher viewed the Third World through Western eyes (Said, 1993: 25-40). In this interpretation, Naipaul appears to continue the long tradition of Orientalists in producing and justifying clichéd statements about Muslim society. His role in both works, as narrator, who is also the Self in travel writing. In his quote, he acknowledges, "*I had trouble with the narrator of the travel writer; I thought that as a traveler and narrator he was in unchallenged command and had to make big judgments*" (Naipaul, 2000: 30). Thus, in reality, the narrator is in full authority to define everything in making a judgment.

In this regard, quoting Loomba (1998) that *travel writing* produced in the 16th and 17th centuries shows a special attention to eating habits, beliefs, religious, etc., so in those records, fact and fiction blend. Loomba, quoting Stephen and Gould, states that although there is an assumption that with 'scientific' devices representation can be avoided, however, "*modern western science was deeply implicated in the construction of racist ways of thinking about human beings and the differences between them*" (Loomba, 1998: 60-61). Modern Western science was deeply involved in shaping racist ways of thinking about human beings and their differences.

Naipaul underscores the strong connection between Indonesian Muslim society and Islamic traditions, which adapt to both local cultures and modern changes. Despite challenges, Islam remains central to daily life. The story of Imaduddin, an intellectual who blended science and religion, exemplifies this balance. As a lecturer and religious leader, he encouraged students to engage with both faith and academia. His collaboration with Habibie, an aviation figure, highlights the contributions of Indonesian Muslims to both religious and scientific progress. (Naipaul, 1998: 9).

Not only that, the narrator's relatively positive view of Imaduddin emerges to justify what Imaduddin did. The following quote is a partial fact of that:

“to possess or control these schools was to possess power. And I began to feel that Imadudin and the Association of Muslim Intellectuals—with their stress on science and technology, and their dismissing of old ritual ways—aimed at nothing less. 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 (Naipaul, 1998: 24).

This shows that Imaduddin and the Association of Muslim Intellectuals, with their emphasis on science and technology, have great ambitions to fulfill the Islamic takeover as part of the world's leader in Islamic revival in the 21st century.

In the *History* chapter, Naipaul introduces Wahid, a key figure behind Imaduddin and his Muslim Intellectual Association, who is linked to Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), a prominent Indonesian intellectual. Wahid, the leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, is depicted as indifferent to Habibie's views on religion and politics. He is not only influential due to his leadership but also because of his lineage, which traces back to

Prophet Muhammad. However, Wahid is described as a controversial and enigmatic thinker, with his ideas sometimes difficult to understand, as noted by *The Jakarta Post*, which described him carefully as such. (Naipaul, 1998: 27).

Wahid is also a religious leader figure who has pesantren and leads NU, he also has strong political thoughts, although Wahid does not have a perfect physique because his eyes cannot see but he has other advantages which are his brain and very brilliant thinking, so many people admire him. This can be seen from the following quote:

One note from a foreign Journalist described him as 'a blind old cleric with a following of thirty million'. This gave Mr Wahid a comic-book character and confused him with somebody else in another country. Mr Wahid's eyes were not good, but he wasn't blind: he was only about fifty- two or fifty-three; and he wasn't cleric (Naipaul, 1998: 27).

Here, the narrator argues that Wahid is actually a very famous person even abroad. Although he has an imperfect physique, he is able to elevate Islam in the eyes of the world. Many people admire him, besides being a great cleric he also has a role in the Indonesian government. This means that he also plunged into the political arena of Indonesia, but that did not hinder his pesantren. Therefore, below is the narrator's view of pesantren in Indonesia: Perhaps religious teaching had to come with this repetitiveness, this isolating and beating down and stunning of the mind, this kind of pain.

Perhaps religious teaching had to come with this repetitiveness, this isolating and beating down and stunning of the mind, this kind of pain. Perhaps out of this there came self-respect of a sort, and even an idea of learning which-in the general cultural depression-might never have otherwise existed. (Naipaul, 1998: 34).

