

Decay of Old Culture: A Study of V.S Naipaul's *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*

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Abstract

The term imperialism is mainly applied to the political and economic dominance of Asia and Africa by Western powers in the 19th and 20th century. However, imperialism has been a common phenomenon throughout recorded history and it is not entirely a European practice. Imperialism goes beyond political domination and economic exploitation. It destroys or pushes the culture of the subjugated people to the periphery. This practice commonly known as cultural imperialism is largely responsible for the decay of indigenous culture in many countries. V.S. Naipaul travelled to four Islamic countries and wrote two books *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief* in which he attacked Islam as an imperialistic religion and held Islamic fundamentalism largely responsible for the destruction of pre-Islamic culture particularly in two South Asian countries, Malaysia and Indonesia. This paper attempts to study how and the extent to which the old culture of the two countries are undermined mainly by Islam and partly by the inevitable forces of modernisation as documented by Naipaul in the two books and critically assess whether he is justified in making such claims.

Key words: Imperialism, Cultural imperialism, religion, Islam, pre-Islamic culture.

Introduction

The term imperialism in its current usage is mainly applied to political and economic dominance of Asia and Africa by Western powers such as Great Britain, France, Germany, Netherlands and Portugal during the 19th and 20th century. However, imperialism has been a common phenomenon throughout recorded history and it is not entirely a European idea or practice. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said defined imperialism as “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory” (9). According to Michael Doyle, “Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire” (qtd. in Said 9). Going by these definitions, it can be said that the practice of maintaining and ruling distant territory was carried out by many powerful countries throughout history. For instance, China had a long history of imperialist expansion under Tang and Qing dynasty, the Ottoman Empire was an imperial state that lasted for many centuries and Japan was an imperialistic country till its defeat in the Second World War. Imperialism goes beyond political domination and economic exploitation. It destroys or tries to erase the customs, religion, social and moral norms of the subject people by imposing and

promoting the culture of the ruling power. This practice is commonly known as cultural imperialism. Political philosophers, literary critics and public intellectuals like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Antonio Gramsci and Edward Said laid the theoretical foundation to the different discourses of cultural imperialism within the context of postcolonial studies. Within the realm of postcolonial studies, most academics would agree that cultural imperialism is the cultural legacy of European colonialism.

Besides military forces, political, educational, religious and cultural institutions were set up to directly and indirectly control the subject people. This idea was expressed by Macaulay in his “Minute Upon Indian Education” in 1835 in which he essentially said that English education was needed to produce a class of Indians who would help them run their enterprise. To achieve this purpose, educational institutions with Western curriculum were set up which in turn led to the undervaluation and neglect of the traditional structure of education, vernacular language and native literature. Religion also played an instrumental role in changing the culture and worldview of the subjugated people. Missionary works were carried out with the primary aim of spreading their faith. Motivated by the beliefs that the culture of the subject race was uncivilised and barbaric and also that a society with a rich culture and a strong cultural identity would be difficult to defeat, the colonizers tried to erase their culture and their history in order to ‘civilize’ them and to mitigate resistance.

The examination of cultural imperialism by Edward Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism*, is centred mostly on the British Empire. No doubt, cultural imperialism of the British in the 19th and first half of the 20th century had no rivals but there are other well known examples of this phenomenon throughout recorded history. Ephraim Karsh in his *Islamic Imperialism* argued that the story of Islam from the mid 7th century to the Ottomans “has been the story of the rise and fall of universal empires and, no less important, of imperialist dreams” (5). He further argued that Islam is different from other major proselytizing religion like Christianity. The universalism of Christianity, he said, was “originally conceived in purely spiritual terms that made a clear distinction between God and Caesar” whereas the birth of Islam was “inextricably linked with the creation of a world empire and its universalism was imperialist” (5). Naipaul also asserted that Islam makes imperial demands from the converted people and it is largely responsible for the erosion of pre-Islamic culture and growth of Arab culture in non-Arab Muslim countries. He made this claim after travelling to some non-Arab Muslim countries including Malaysia and Indonesia and wrote two travel books, *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief* documenting his experience and observation.

