

# Gothic Horror and Muslim Madness in V. S. Naipaul's *Beyond Belief*: 'Orientalist' Excursions among *the Converted People*

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## Abstract

This article is written in response to the favorable critical reception that V. S. Naipaul's writings about the Muslim world have received in mainstream western culture. Since the publication of his travel narratives, *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*, Naipaul has enjoyed a reputation as an authority on the Muslim world. The critical acclaim that he has received has been accompanied by official recognition, including a knighthood and the Nobel Prize for Literature.

However, many critics beyond the periphery of mainstream western culture have voiced concerns about his hatred of Islam. In this article, I offer a revisionist reading of Naipaul's most recent Islamic travel narrative, *Beyond Belief*, arguing that Islamophobia has been disturbingly misinterpreted as expertise. Focusing on three main literary themes – nineteenth-century literary conventions, the gothic genre, and neurosis – I expose this bigoted worldview and call for his status to be reconsidered.

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## Introduction

V. S. Naipaul's writings about the Muslim world have become increasingly influential in mainstream western culture. Since the publication of his travel narratives *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*, in which he offered an account of his travels in Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia, Naipaul has established himself as an authority on "Islam in action." With specific reference to his "Islamic journeys," critics have commended Naipaul for his "moral integrity," "fearless truth-telling," and loyalty to the "proof of evidence."<sup>1</sup> The favorable critical reception that *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief* elicited has given rise to the inclusion of Naipaul's work in books that promise "new levels of understanding about Islam."<sup>2</sup> Critical acclaim has been matched by official recognition: In 1990, Naipaul received a knighthood for his services to literature and, in 2001, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

However, in contrast to this impressive résumé, critics beyond the periphery of mainstream western culture have referred to him as a man "incapable of restraining his loathing for the Islamic world and its people."<sup>3</sup> Concerns about Naipaul's hatred of Islam, as voiced by Eqbal Ahmad, Amin Malak, Caryl Phillips, and even Salman Rushdie,<sup>4</sup> give Naipaul's prominent status in mainstream western culture a rather more sinister aspect. In this article, I shall expose how his Islamophobia has been interpreted as expertise by offering a revisionist reading of *Beyond Belief*. Focusing on three main literary themes in Naipaul's most recent "Islamic excursion," namely, nineteenth-century literary conventions, the gothic genre, and neurosis, I shall argue that his standing as an authority on the Muslim world needs to be reconsidered.

## Literary Conventions and Naipaul's

### Restricted Passages

Although literary critics overwhelmingly accept that there is an ambivalent relationship between travel writing and fiction,<sup>5</sup> travel writing is still largely referred to as non-fictional literature. This label is misleading, for it detracts from the fact that travel writing is an established literary genre full of narrative conventions and fictional devices. Travel writing and fiction frequently overlap and intertwine. However, while critics celebrate Naipaul for his "moral integrity" and "commitment to truth," it is not surprising that *Beyond Belief* has been predominantly read as an informative, factual text. We are repeatedly promised that Naipaul's travel

writing will “enable” western readers to gain an “insight” into the life of Muslims.

Naipaul does everything possible to reinforce this sort of reading. In the prologue to *Beyond Belief*, the narrative voice assures us that “THIS is a book about people. It is not a book of opinions.”<sup>6</sup> We are guaranteed that “the truth” will be presented to us in an undistorted manner. Sensitive to the ways in which an obtrusive narrator can undermine the authority of a “non-fictional” text, Naipaul promises that the “writer will be less present, less of an inquirer”; instead, he will be “in the background, trusting to his instinct.”<sup>7</sup> Modelling himself on a figure esteemed by nineteenth-century English romantics, Naipaul claims to be a pure, natural, and instinctive artist. In this manner, he assures us that we can rely on his objectivity.