The passage explores how advancements in science, technology, and communication have diminished geographical and cultural barriers, weakening state and ideological influence. This globalization has reduced the significance of traditional bonds, such as nationality, and made knowledge more diverse. It suggests that science, alongside religion, can help elevate Islam on a global scale. The narrator's visit to Jakarta to meet Imaduddin highlights his exposure to global influences, as seen in the foreign souvenirs in his house, even though Imaduddin is absent. These mementoes, including Japanese items, an Eiffel Tower, and a Delft China

plate, reveal a softer side of Imaduddin (or his wife) and reflect the impact of global experiences on their lives. The following quote may explain what has been stated earlier:

"This was the story I reconstructed. In Langkat—perhaps in the latter part of the last century: Imaduddin gave no dates—there was a muezzin, a man who called the faithful to prayer. By that time the old muezzin's son, Imaduddin's father, was truly launched in Langkat. In 1918, when travel became safe again after the Great War, the mufti persuaded the sultan to send the young man to Mecca to study Arabic for two years... (Naipaul, 1998: 44).

Perhaps the quote above can represent the statement regarding the historical aspect depicted by the narrator in the *A Convert* chapter. Additionally, besides the historical aspect, the *A Convert* story can also be said to have religious philosophical aspects because there is a strong discussion about Islam in it. The following quote, for example, describes the Islamic atmosphere in Imaduddin's house:

"A large framed piece of Arabic calligraphy on one wall was very much like Imaduddin—foreign travel among the faithful: a gift perhaps, a souvenir—but I began to wonder whether I had come to the right place" (Naipaul, 1998: 42).

Naipaul explores Indonesian Muslim society by visiting sacred sites in West Sumatra, questioning the creation of such sites outside Saudi Arabia and the adoption of Arab-like practices in countries like Indonesia. He meets Mariman and Furqan from CIDES, where Mariman explains that villagers attribute his success to education, not religion. This shift highlights the growing importance of education, though many still return to religious practices. Naipaul's narrative reflects a subjective view shaped by post-colonial discourse, influenced by language, ideology, and worldview. As articulated by [Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin \(1998: 220\)](#),

"The concept of subjectivity problematizes the simple relationship between the individual and language, replacing human nature with the concept of the production of the human subject through ideology, discourse or language. These are seen as determining factors in the construction of individual identity, which itself becomes an effect rather than a cause of such factors."

From the above quote, it can be explained that Naipaul's texts ultimately function like a body that displays someone's identity but remains within a context full of subjectivity. [As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and](#)

Tiffin (1998: 220) further explain, "For although the body is a text, that is, a space in which conflicting discourses can be written and read, it is a specially material text, one that demonstrates how subjectivity, however constructed it may in fact be, is 'felt' as inescapably material and permanent." This aligns with Said's (1991) principle of worldliness in a text, where for Said, the materiality of the text is a series of authorial authority. Therefore, the narrator's subjectivity is also the materiality of the text, which functions to show that the world is constructed by authorial authority. This power, in travel writing, takes the form of a narrator who, in addition to being the author himself, also serves as a narrator, becoming a kind of censoring institution who, freely, the narrator can make undisputed justifications about what he sees and how he judges it.

Such a context is also evident in the *Ghost* section when the narrator misperceives the name Budi, a friend he coincidentally meets while traveling by car from Yogyakarta airport to the hotel where he stays. The following quote will clarify how the narrator's process of justification, which the researcher considers a mistake in perception based on his subjectivity: "We agreed later that I was to call him Budi (a common Indonesian name, descended no doubt from the Buddha); but he was at first only a voice in the darkness" (Naipaul, 1998: 118).

Here, subjectivity comes into play again; the narrator tries to construct his language as a form of general discourse that the name Budi is directly related to Buddha, whereas it may not be like that according to Indonesians in general. As the first person, he expresses an opinion that seems to be a general opinion, but it may not necessarily be accepted and justified by people or readers. Therefore, what happens later is that the word Budi means nothing to the narrator other than its association with Buddha. In this context, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1998) state that "subjectivity and the language that produces it constitute a process in which meaning is never fully present in any utterance but is continually deferred" (P. 223).