The paper attempts to study how the decay and erosion of old culture, beliefs, ways of life, rites and rituals took place in Malaysia and Indonesia based on Naipaul’s *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*. In *India: A Wounded Civilization*, Naipaul said that India was invaded and its wealth plundered by multiple Islamic invaders in the past. How Islam came to Malaysia and Indonesia and how it affected the local culture is a different story. In the first book *Among the Believers*, he began by briefly narrating how Hinduism and Buddhism came to South East Asia from India. These religions were not spread by armies or colonists but by merchants and priests from the Indian subcontinent. Around the fourteenth and fifteenth century, Islam came to South East Asia as another religion from India. It was brought by the same kind of travellers from India. There was no invasion and overnight abrogation of a settled world-order as it happened in India. Islam spread as an idea with a Prophet, a divine

revelation, a concept of heaven and hell and a divinely sanctioned code. It did not clash with the older faith or civilization but mingled with older ideas.

Malaysia

This section of the paper examines the ways and processes through which old culture deteriorates and decays in Malaysia as documented by Naipaul in the two books. He examined the effect of the rise of what he called 'new Islam' on the culture of some South East Asian countries, particularly Malaysia. In the later part of 20th century, a new Islamic movement started in Pakistan and began to send missionaries to Malaysia to purify that mixed religion. One of their missions, Naipaul pointed out, was to pull down Western materialism and turn the country into a land of pure faith. After some years, the missionaries found a response from a young generation of Malays who came from villages. The Islamic revolutionaries of Malaysia, as Naipaul called them, are young Malays who found themselves alienated and marginalised in their own country. He believed that those feelings were created by the realisation that the new world which they found themselves in was a British-Chinese creation. The British no longer ruled, but the Malays were only half the population. The Chinese immigrants had monopolised the economy and the political power of the country was in the hands of the Malay royal families who had crossed over into the new world some generations ago. So, the new men of the villages, determined to fight the injustice, used Islam as their weapon. He observed thus, "Now they have a weapon: Islam. It is their way of getting even with the world. It serves their grief, their feeling of inadequacy, their social rage and racial hate" (*Among* 264).

As Naipaul uses the unique technique to interviewing individuals and representatives of organisations to gather information regarding any contemporary social, political, economic, cultural and religious issues in his travel based narratives to formulate his own views which form the basis of his non-fictional works, certain individual viewpoints as discussed here. His conversations with different people in Malaysia showed how young Muslim men working in different Islamic groups were trying to uproot the old Malaysian culture they grew up in to make the country Islamically purer. One of the men Naipaul interviewed was Shafi, a young man who worked at ABIM, a Muslim youth organisation. He described his childhood life in a village in Kota Baru as an idyllic experience where everybody knew each other very well, lived a self-sufficient life, a life free from waste, pollution and modern machineries and technology. It was also a very religious community where children were encouraged more to go for religious education than secular education. He admitted that there were drawbacks to that system of life in the sense that they lagged behind the Chinese community in intellectual pursuits and material success. But he felt that the village system of religious education had its own benefits. He said,

Yes, we fell behind intellectually, I would say further – in terms of pursuit for material and secular education we fell behind. But in terms of being more human, more responsible persons, being more reasonable in our conduct or way of life. I think we are a lot better than them. Morally we are a lot better than them. (*Among* 277)

Naipaul sensed some contradictions in Shafi's view of the village life that he longed to go back to. Shafi said that he considered going back to the village sometimes but he seemed to

have changed his mind and said that there were certain aspects of the village life that he did not like and approve. Some communities in the villages emphasised pre-Islamic traditions more than Islamic tradition. So, over and above his wish to preserve the Malay village community life, he had a contrary wish given by the new Islam to purify the old ways of the village. Any un-Islamic or pre-Islamic customs and beliefs that sprang from the Hindu, Buddhist and animist past were considered impure and part of his cause was to uproot what had survived of the old faiths. Similar views were held by many other young Malay Muslims. A *haji* (someone who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca) told Naipaul that he had no romantic feelings for the village because the village life was not Islamic. The villagers still followed so many animistic and Hindu traditions. He disapproved of the Hindu wedding ceremonies because it went against the Koran. While organisations like ABIM were trying to inculcate Islamic values to young people through religious education, there were also violent and radical Muslim groups who were destroying all remnants of past civilization and old faiths by smashing Chinese shrines, Hindu and Buddhist temples.