Nineteenth-century literary conventions do not only provide Naipaul with inspiration regarding the narrator’s role. During this literary period, the English novel as a genre had not yet found a narrative device that could provide the illusion that the reader could enter into the character’s mind. Modernist conventions such as the “stream of consciousness” were yet to emerge. Consequently, the “internal” drama was displaced onto an excessively responsive physical body or environment. Nineteenth-century literature twitches with hysterical characters prone to excessive blushing, hyperventilation, trembling, and faints. For example, in Wilkie Collins’ novel *The Woman in White*, “womanish tears,” shivering skin, and severe bouts of “nervousness” besiege the main characters. All of the characters’ doubts and concerns are played out on the skin’s surface.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in a novel such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, we know when the central character is angry or frustrated, because at these moments of crisis, a sudden backdrop of scarlet-colored soft furnishings and violent rainstorms appear.<sup>9</sup> This sort of narrative displacement is a technique that Naipaul employs to great effect when encountering Muslims in *Beyond Belief*.

Writing himself into the role of the central character, Naipaul displaces his emotions onto both his physical body and the local environment. However, the symptoms that he exhibits are not the typical shivers, faints, or sweats of the nineteenth-century hero or heroine. Rather, Naipaul’s internal anxiety and, in some cases, clear disgust manifest themselves in a very specific manner. On encountering practicing Muslims, Naipaul begins to suffer from severe breathing restrictions. He also experiences an accompanying change in air quality.

The first incident occurs when he visits Imaduddin's office. Imaduddin, who lives in Indonesia, is referred to as an "unusual man" because he is "a man of science" and "a dedicated man of the faith." Naipaul is uncomfortable with this "contradiction" (despite their long and intertwined history, science and Islam are, in Naipaul's view, incompatible). It is clear that he also considers Imaduddin to be a hypocrite: He takes exception to Imaduddin's wealth, preferring "his" Muslims to be pious and poor. Despite the kindness that Imaduddin shows to his guest, his "Muslimness" causes Naipaul to suffer from unpleasant physical reactions.

Naipaul enters the office and, loyal to nineteenth-century realism, begins to make his inventory of the room:

On one side of the laptop was a well-handled Koran; on the other side was a pile of shoddily produced paperback books, perhaps a foot high, of similar size and in electric blue covers, which had been published in Egypt and might have been a very long commentary on the Koran: no doubt like meat and drink to Imaduddin.<sup>10</sup>

Naipaul is safe while Imaduddin remains in the room. But when he answers the *adhan* (call to prayer) and deserts Naipaul, the very presence of what Naipaul suspects to be a set of "Islamic books" (he cannot read Arabic and is therefore forced to hazard a guess at the books' contents) is enough to provoke serious health implications. We are informed that,

... without the man himself [...] his missionary paraphernalia felt oppressive [...]. It was only someone like Imaduddin who could give point and life to the electric-blue Egyptian paperbacks on the glass-topped desk.<sup>11</sup>

In his heightened state of anxiety, Naipaul transforms Imaduddin's private reading material into "dangerous missionary paraphernalia" with awesome powers. They are the "meat and drink," the life-blood upon which Imaduddin apparently survives. The "electric-blue" covers suggest that these books are made of hazardous, explosive materials and, being only "shoddily produced," they are set in stark contrast to the laptop computer and glass-desk upon which they rest. Naipaul prefers not to ask Imaduddin about the content of these books, for doing so would deflate the passage's tension.

Rather, he reassures himself with the thought that this possible "commentary on the Koran is something that only a man like Imaduddin could give point and life to." However, mere proximity to these potentially "Muslim" books causes him to suffer from the "oppressive" atmosphere

that they generate.<sup>12</sup> This episode offers a foretaste of what is to come, and Naipaul endures far more severe reactions when he is exposed to the material presence of Islamic literature in Pakistan.

The second change in atmospheric quality occurs when Naipaul visits Mohammed Akram Ranjha at a commune run by, in Naipaul's words, "the most important of the fundamentalist groups: Jamaat-i-Islami." Imprisoned for kidnapping and possibly helping to murder his brother's wife (Naipaul's choice of Muslim "interviewees" are far from being, as he claims, "representative"), Mohammed is imprisoned and shares a cell with a "political prisoner." This leads to his "jailhouse conversion." Eventually, a lawyer who we are told is "crazed with religion" helps Mohammed get into law college. While practicing law, Mohammed becomes politically active on behalf of Jamaat-i-Islami.