In the *Ghost* section, Naipaul presents various perspectives on Budi, a character who undergoes a spiritual transformation through his faith in Islam. Budi's newfound religious devotion is depicted through his daily practices, such as praying five times a day and avoiding beef that is not slaughtered according to Islamic law. (Naipaul, 1998: 119). His business, which was previously struggling, starts to thrive after he performs the Hajj, showing the positive impact of his religious commitment. Naipaul believes that countries like Indonesia, Pakistan, and Iran, having been

converted to Islam rather than having a direct historical connection to Islam's birthplace, experience a spiritual void. This void, he argues, fuels fundamentalist movements and a sense of rage against the past, as these countries seek an unattainable "true faith."

In the *A Sacred Place* section, Naipaul visits Minangkabau in Indonesia, a region where the majority are Muslims. He describes the area as having been a site of Wahhabi fundamentalist wars in the 19th century, noting the persistence of religious passion in the region. As he shifts his narrative to Java, Naipaul introduces two characters, Mariman and Furqon, who are also researching Muslim communities. Furqon, from Sumatra, is adventurous and less tied to his home, while Mariman, a Javanese, adheres to communal principles, symbolizing the more collective and pragmatic attitude of the Javanese Muslim community. (Naipaul, 1998: 56)

Recent research findings relevant to the themes in *Beyond Belief* by Naipaul suggest that Indonesia is a country with a highly dynamic Muslim society, where tradition, modernity, and religion interact in complex ways. While Islamic traditions continue to play a significant role in daily life, modernity and global influences present new challenges in religion, politics, and social identity. Sari, A. D. (2021: 215-230). Further academic research continues to reveal how Indonesia navigates these tensions and how Muslim society there manages significant social changes while preserving its cultural heritage.

Islam and Society in Iran: Analyzing the Social and Cultural Landscape

Naipaul's offers a critical exploration of the Islamic world, particularly Iran, examining the social, cultural, and religious landscapes. Although Naipaul's writing is not a formal academic study, it addresses significant themes that are relevant to the broader conversation about Islam, society, and the diversity of religious practice in the Muslim world. Bano, M. (2012: 45-67). One of the key issues that Naipaul addresses is the diversity of interpretations of Islam and how these interpretations shape societal structures. In this context, the concept of dakwah (Islamic missionary work) and its relationship to diversity within Muslim communities, particularly in Iran, is a critical theme that resonates throughout Naipaul's analysis.

In "The Foundation of the Oppressed," the narrator recounts his

experience of witnessing Iran's post-Islamic Revolution in 1979. [Moghissi, H. \(2009: 79-98\)](#). The narrator notes that after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Western symbols were replaced with Persian-Arabic names. For example, the Hyatt Hotel and KFC were renamed. The Islamic Republic of Iran, strongly anti-Western, especially against the United States, was viewed by many Iranians as an oppressive force against the Islamic world.

The narrator begins his journey by exploring Iran's conditions guided by a translator named Mehrdad, who indirectly became a victim of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war in the past. Mehrdad's father lost his job due to nationalization, and his sister remained unmarried as many men became casualties of the Iran-Iraq war. The Iranian state system [Keddie, N. R. \(2003: 500-24\)](#) was heavily influenced by the policies of Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Society in Iran was governed by strict Islamic Sharia laws that controlled the behavior of its citizens, with institutions like the Revolutionary Guard ensuring adherence to Sharia. Every action in Iran was monitored by these institutions, and nothing could be published or circulated without their approval. [Aghaie, K. S. \(2014: 121\)](#).

Continuing his journey through post-revolution Iran, the narrator visits monuments commemorating the Islamic Revolution and the victims of the Iran-Iraq war. These monuments feature various symbols of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, including statues of Ayatollah Khomeini and donation boxes for supporting Imam Khomeini's committee or the Revolution committee. [Harris, M. \(2011: 231\)](#). The cultural and political significance of monuments dedicated to the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War in Iran. These monuments serve as symbols of national identity, religious devotion, and the political agendas of the Islamic Republic of Iran, including the remembrance of martyrs like the 13-year-old child mentioned.