By recording such incidents, Naipaul showed how old culture, traditional ways of life, religious beliefs and practices had vanished, though some may have decayed due to its own inherent weaknesses. Most part of the so called old culture decayed through conflicts, violent forces from outside initiated by the young generation who have lost all respect for the old ways of life. However progressive new ways may seem, to witness the traces of a decaying yet once highly active culture cannot always be seen as positive growth. We sometimes see the need for peaceful co-existence between traditional and modern ways of life for the country's intellectual as well as moral growth. All is not over yet as Naipaul recorded other views which had more tolerant views of other faiths and rituals. Rashid's father who was of mixed Chinese and Indonesian origin was a bomoh (a healer or a shaman). His mother had adopted Malay language and culture and she worshipped a Malay ancestor, the Datuk. He became interested in Christianity when he was in secondary school and later in Islam. Interest in other religions was prompted by the fact that the rituals and the deities at home couldn't answer bigger philosophical questions. After he became a Muslim, he stopped taking part in the rituals at home but his father never questioned his choice. Neither he nor his father forced other family members to follow one particular faith. Through such observations, Naipaul pondered upon religious beliefs which play the most crucial role in the gradual decay of old ways of life by pointing out certain basic human traits such as scepticism and antagonism towards religion other than one's own.

By the time Naipaul visited Malaysia in 1995 after his first visit in 1979, so much had changed. He noticed that the city of Kuala Lumpur and all the surrounding towns had gone through a major infrastructural change. The conditions of the interior small towns and villages had improved so much that almost all remnants of the past had disappeared. The common perception that the Malays were lazy was replaced by the new idea that they were as innovative, business-minded and energetic as the Chinese. Racial tension between the Malays and Chinese seemed to have disappeared. All these points to the changing scenario in the last decade of the 20th century in Malaysia which is no longer concentrated solely on religious aspects but has broadened to other areas such as economic, infrastructural and political aspects which have now become new tools responsible for the decay of old culture. Such transformation is witnessed through individuals like Nasar, a young man who worked at

ABIM when Naipaul met him in 1979. He started his own company and had become very successful. Naipaul asked if his views of Islam had changed due to changed circumstances and he replied,

In those days we talked about religion theoretically. Now we are talking about Islam as a way of life in practice. Now I confront the real world. My previous knowledge helps me- what I can do, the limit of my freedom, to what extent I can adhere to a mere capitalist philosophy. . . . The test for a Muslim is when they are confronted with reality and a choice to make. Until then they are always right. Utopian. (*Beyond Belief* 390)

Change is necessary for the continuance of life and for the youth, it is easy to change and adapt to and adopt new ways of life but it is the old who faces unexpected challenges, having to adopt new ways while still bound by memories of the old.

Indonesia

Indonesia is a Muslim dominated country but before the coming of Islam, it had a great Hindu-Buddhist past. That civilization lasted for 1400 years and it still survived in many ways. The 9th century Borobudur temple and Prambanam temple stand as symbols of that great civilization. Naipaul said that the great pre-Islamic civilization gave Indonesians or the Javanese a feeling of uniqueness. That civilization is no longer part of the system, no longer fully possessed by the people because they are no longer fully understood. It can be understood only through academic strife. But seeing the statues and revolutionary monuments in the city of Jakarta, Naipaul felt that people had a sense of the past and that past went beyond the freedom struggle and colonial times. Even the name of the city 'Jakarta' was a Sanskrit name which means 'the city of victory'.