His son Saleem, a 34-year-old senior customs officer, agrees to drive Naipaul to the commune on the edge of Lahore. This is when Naipaul realizes that he has made his first major mistake: He failed to accept Saleem's "offer of air-conditioning." Naipaul refused the offer because he feared that he might catch a "chill." He comes to regret this decision because the closer he gets to the commune, the more "choked" he becomes. Significantly, Naipaul's breathing restrictions once again coincide with the call to prayer (like Imaduddin before him, Saleem deserts the afflicted Naipaul in order to go to the mosque).<sup>13</sup> When Saleem returns, he takes Naipaul to his study and library.

At this point in the journey, Naipaul encounters yet another set of "Islamic books":

Half the wall facing the door carried those Islamic sets in decorated binding [...]. I soon stopped looking at the books. I began to choke in the stale, enclosed air. I felt I was becoming ill.<sup>14</sup>

This room of "Islamic learning" appears to be drained of oxygen. We are told that it is "entirely sealed" (by this, Naipaul later clarifies that he meant that the window was closed). Naipaul tries to rectify this and demands that someone open the window and switch on the "air-cleaner." Sitting on the only chair in the room, one that has been brought up for him at his specific request, he sits by the window, inhales some slightly less polluted air, and begins to recover.

But the relief that he enjoys is short-lived. Having survived the stifling atmosphere produced by the *adhan*, the mosque, Islamic literature, and

Muslim households, Naipaul's breathing restriction returns during the following dialogue, in which Saleem proudly introduces his young son:

Saleem said, 'He is going to learn the whole Koran by heart.'  
 'The whole Koran,' the old man said, picking up the duet with his son.  
 I asked, 'How long will that take?'  
 Saleem said, 'Five or six years.'  
 I couldn't stay. My breathing had become very bad. Downstairs, the servants, thin and dark and dingy, behind the sacks with the split golden paddy. Outside, the fumes and grit of the Multan road. Saleem's driver drove me back to the hotel. Saleem didn't come with me.<sup>15</sup>

Naipaul's reaction to the tradition of learning to recite the Qur'an is so violent that he flees back to the relative safety of his hotel in Lahore without delay. The little boy is left unheard.

As one can see from these passages, Naipaul's fear of Islamic literature, mosques, or indeed any form of Muslim worship are clearly reflected in both his environment and his physical ailments. In *Beyond Belief*, poor air-quality is an indicator of the Islamic faith, and Naipaul's asthmatic responses are symptomatic of the emotions that he experiences during close encounters with Muslims. In her study of Naipaul, Fawzia Mustafa observes that he uses "physical discomfort" as "a gauge for reading the functioning, or completeness, or societal health of the place in which he finds himself."<sup>16</sup>

This is correct, but she fails to mention that Naipaul's physical discomfort is most acute when he is in the presence of "the believers." Muslims of various races, traditions, and character induce violent physical responses from this narrator of supposed "moral integrity." His dislike of Islam is so intense that he is compelled to rush out of "interviews," escape an "oppressive" atmosphere, reach for "air-cleaners," and struggle to open windows when in the presence of practicing Muslims. Although Naipaul may well have a sensitive physical disposition, his commitment to literary conventions in nineteenth-century fiction helps to explain both his recurrent breathing restrictions and the faith-dependent air quality that he "discovers" in Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Iran.