Additionally, there are monuments dedicated to the Iran-Iraq war, honoring the soldiers who sacrificed their lives. One particularly remembered martyr is a 13-year-old child who sacrificed himself by detonating a bomb against enemy tanks, receiving special attention from Khomeini in his speeches. [Moghadam, V. M. \(2012: 23\)](#). The perception built in this sub-heading gives the impression that the revolution in Iran restricts freedom, is authoritarian, and far from Western values that advocate democracy and freedom.

"There were religious rules now about every kind of public

behavior, and there were green-uniform Revolutionary Guards—their beards and guerrilla gear now the sign of authority, and not young rebellion—to enforce the rules." (Naipaul, 1998: 147)

The narrator views Iran's opposition to Western ideology as a mistake, using it to criticize the Islamic-based state system. His portrayal of Iran reflects a negative perception of Islam, positioning it as an "otherness" due to the country's stance against the West.

The story then continues with the sub-heading; "*Mr. Jeffrey's Round Trip*." Here, the narrator seeks someone known in the past named Mr. Jeffrey. He was the founder of an English-language newspaper called *Tehran Times* before the revolution. However, after six months of the revolution, the newspaper experienced a different fate. According to Mr. Jaffrey, the revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini did not bring about a better situation as expected, akin to the state Muhammad established during his prophethood. Pillay, V. (2010: 443). He thought that after the Shah's regime ended in Iran and was replaced by Islamic revolution, it might be better, but it turned out to be a country with excessive fanaticism. After six months of the revolution, his newspaper office experienced setbacks and losses indirectly due to the revolution that occurred at that time. Khatami, M. (2002: 89).

The narrator then discovers that Mr. Jaffrey had lost the *Tehran Times* newspaper, and he also found Mr. Jaffrey's colleague named Mr. Parvez working at another English-language newspaper called *Iran News*. He narrates what happened to Mr. Jaffrey after the revolution. At that time, Mr. Jaffrey was a journalist at Radio VOA, and during that period, relations between Iran and the United States were often strained, with the US embassy frequently besieged by groups of Muslim students following Ayatollah Khomeini. Mr. Jaffrey was asked to come to the embassy by one of the students, but after that, Mr. Jaffrey left Iran for Pakistan and was suspected of being a spy by Mr. Parvez. Events unfolded, including the Iran-Iraq war and the subsequent assassinations of Iranian leaders after the revolution. Mr. Parvez then became an editor at *Iran News*, and in his office, there was always a censor to screen all news before publication. Mobaraki, M. (2017: 325-345).

This story portrays Iran's condition after the revolution that overthrew the Shah Pahlavi regime, seen through the eyes of two journalists, Mr. Jaffrey and Mr. Parvez. They believe that the Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini did not result in significant

changes, despite its success in overthrowing the Pahlavi regime. The promises made by the revolution leaders failed to improve the lives of the Iranian people. [Azimi, F. \(2011: 180-198\)](#).

The portrayal of post-revolution Iranian society [Bakhash, S. \(2005\)](#) represented by a person named Mehrdad also serves as a means for Naipaul to criticize Iran and/or Islam in general. Mehrdad is depicted as contrasting with the revolutionary spirit because the impact he experiences is far from his expectations. [According to Bakhash, S. \(2005: 123-145\)](#), that the portrayal and representation become highly subjective when readers are only presented with one individual as a representation of Iranian society, which, in reality, cannot fully represent the entire Iranian society.

When Mehrdad's sister left the office she came home and stayed home. She stayed in her room much of time. She was moody, Merhdad said, she had become heavy, and bad rages and often cried; their mother don't know what to do for her (Naipaul, 1998: 146)

The same goes for the portrayal of the journalistic world in Iran, which was directly affected by the 1979 revolution. Before the revolution, journalism in Iran was not closely monitored by the government. [Aghaie, K. S. \(2004: 124\)](#) said that; the interests of the Shah regime, supported by the United States, were very apparent, including in the field of journalism. One of the American media present at the time was VOA (*Voice of America*). After the revolution, everything related to the West, especially the United States, was removed, including the US embassy and its VOA. This story implies that Iran had curtailed press freedom during the revolution, and the symbol of the collapse of that freedom was detached from the Western world, especially the United States. [Khamene'i, M. \(2011: 56\)](#). Thus, Iran no longer became a democratic and free country in the field of journalism after the revolution, especially concerning matters related to the Islamic state system, as seen in the quote; *"We have criticized presidents, ministers, etc. but we know if we even try to hurt or destroy the basic system, we would not be spared"* (Naipaul, 1998: 162).