Looking at the major historical events that had taken place in Indonesia, and interviewing different people, Naipaul tried to assess how much cultural changes had taken place due to internal and external forces. It was from Suryadi who considered himself a nominal Muslim that Naipaul came to know about the cultural changes taking place in the country. Under the Dutch rule, there were school and universities that provided good education to the people. When the Japanese occupied Java, school and universities were taken over by the Japanese and classes were used to preach nationalism. In order to abolish the Dutch language, they ordered all the Dutch signs to be taken down or painted out and within a short period of time, almost all remains of the three hundred years of Dutch rule disappeared. In universities, students were given military training. Following the discipline of the Zen monastery, all the students were made to shave their heads.

Suryadi, being a Javanese, loved his culture: the Javanese dance, the Javanese epics and the puppet plays but he perceived a perversion taking place in Javanese culture during the army rule under Suharto. The Javanese culture that the army rule asserted was encouraging a revival of feudal attitudes, with the army taking the place of the old courts and he considered it a twisted kind of retrogression. Suryadi also saw the effects of new Islam on many young people. His own daughter began to change after she met a new Muslim man at the university. From a lively girl who loved Javanese dancing, diving and camping, she became a submissive and dull girl. She began to cover her hair, wear drab long gowns and had signed a pledge to be ruled in everything by a particular Muslim teacher. At the end of this meeting, Naipaul

concluded that people, whether they moved forward into the new modern civilization or backward towards the purer faith, were getting further from their own culture.

It can be noted that modern civilization contributes a lot towards the disintegration of a culture of a people but other factors such as colonial rule and its impositions on the natives also encourage the gradual erosion of one's culture through severance of ties with one's past. For Sitor Situmorang, a famous poet who came from Sumatra, disconnection with his tribal past started since the colonial times. Sitor was a Batak, one of the animist tribes of Sumatra. The tribe had a very unique style of decorative art, extraordinary building skills and different rituals performed at different occasions. From that life, he was sent to a Dutch boarding school at the age of six. He went to Jakarta for his secondary education. Because he spent most of his early life outside of his village, his knowledge of and contact with the village life was limited. As a writer, he had been trying to write an autobiography but because he had lost touch with his tribal past, he could not reconstruct it. Understanding his difficulty, Naipaul said, "He hadn't been able to define himself because he didn't know who he was. He had been cut off from his past. He had gone to the Dutch school when he was six; he had been cleansed of village beliefs" (*Among* 366).

Religious and educational institutions have always played important roles in promoting and developing cultures. Naipaul saw the traditional Islamic village boarding schools known as *pesantrens* as a part of breaking away from the Indonesian past. Naipaul found out that the children in the *pesantrens* were learning mostly religious lessons in Arabic and low carpentry skills. The idea of "unstructured" schools where everybody learned from each other did not appeal to him. He wrote, "The sufi centre turned school: the discipline of monks and dervishes applied to the young: it wasn't traditional, and it wasn't education. It was a breaking away from the Indonesian past; it was Islamization, it was stupefaction, greater than any that could have come with a western-style curriculum" (*Among* 378).

Naipaul saw another type of training programme given to young students by Imaduddin who was an electrical engineer and an instructor at the Bandung Institute of Technology. Through his Islamic mental training course, he strove to prepare the next generation of leaders of Indonesia to replace the existing system of the government with an Islamic state. He was not happy with the government paying attention to the monuments of the old faiths like the Borobudur and Prambanam temples. Listening to Imaduddin's vision of a country run by Islamic rules, his rejection of the West and wilful denial of Indonesian history, Naipaul commented rather ironically, "His faith was so great that he could separate his country from its history, traditions, art: its particularity" (*Among* 435). When Naipaul revisited Indonesia in 1995, he found out that Imaduddin had become more influential through his connection with Habibie, the minister for research and technology. What disheartens us is the fact that persons like Imaduddin with a radical mindset work to cut off all ties with his past to erase all traces of other religions and to reject whether good or bad – all the achievements and contributions of the past to the present. This is a negative mindset which proves to bring more harm than benefits.