### The Gothic Novel

One of the main nineteenth-century genres that Naipaul mobilizes in his "Islamic" travelogue is a style called "gothic realism." Occasionally, he

abandons himself to its dictates so completely that he produces rather humorous results. The typical plot of the nineteenth-century gothic novel is that of the delicate but curious heroine who is lured into the ancestral home of a seemingly innocent but fearsomely dangerous count or aristocrat. Naipaul recycles this plot, placing himself at the center. It goes like this. The inquisitive Naipaul visits Imaduddin's house in order to "hear a little more about his past – his ancestry."<sup>17</sup> But Naipaul arrives late and, to his disdain, is left to wait in an empty room. Once again he fulfils the familiar role of the "realist observer" and describes the objects in the room:

On the pillars of the sitting room there were two or three decorative little flower pieces and, surprisingly, a picture of a sailing ship. About the sitting room were small mementoes of foreign travel, tourist souvenirs, showing a softer side of Imaduddin (or his wife), a side not connected with mental training, if indeed the house was theirs, and if their mementoes had truly tugged at their hearts (and did not, rather, preserve the memory of some pious giver).<sup>18</sup>

As the description develops, the language becomes increasingly gothic in style. Superficially, the room has the appearance of familiarity, even comfort, but there is the suggestion that this might just be a sinister and deceptive cover. In Naipaul's view, Islamic education ("mental training") is incompatible with a love of travel, sentimentality, or a liking for nautical scenes. Therefore, the collection of "sentimental objects" becomes suspicious, and Naipaul doubts whether the house actually belongs to Imaduddin and his wife. The implication is that these comforting objects are being displayed in order to lure him into a false sense of security. Naipaul's nerves get the better of him as he waits for Imaduddin, and he begins to experience a deep sense of panic,

... how long [...] should I stay where I was, violating the house, and how when the time came [...] might I get away from the curious trap I had appeared to have fallen into.<sup>19</sup>

This passage could have been lifted straight out of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Naipaul, in his loyalty to the gothic narrative, has written himself into the role of the vulnerable, innocent heroine at the mercy of the dark lord. As if aware of the narrative trap into which he has fallen, as well as of the weak narrative position that he has inadvertently adopted, he attempts to recover his narratorial author-

ity by means of a well-used Naipaulian weapon: a toilet joke. Once he discovers that Imaduddin was doing nothing more menacing than having a massage, he claims that he had suspected that Imaduddin's "bathroom problems" were the cause of his wait all along.<sup>20</sup> However, Naipaul's use of the gothic genre is usually rather more disturbing.

Naipaul uses gothic language to portray both Islam and Muslims throughout *Beyond Belief*, and its powers of political manipulation are alarming. In the section on Indonesia, Islam is described as having spread in a Dracula-like fashion:

Islam had come here not long before Europe. It had not been the towering force it had been in other converted places. [...] It had not completely possessed the souls of people.<sup>21</sup>

According to Naipaul, Indonesia only narrowly escaped this ghoulish fate. We need only study his description of Muslims (or "possessed souls") answering the *adhan* in order to see the importance of the gothic genre in his narration,

... within the office, no doubt from the carpeted and rumpled open space at the end of the corridor, hesitant scraping sounds developed into a shy chant. [...] The chanting from the corridor became more confident. It couldn't be denied now. I could see that Imaduddin wanted to be out there, with the chanters and the prayers. The chanting now filled the corridor [...] he couldn't be held back.<sup>22</sup>

This passage is infused with gothic tension: the "hesitant scraping sounds" and rising "chants" suggest the actions of a frightening and possibly subhuman sect, rather than a group of Muslims at prayer. Muslims do not chant before beginning the main prayer. If a Muslim arrives early, he or she might do two *rak'ats*, that is, salutations to the mosque, but this is always done in silence. It does not involve "hesitant scraping sounds." In Naipaul's view, by merely answering the call to prayer, Imaduddin reveals himself to be one of the walking dead, a mindless being seduced against his will, for "he couldn't be held back." (Notably, those who are not Muslims in *Beyond Belief* are repeatedly referred to as being "their own men.")