The portrayal of the Iranian journalistic world during the pre-revolution and post-revolution periods gives the impression that Iran has violated press freedom. [Kian, S. \(2009: 172\)](#). In the post-revolution era, the Iranian press is monitored by the government through strict censorship that regulates the news given to the public. During this time,

there was also no interference from the United States in Iran, especially in journalism. After the revolution, VOA could not carry out its activities. [Mir, F. A. \(2012: 88\)](#). According to the narrator's perception, this gives the impression that Iran has deviated from the corridor of press freedom upheld by the United States as a symbol of liberty. Negative perceptions and views about the revolution resurface here, indicating that the hopes for a government to replace the Shah regime were not as expected, namely a government oriented towards the West, as in the following quote:

"I thought that the regime of Shah would go, and we would have a Western-style democratic government, as we had in India. I have never been Islamic as such... my background was not religious at all." (Naipaul, 1998: 164)

Meanwhile, in "The Great War," we are presented with the narrator's meeting with Arash in this story, who will recount his experiences of war. [Hosseini, S. R. \(2015: 115\)](#) said that representation in Iranian war narratives, particularly focusing on individuals like Arash, who transition from active participation to civilian life after the war. It likely discusses the symbolic meaning of colors and headbands in Basiji identity and how the Iranian war experience is memorialized in personal stories. [Fazeli, M. \(2017: 58\)](#), Arash used to be a Basiji but now works as a taxi driver in Tehran. Basijis are Iranian fighters known for their headbands, which can be red, white, green, or black. What is often seen on TV is the red headband. Red symbolizes blood, sacrifice, and belief. Arash's family has lived in Tehran for two generations; they are a farming family. Arash's grandfather, when he came to Tehran, became a soldier during the reign of Reza Shah, the father of the last Shah's lineage.

During the war, there will be a Chanter (church singer) who comes to the front lines before the war begins. The singer will rhythmically strike his chest with one hand. And he will use both hands if the situation of war becomes serious, but what is sung is not from the Qur'an but rather hymns. The singing ceremony lasts for two hours, after which it stops for half an hour or more, but not more than ninety minutes, and then the attack begins. Many people cleanse themselves (wudhu) before the attack because they believe the attack they are about to undertake is holy, and it is very good because it can purify them. [Shahrani, M. N. \(2018: 134\)](#). And it ends with sacrifice; they can see God with a clean body and clothes after making the sacrifice. Arash served as a conscript for four years, the

first two years as a Basiji and the second two years joining the army for military duty. Rahimi, S. (2020: 88).

Initially, Arash chose to be a Basiji rather than a soldier because all the TV, radio, and newspaper coverage made him feel like he was fighting for Islam. A confirming quote from the text is as follows: *"They made him feel he was fighting for Islam, first of all. And then nation and family. Both together"* (Naipaul, 1998: 169).

In this passage, Arash, who served in the Basiji and later the army during the Iran-Iraq war, narrowly survived a rocket attack that left him severely injured. After recovering, he returned home, where his father, concerned for his safety, did not want him to fight again. Arash reflects on the death of Imam Khomeini, which marked a shift in the country. Despite the ongoing war and sacrifices, people in Tehran became more focused on materialistic pursuits like money, fashion, and music, moving away from the ideological and religious struggles that once defined their lives. *"In Tehran nobody cared about the war. Everybody was looking for money"* (Naipaul, 1998: 171).

The passage depicts a Muslim community in Tehran influenced by American culture, with the Basiji gaining a negative reputation. Western music, clothing, and eating habits have replaced traditional Islamic practices, leading to cultural assimilation. While some Muslims continue to fight for their faith, others are indifferent. The text suggests that America's influence now undermines faith through subtle means, such as music and lifestyle changes, posing a gradual but dangerous threat to the community's religious beliefs. *"He broke off then and, in the same tone voice, asked Merhbad, 'he is asking about brainwashing?'"* (Naipaul, 1998: 173).