Nevertheless, Naipaul also brought forth such aspects of life which has not lost much of its old culture. Naipaul went to one of the villages below the volcano of Mount Merapi known for its rich cultural heritage. Rice cultivation was one of the main activities of the villagers. There were so many rituals and traditions connected with rice and in traditional houses,

people had a shrine of the goddess Devi Sri, the rice goddess. Naipaul was impressed by their exquisite manners, their rituals of welcome to guests and their use of polite language which is different from the everyday language.

Islam and Christianity came to these parts of the country not as rival faiths to the older faith but as a complement to the old faith. The perfect blending of the old and new religion was seen in the evolution of the *wayang*, the puppet theatre. The story of the puppet play was based on the two Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The stories, reworked and retold over the centuries had taken Javanese roots and had been adapted to Islam. The characters of the play had adopted Javanese names. The people of Prambanam village called themselves people of composite religion because they live with everything at once: the mosque, the church, Krishna, the rice goddess, a remnant of Hindu caste, the Buddhist idea of nirvana, the Muslim idea of paradise. However, such idyllic life, sooner or later, must bear the brunt of change even though one wished it were not so.

Changes in the old rhythm of life are inevitable with the coming of modernisation. Due to rapid growth of population, more food was needed but the new rice that gave two crops a year started interfering with seasonal festivals and gave people no time to enjoy the puppet plays. The family planning system threatened the extended family system which in turn affected the bonds between men. The ritualised community life where relatives were called to help each other to cut paddy was gone. So, the rich community life that centred on growing rice began to deteriorate slowly. When he revisited this village after sixteen years, Linus, an old acquaintance, told him about the changes in the old ways brought by urbanisation process. Many young people had left the rice fields in search of jobs in cities. Farmers have no more time and money for puppet shows and festivities.

Linus also pointed out that the composite religion which the village was known for was slowly vanishing. As a Christian, he said that it was not difficult to live with the old ways because the Christianity they adopted did not require a complete break with the past. On the other hand, he noticed that the Muslims were slowly abandoning the old ways and becoming more assertive of their difference from others. Many women had begun to cover themselves up in veils and gowns. Even the village *koum*, a Muslim village elder had started refraining himself from performing certain Javanese rituals. He felt that the tolerance and equilibrium of the village had gone.

Naipaul went to another village known for rice cultivation in the Minangkabau uplands in West Sumatra. In the village, people still held some animist beliefs. For instance, they believed that forests, springs and rivers were occupied by spirits and men who clear the land had to make a compromise by performing certain rituals with the spirit inhabitants. Rice, being the principal crop, was the subject of every kind of old reverences and fertility rite and it had to be treated with respect. Some practices that predate even the Hindu and Buddhist civilisation still existed in these villages. For instance, before the rice harvest, they had to cut seven stalks of paddy and hang it up on their houses but nobody knew the original prompting behind that tradition. Because there was no written history and literature, a thousand year old civilization was reduced to a set of rites and taboos. Now, with the coming of new Islam, Naipaul believed that even those surviving traditions would disappear soon because the missionaries do not tolerate composite religion or un-Islamic traditions.

His conversation with people from different background and visits to villages gave Naipaul a chance to access the damages done by religions in general and Islam in particular to indigenous and non-Arabic cultures. According to him, one of the reasons why the revealed religions like Christianity and Islam survived and not the indigenous religions was because great conversions of nations, as in Indonesia, occur when people have no means of understanding or retrieving the past. A society rejects or looks down upon their own culture when they have no firm grasp of their own past and the history of their own country. In such a situation, it becomes easier for an outside civilisation to impose their culture on them and completely wipe out all remnants of their past. Naipaul criticised Islam for its imperialist ambitions which, he believed, is mainly responsible for the decay of indigenous culture. He wrote,