As in numerous instances in the text, Naipaul's use of gothic imagery tells us more about his own fears and prejudices than about reality. This can also be seen in Naipaul's description of Saleem. When Saleem hears the *adhan*, he is described as responding in a spasmodic and zombie-like

fashion. We are told that “in sudden haste” he “took off his tie and threw his jacket on the car seat and went to join in the prayers.”<sup>23</sup> That Muslims are captured souls at the mercy of a mind-numbing and unstoppable force is a persistent theme in Naipaul’s text. According to Naipaul, “cultural depression” causes “religious teaching and a knowledge of Islam” to flourish. He goes on to assert that learning how to recite the Qur’an, “how to have ablution,” and “how to do the right prayers” involves an “isolating and beating down and stunning of the mind,” a “kind of pain.”<sup>24</sup> Once again, Naipaul suggests that Muslims are like the living dead, their brains anaesthetized by pain and suffering.

This theme is extended when he describes the theological school of Qom, Iran. Naipaul’s translator, Mehrdad, informs him that “special night prayers involve a lot of bowing and rubbing of the forehead against the earth.” Naipaul describes these “very pious people” as having “something like a scorch mark on their forehead; this was because they heated the cakes of earth for their prayers.”<sup>25</sup> The underlying references have a powerful impact. Muslims answer the call to prayer in zombie-like fashion and have scorched foreheads, as if marked by the Anti-Christ.

The women who walk through the streets of this center of learning are described in an equally hellish manner. Like enslaved creatures, they “held the chador over their face with their hands or bit an end of it between their teeth; they looked like people who were muzzling themselves.”<sup>26</sup> Though it is traditional in a number of cultures for women (especially those of the older generation) to hold their headscarf between their teeth, he uses this as “evidence” that these “subhuman” women have given up their souls and are suffering torturous consequences. These hellish images echo Dante’s *Inferno*. Naipaul uses the gothic genre to give credence to his opinion that political Islam is “a complete form of control” that “deform[s] people’s lives.”<sup>27</sup>

Naipaul fails to comment on the fact that in the same areas in which he identifies this monstrous “complete form of control,” non-Islamic practices are rife. For example, he encounters brothels, the caste system, local superstitions, fast-breakers, scantily clad women, military dictatorships, and so on. In response to his earlier travelogue, Amin Malak remarks,

... two of the four countries – Pakistan and Indonesia – are under military dictatorships, the third (Iran) is undergoing a revolutionary process, and the fourth (Malaysia) is suffering from racial tension [...]. No wonder then that his search for Islamic institutions or Islamic law in prac-

tice becomes an exercise in futility. It would be hard to imagine stable and legitimate social structures existing, let alone functioning, in the political climates of the four countries visited.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the fact that Naipaul details non-Islamic practices at length, he persists in his claim that all the ills of the people whom he meets have their origin in Islam. The text's message is clear: non-Arab Muslims are to be pitied because they have given away their souls.

It is no accident that *Beyond Belief* frequently reads like a gothic novel. The gothic genre is dominated by vulnerable characters who submit their will, often subconsciously, to a higher demonic force that feeds off their life blood and leaves them void. In Naipaul's view, the men who are "unable to resist" the call to prayer and the women who "muzzle themselves" have signed such a contract of submission and have agreed to abolish "the self." At a reading of his book *Half a Life* at Queen Elizabeth Hall in October 2001, Naipaul claimed that Islam demanded an "abolition of the self" that "was worse than the similar colonial abolition of identity [...] much, much worse in fact."<sup>29</sup> In *Beyond Belief*, he asserts that,

... 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.<sup>30</sup>

Naipaul repeatedly asserts that Islam demands that people annul their individuality. With regards to Pakistan, he argues that "the fundamentalists wanted people to be transparent, pure, to be empty vessels for the faith. It was an impossibility: human beings could never be blanks in that way."<sup>31</sup> Yet, according to him, such people exist. Those who are "empty," those who are suffering from cultural depression and an ignorance about their past are identified as being those most "at risk" of conversion.

In his view, certain people or cultures are more vulnerable to Islam than others. For example, he states that Indonesians are susceptible to conversion because "they have no idea of themselves."<sup>32</sup> A vacuum of identity is stipulated as being the ideal environment in which Islam can prosper. Like the weak and vulnerable women that faint and submit to blood-sucking vampires in the gothic novel, Naipaul's text suggests that non-Arab Muslims, with their delicate mental constitutions, have inadvertently become the living dead.