Naipaul critiques Iran's use of dakwah (Islamic missionary work) after the revolution, arguing that the state uses it not only to spread religious teachings but to enforce alignment with its official ideology. He highlights the tension between the state's singular interpretation of Islam and the diverse ways people practice the religion, which leads to social alienation and fragmentation. Naipaul suggests that state-controlled dakwah suppresses religious diversity and contributes to cultural division, encouraging reflection on the coexistence of religious pluralism and dakwah in societies like Iran.

Islam and Society in Pakistan: An Exploration of Faith, Identity, and Social Change

Naipaul critically examines Islamic societies, including Pakistan, focusing on the intersection of faith, identity, and social change. While not an academic study, Naipaul's work provides valuable insight into the social, political, and religious landscapes of Muslim-majority societies, particularly Pakistan. Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan has grappled with defining its national identity in relation to Islam and modernity. [Patranobish, P. \(2019: 31\)](#). In this context, both *dakwah* (Islamic missionary work) and social change play significant roles in shaping the dynamics of Pakistani society. By integrating relevant phenomena, recent data, and previous studies, we can better understand how religion and identity evolve within Pakistan.

The portrayal of the Islamic community in "Dropping off the Map," specifically in the section "Rana in His Village," begins with the turmoil in the Pakistan Parliament, known for its Sabbath on Friday, which causes chaos and suffering for the people. This is exacerbated by the hanging of Mr. Bhutto.

"The Raiwind gathering that year had come at a time when the country was having its first taste of religious terror, under General Zia. He had hanged Mr. Bhutto, the Friday Sabbath man..." [\(Naipaul, 1998: 286\)](#).

The term "religious terror" marks the brutality of the perpetrator, General Zia, who "...he had gone to Mecca to do the little pilgrimage, not the full one, but he had still come back with a hundred million dollars of Saudi money" [\(Naipaul, 1998: 286\)](#). It is ironic that after terrorizing, he then goes on an Umrah pilgrimage and returns with a wealth of dollars. This narrative emphasizes words that refer to places and events such as Mecca and pilgrimage, which are closely associated with Islam/Muslims.

The passage highlights how Western or non-Muslim perspectives, often unsympathetic, shape the narrator's view of Islam and Muslim societies. These views, influenced by outdated stereotypes of Muslims, portray them as oil suppliers, terrorists, or violent mobs. The narrator observes that there is little room in cultural discourse to portray Islam sympathetically, especially in relation to non-Western societies, as reflected in his reaction to a mosque sermon. The narrator comments as in the following quote:

"...[f]rom far away we could hear the loudspeakers in the village.

They were not selling blankets now. They were the loudspeakers of the mosque, and the preacher was speaking. ... could come to people living simple lives, such as people of the village" (Naipaul 1998: 293).

The narrator contrasts two voices heard through loudspeakers: one from a blanket vendor and the other from a 'vendor' of religious dogma (Islam). Both voices share the same intention—selling something—but the narrator finds the religious voice to be overwhelming. This juxtaposition highlights the complexities of identity and interpretation in post-colonialism. In the section "Guerilla," the narrator meets Shahbaz, a man born after Pakistan's independence, who, despite not experiencing colonialism directly in his country, faces racial pressures in England while attending school. This adds to the ongoing struggle with colonial influences on identity.

"He had gone to both primary and public school in England, and he had suffered especially at the public school. He was the only Asian, the only Muslim, the only one who didn't eat pork and go to the chapel" (Naipaul, 1998: 295). Eventually, Shahbaz and his father could not bear the burden, so they decided to return to Pakistan. However, life in Pakistan did not improve for him. In the narration, the narrator recounts two contradictory things about Shahbaz's experiences.

This has implications for individual characters, especially Salman, whose religious faith or devotion to religion becomes reduced and even fades away. The narrator recounts, "...He (Salman) had no religious faith now, but he was the complete Pakistani soldier. He was passionate about going to war with India." ...The reality faced by Salman is not easy, and bias towards Islam is further reinforced by the narrator's statement, "I think this tradition gives the Muslim license to act violently" (Naipaul, 1998: 327).