The cruelty of Islamic fundamentalism is that it allows only to one people- the Arabs, the original people of the Prophet - a past, and sacred places, pilgrimages and earth reverences. These sacred Arab places have to be the scared places of all the converted peoples. Converted peoples have to strip themselves of their past; of converted peoples nothing is required but the purest faith (if such a thing can be arrived at), Islam, submission. It is the most uncompromising kind of imperialism. (*Beyond Belief* 70)

Dissayanake and Wickramagamage also pointed out that modernisation and fundamentalist Islam, ironically, worked together to push people away from their culture. They wrote,

And the fundamentalist movement in Islam is loosening more and more of those ties that imbricate the people with their authenticated culture. But ironically it is precisely their sense of loss in the modern world – the modern ways that are fast replacing the traditional life-styles in the urban centres of Indonesia – that is pushing these people into a puritanical Islam. (90)

As he documented in the two books, apart from the rise of fundamentalist Islam, there are also historical processes that are beyond the control of individuals, modernisation and urbanisation that contributed to the loss of culture in these two countries.

Conclusion

Naipaul's two travel books to Islamic countries have received criticism from a wide array of critics especially from the Islamic countries. He was mainly criticised for calling Islam an Arab religion and all non-Arab Muslims as converts. In an article entitled "An Intellectual Catastrophe," Edward Said criticised Naipaul for the implication that non-Arab Muslims are inauthentic Muslims. He wrote,

This ridiculous argument would suggest by extension that only a native of Rome can be a good Roman Catholic; other Catholic Italians, Spaniards, Latin Americans, Philipinos who are converts are inauthentic and cut off from their traditions. According to Naipaul, then, Anglicans who are not British are only converts and they too, like the Malaysian or Iranian Muslim, are doomed to a life of imitation and incompetence since they are converts. (Said)

Another critic also rebutted Naipaul's claims about Islam being an Arab religion thus,

It is true that Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, was revealed in Arab. The seed of this faith, like any other faith, travelled to different parts of the world from that epicentre. However, it is a misnomer to label it as an Arab religion. This term gives the impression that it (Islam) was meant only for the Arabs. A Priori, it may also imply that those non-Arabs who converted to this faith were somehow illegitimate or inferior in doing so. However, it was Islam, which preached the message that no one – Arab, non-Arab, white, black, tall, short – is superior or inferior to anyone else, except in term of piety. (Anjum)

In this regard, the criticism against Naipaul's statement is fair because people of all faiths today, once upon a time, were either pagans or animists until they or their ancestors converted to another religion. It is not only religion but also new ideas, culture and religions spread through different means and people embrace them according to their needs. The fact that they embrace new ideas, culture and religion coming from another civilisation does not make them inferior or superior.

Another criticism against Naipaul is the claim that Islam makes imperial demands and requires rejection of the old ways of life. Anjum countered it by saying that any new idea or religion seeks rejection of the old in order to embrace the new faith. He wrote, "What is left behind is what is historically moribund. History is witness to this process. For instance, when Christianity came to Europe, did it not replace the pagan faiths in the continent?" This criticism appeared to have missed the point that Naipaul tried to address. Naipaul was specifically pointing to the new fundamentalist movement which seeks to not only reject the old ways of life but also shows a wilful ignorance of the history of the country that can be dated back to many centuries. He did not attack Muslims or Islam that had come to these countries centuries ago. He wrote in *Beyond Belief* that most people today are culturally mixed in varying degrees and that religious or cultural purity is "a fundamentalist fantasy" (64). Naipaul also noted that there are other forces besides new Islam that contributes to the decay of culture such as modernisation, urbanisation, foreign occupation and European colonisation. All changes are not bad, in fact most changes are targeted at bringing optimistic results and yet when certain factors which made these changes possible start a gradual process of completely uprooting old ways of life and culture or cultures of a people or a nation, then it is high time for a common effort to start preserving and protecting the decaying cultural heritage or meaningful ways of life.

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