## Naipaul and Neurosis

Naipaul's evident concern with the mental health of Muslims constitutes another area of similarity between *Beyond Belief* and nineteenth-century literature. Although not a genre as such, mental instability became a pre-occupation in nineteenth-century fiction, reaching its peak toward the latter part of the century. Instead of locking madness in the attic (such is the fate of Bertha Mason, the "madwoman" in *Jane Eyre*), *fin-de-siècle* novels brought madness downstairs to be "analyzed." Central characters become increasingly "unstable," and even those marginal characters who are included in order to "cure" the afflicted begin to show signs of insanity. For example, one of the doctors of psychiatry in *Dracula* becomes slowly addicted to drugs, while the other one is prone to alarming bouts of hysteria. This ambiguous line between madness and sanity can also be seen in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* and Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*.

The readiness to address the causes, symptoms, and fluidity of madness in literature ran parallel to the increasingly influential academic discipline of psychiatry. During this period, the language of such psychiatrists as Andrew Wynter (*The Borderlands of Insanity*, 1875), Henry Maudsley (*The Pathology of the Mind*, 1895) and Sigmund Freud entered into popular discourse.<sup>33</sup> Reflecting contemporary cultures' anxieties, characters regularly slip in and out of madness, experiencing hysteria, degeneration, insanity, and other newly defined (or redefined) psychological states.

In much *fin-de-siècle* literature, characters and narrators utilize the discourse of psychiatry in order to authoritatively "define" and explain the psychological states of others. Such "mental assessments" are not confined to those "qualified" to offer opinions. Madness is such a pervasive discourse that everyone, including the patients, is eager to practice amateur psychology. For example, in *Dracula*, Dr. Seward classifies the character Renfield as a "zoophagous patient"<sup>34</sup> (explained by his penchant for eating flies). However, between fly-eating episodes the "pet lunatic" Renfield asserts:

Since I myself have been an inmate of a lunatic asylum, I cannot help but notice that the sophistic tendencies of some of its inmates lean towards the errors of *non causæ* and *ignoration elenchi*.<sup>35</sup>

In *fin-de-siècle* literature, authors eagerly experiment with this new authoritative discourse of the mind, and narrators and characters alike define

and classify the liberal spread of madness with “scientific” enthusiasm. Yet again, Naipaul does not fail in his allegiance to nineteenth-century fiction. While traveling in the “Muslim world,” he is regularly faced with what he perceives to be “irrational behavior” and is quick to offer his diagnosis regarding the mental health of the “converted peoples.” He writes:

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. His holy places are in Arab lands; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easily set on the boil.<sup>36</sup>

Neurosis, a tendency toward nihilism, self-delusions, latent aggression and fantasy lives are, according to Naipaul, characteristics of these simmering Muslims. Of Pakistan, Naipaul writes:

The local people would hardly be there, in their own land, or would be there only as ciphers swept aside by the agents of the faith. It is a dreadful mangling of history. It is a convert’s view; that is all that can be said for it. History has become a kind of neurosis. Too much has to be ignored or angled; there is too much fantasy. This fantasy isn’t in the books alone; it affects people’s lives.<sup>37</sup>

Islam is found guilty of inducing mental illness on a national scale because it is an “Arab” religion with sacred places in Arab lands. According to this peculiar thesis, Arabs do not suffer from neurosis because they are not “converts.” Naipaul fails to mention that Arabs were generally polytheists at the time of Prophet Muhammad and, in order to become Muslims, necessarily “converted.” Perhaps he dismisses this factor because he believes that the “sacred places” of Arabs are “in their own lands”? Assuming that this is Naipaul’s reasoning, it would follow that European and American Christians and Jews suffer from a similar “neurosis” because their “sacred places” are abroad. However, it is clear that Naipaul regards western Christians and Jews as mentally sound. The logic behind his argument is impossible to follow. As Eqbal Ahmed asks:

Who is not a convert? By Naipaul's definition, if Iranians are converted Muslims, then Americans are converted Christians, the Japanese are converted Buddhists, and the Chinese, large numbers of them, are converted Buddhists as well. Everybody is converted because at the beginning every religion had only a few followers. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, all prophetic religions developed through conversion. In that sense, his organising thesis should not exclude anyone.<sup>38</sup>

Michael Gilsean dismisses Naipaul's claim that non-Arab Muslims suffer from "neurosis" with the rebuff that his line of reasoning is made of "shallow stuff."<sup>39</sup> Naipaul's attempts to identify and explain what he refers to as "the irrational energies of the faith"<sup>40</sup> are poorly reasoned, and his pains to assume the role of psychiatrist are far less convincing than those of his literary predecessors.

### Conclusion

In *Beyond Belief*, Naipaul plunders the nineteenth-century novel in order to present a disturbing image of the Muslim world. Having striven to establish himself as a reliable and trustworthy narrator, he presents a landscape in which mosques, the *adhan*, Islamic literature, Islamic dress, and Muslim households combine to generate an oppressive atmosphere in which he cannot breathe. Naipaul's use of this nineteenth-century literary convention is rhetorically powerful: The narrative encourages the reader to feel stifled in oxygen-drained Muslim environments and relieved by the free flow of air in non-Muslim spaces. But the manipulation does not stop there. Naipaul goes on to mobilize the gothic genre – a genre designed to terrify its readers. Bloodthirsty vampires and immortal beasts take over the minds of their victims and threaten civilization, reason, modernity, and sanity. By studying Naipaul's depiction of eerie Muslim households, threatening Islamic artifacts, and brainwashed Muslims at prayer, one can see how his manipulation of the gothic genre culminates in a powerful piece of propaganda.

The final nineteenth-century narrative strand that pervades *Beyond Belief* is that of madness. Followers of Islam are repeatedly referred to as violent, irrational, void, confused, numbed by pain, and prey to a nihilistic form of neurosis. For this reason, those who share his hatred of Islam regard *Beyond Belief* as a "first-rate humanist study" of "contemporary Islamic converts."<sup>41</sup> However, the prestigious awards and critical acclaim that Naipaul has received suggest that his Islamophobic worldview is dis-

turbingly widespread, confirming Edward Said's fear that "malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West."<sup>42</sup>

At a time when Muslims and non-Muslims need to find grounds for mutual respect and understanding, it is essential that the twisted vision presented in *Beyond Belief* is not read as a reliable account of the Muslim world. Naipaul exploits the nineteenth-century novel in order to reinforce his bigoted, Islamophobic worldview. It is, therefore, vital that his place in mainstream western culture be both challenged and revised.

### Notes

1. See John Lukacs, Susheila Nasta, and Dagmar Barnouw, respectively. John Lukacs in Connor Cruise O'Brien, Edward Said, and John Lukacs, "The Intellectual in the Post-Colonial World: Response and Discussion," *Salmagundi* 70-71 (1986): 65-81; Susheila Nasta, "Contemporary Writers: V.S. Naipaul," The British Council: online at [www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=author78&state=](http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=author78&state=), 4; and Dagmar Barnouw, *Naipaul's Strangers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 55. The following critics also praise Naipaul for his loyalty to the truth: Jason Cowley, "Don't give up the day job yet, Sir Vidia," *Sunday*, 22 September 2002: online at [www.books.guardian.co.ukwww.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=author78&state=](http://www.books.guardian.co.ukwww.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=author78&state=), 4; and Leon Gottfried, "A Skeptical Pilgrimage," *Modern Fiction Studies* 30, no. 3 (autumn 1984): 567.
2. For example, the editors of *Inside Islam* selected Naipaul to write a chapter on "Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia." See V. S. Naipaul, "Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia," *Inside Islam: The Faith, the People and the Conflicts of the World's Fastest Growing Religion* ed. John Miller and Aaron Kenedi (Marlowe and Co.: 2002).
3. See Caryl Phillips, "The Enigma of Denial," *The New Republic* Online, (05.29.00): [www.TNR.com/052900/phillips052900.htm](http://www.TNR.com/052900/phillips052900.htm), pp. 1-2, 4, and 13, respectively. For a sophisticated analysis of Naipaul's writing and responses to his work, see Rob Nixon, *London Calling: Postcolonial Mandarin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
4. Eqbal Ahmed asserts that Naipaul is "a very sick man" whose writing is "irresponsible" and "scandalous," and concludes that "Islam" is one of the "imagined ghosts" that Naipaul continues "to pursue." See Eqbal Ahmad, "Distorted Histories: An Interview with Eqbal Ahmad," David Barsamian, *Himal: South Asian* (March 1999): online at [www.tni.org/history/ahmad/david1999.htm](http://www.tni.org/history/ahmad/david1999.htm), 10. Amin Malak criticises Naipaul's "deplorable narrowness of vision" that, he argues, combined with a "lack of sound knowledge and understanding of Islam," compounds the "negative impact" of his first