However, despite these reform trends, studies also show that Pakistan faces significant challenges in balancing the preservation of traditional Islamic values with the demands of modernity. Hassan Askari Rizvi, in his article in the *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* (2017), explains how Pakistani politics is often caught between conservative Islamic factions dominating religious policy and those supporting social reforms.

Finally, Naipaul provides a critical analysis of the relationship between Islam, identity, and social change in Pakistan. While Pakistan

seeks to preserve its identity as an Islamic state, there is significant tension between traditional Islamic values and the forces of modernity. Dakwah plays a pivotal role in this process, acting as both a tool for reinforcing conservative religious ideologies and a response to broader social challenges. This social phenomenon is influenced by the internal diversity of Islam in Pakistan, which creates both opportunities for change and tensions within society. Previous studies and recent data reveal that Pakistan is at a crossroads between preserving traditional Islamic values and pursuing modernity, resulting in complex social dynamics.

The Dynamics of Muslim Life in Malaysia: Islam, Social Structure, and National Development

Naipaul critiques the manipulation of religion for political control and questions whether a single religious interpretation hinders intellectual and social growth. Digital dakwah, which allows for more diverse religious expressions, raises concerns about centralizing religious authority. In Malaysia, it challenges the government's control over religious narratives, as its rapid spread complicates regulation. This trend reflects a global shift in the Muslim world, where digital platforms enable remote Islamic education, making religious knowledge more accessible, especially in rural areas. According to a study by [Nor Azizhan Idris \(2022: 45\)](#) in the *International Journal of Islamic Thought*, this digital transformation has increased the involvement of young Malaysians in religious discussions, fostering a new, more engaged generation of Muslims.

The role of digital dakwah in Malaysia is expected to grow as the digital landscape evolves. While it offers benefits such as increased accessibility and inclusivity, it also presents challenges related to ideological control and fragmentation. Naipaul's analysis of Islamic societies, particularly their relationship with modernity, provides valuable insights into how digital dakwah may shape the future of Muslim life in Malaysia.

The narrative also explores the life of Nadezha, a Malaysian girl who hides her father's rural background. Her father, though from a village, is well-educated, having attended college in Kuala Langsar, where strict social restrictions made it difficult for Nadezha's parents to interact. Growing up in a more academic environment, Nadezha found the behaviors of those around her unreasonable, highlighting the complexity of societal norms and personal identity. As in the following quote:

After the fasting month all the family came together, sometimes with friends, and they played poker for two days and two nights. Nadezha grew up thinking that this was usual, that it was what people everywhere did after the fasting month. Nadezha said, “They were decadent. They thought it would last for ever. ‘They were not educated. That’s the problem, in my time the rich didn’t study’ (Naipaul, 1998: 398).

This is certainly related to Nadezha's educational background as someone educated in college. She prioritizes logic over everything related to tradition. In this position, Nadezha is a female figure who adopts a term that is considered appropriation in postcolonial studies.

A term used to describe the ways in which post-colonial societies take over those aspects of the imperial culture –language, forms of writing, film, theatre, even modes of thought and argument such as rationalism, logic and analysis – that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities (Aschroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 1998: 19).

The passage explores the intersection of Islam and local traditions in Malaysia, particularly the influence of Hindu customs on Malay marriage practices and the critique of Malays' focus on civil service over business due to colonial legacies. It portrays life in a Malay village as centered on religion, with daily prayers and the mosque as the social center. The narrative also highlights the blending of Islamic and Hindu traditions, illustrated by Rashid, the Bomoh's son, who grapples with Islamic teachings but gradually embraces the faith.

Syed Alwi's story mirrors these struggles, as his father, suffering from schizophrenia, lives a dual life—one adhering to Islamic principles and the other contradicting them. His father's search for a personal connection with God reflects broader religious conflicts in Malaysia, where Islam struggles to fully integrate with deeply rooted cultural practices. This duality symbolizes the tension between maintaining traditional customs and embracing Islam in post-colonial Malaysia.

Islam, as it developed in Malaysia, formed a new culture that may have differed significantly from pre-existing cultures. The quote suggests that a Muslim who has not fully embraced Islam is torn between two worlds: one where they adhere to Islam with all its regulations and laws, and another where Islam is merely an identity. It raises questions about whether Islam shapes the personality of a Muslim in Malaysia, or if it's the

Muslim who shapes Islam within themselves. [Ahmad, R. \(2021: 45\)](#). This reflects the portrayal of Muslims in Malaysia at that time, who were still grappling with their beliefs as Muslims.

Syed Alwi's father experiences unusual occurrences outside his normal life, illustrating the life of a Muslim who does not fully practice Islamic teachings. The narrator seems to indicate to readers that Islam has had negative effects on pre-existing cultures in Malaysia, suggesting that Islam could potentially erode entire cultures worldwide. Islamic teachings may conflict with the modern world, causing confusion among Malaysian society. Mentally, physically, and geographically, society is divided between their Muslim identity and their engagement in the modern world, which often contradicts Islamic principles. [Ahmad, R. \(2021: 123\)](#).

Furthermore, the narrator depicts Islam as the original religion of the Arabs, suggesting that non-Arab Muslims are not considered fully Muslim, or that their Islam is perceived as converted or secondary. In contrast, true Muslims are portrayed as native Arabs.

“Syed Alwi, talking of his ancestry, said, ‘Legends are more real than history, ‘a descendant of the prophet. This meant, in Malaysia, that an ancestor would have been an Arab or Indian merchant, and Alwi was an Arab clan name. But Syed Alwi with all his Malay instinct and passions, looked more European than Arab or Malay.’” [\(Naipaul, 1998: 423\)](#).

Naipaul offers a critique of the ways in which Islam intersects with social and national development. In Malaysia, this relationship is evolving in response to both traditional values and the pressures of modernity, particularly through the phenomenon of digital dakwah. The rise of digital dakwah in Malaysia is transforming religious engagement and social dynamics, presenting both opportunities for social reform and challenges regarding the control and regulation of religious narratives. [Ahmad, A. \(2020: 123\)](#). As Malaysia continues to integrate Islam with national development in the digital age, the dynamics of Muslim life will continue to shift, influenced by new technologies and the evolving role of religion in society.

CONCLUSION

The research emphasizes the role of literature, particularly Naipaul's writings, as a powerful tool for reflecting on and critiquing the practices of da'wah. [Naipaul's storytelling challenges the way religion is propagated,](#)

urging readers to critically assess the relationship between religion and politics in Muslim-majority countries. His narratives offer insight into the complexities of Islamic identity in the modern world, particularly in regions where Islam is closely tied to national identity and political authority.

Literature as a means for Da'wah. The study highlights that literature, beyond entertainment, can serve as a means of promoting genuine religious understanding. Naipaul's work acts as an indirect form of da'wah, using narrative to critique the politicization of religion and advocating for a more authentic practice of Islam based on peace and intellectual freedom.

Global Da'wah and Contemporary Challenges. The research stresses the importance of context when considering da'wah efforts. Da'wah in Third-World societies often ignores local socio-political realities, leading to misinterpretations. The study calls for a more contextually aware approach to da'wah that adapts to the unique challenges of each society.

Criticism of the Spread and Interpretation of Islam. Naipaul critiques the narrow, politicized interpretations of Islam in Third-World societies. This research calls for a more inclusive approach to religious scholarship and da'wah, one that reflects the pluralistic nature of Islamic societies and promotes a return to a more inclusive, authentic interpretation of Islam.

Context in the Conversion Process. The research underscores the importance of understanding the socio-political and cultural contexts in which conversions to Islam take place. Naipaul suggests that conversions are often influenced by factors beyond spiritual belief, such as political and cultural pressures, and advocates for a nuanced understanding of conversion in da'wah efforts.

In conclusion, this research illustrates how Naipaul's *Beyond Belief* functions as a reflective critique of da'wah practices, urging a more thoughtful, inclusive, and context-aware approach to religious propagation. It calls for an understanding of Islam that respects the diverse realities of modern Muslim societies and challenges the misuse of religion for political purposes.

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