- “Islamic Excursion,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 1984): 561-66. Finally, Salman Rushdie accuses Naipaul of “aligning himself with the more dangerous and fascistic elements of Hindu nationalism.” Rushdie’s comments are quoted by Susheila Nasta in her summary of “V. S. Naipaul,” British Council: online at [www.contemporarywriters.com](http://www.contemporarywriters.com).
5. As Rana Kabbani reminds us in her *Europe’s Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule* (London: Pandora Press, 1988), 122, travelogue writers are still “writing fiction, the non-fiction genre of the travelogue is a creative convention only.”
  6. V. S. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted People* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 1.
  7. *Ibid.*, 2.
  8. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* [1860] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
  9. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* [1847] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
  10. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief*, 16.
  11. *Ibid.*, 19-20.
  12. *Ibid.*
  13. *Ibid.*, 316.
  14. *Ibid.*, 317.
  15. *Ibid.*, 321.
  16. Fawzia Mustafa, *V. S. Naipaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 79.
  17. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief*, 41.
  18. *Ibid.*, 42-43.
  19. *Ibid.*, 43.
  20. *Ibid.*
  21. *Ibid.*, 24.
  22. *Ibid.*, 18-20.
  23. *Ibid.*, 316.
  24. *Ibid.*, 34.
  25. *Ibid.*, 238.
  26. *Ibid.*, 217.
  27. *Ibid.*, 240.
  28. Malak, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 565.
  29. Quoted by Fiachra Gibbons in “V.S. Naipaul Launches Attack on Islam,” *The Guardian*, 4 October 2001.
  30. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief*, 72.
  31. *Ibid.*, 311.
  32. *Ibid.*, 72.
  33. See J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman, *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

34. Stoker, *Dracula*, 115.
35. *Ibid.*, 233.
36. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief*, 1.
37. *Ibid.*, 329.
38. Eqbal Ahmad, "Distorted Histories: An Interview with Eqbal Ahmad" by David Barsamian, *Himal* (March 1999). See [www.tni.org/history/ahmad/david1999.htm](http://www.tni.org/history/ahmad/david1999.htm), (1-13), 9-10.
39. Michael Gilsean, "Manager of Stories," *London Review of Books* 20, no. 17 (3 September 1998).
40. Barnouw praises Naipaul for following "reasoned evidence wherever it takes him" in order to help the reader understand the "irrational energies of faith." See Dagmar Barnouw, *Naipaul's Strangers*, 63 and 61, respectively. Though *Naipaul's Strangers* masquerades as literary criticism, it becomes clear that Barnouw is merely using Naipaul to express her own highly cultivated prejudices.
41. See C. J. S Wallia, "Book Review of *Beyond Belief*," [www.indiastar.com/wallia15.htm](http://www.indiastar.com/wallia15.htm).
42. Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (London: Vintage, 1997), xii. [First published by Routledge in 1981.]