

# *Routes*

## **Moving Worlds**

A JOURNAL OF TRANSCULTURAL WRITINGS

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VOLUME 2 NUMBER 1 2002

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*Moving Worlds* is an internationally refereed journal based at the University of Leeds. The editors do not necessarily endorse the views expressed by its contributors.

All correspondence – manuscripts, books for review, enquiries – should be sent to: *Moving Worlds*, School of English, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT UK

email: [mworlds@english.novell.leeds.ac.uk](mailto:mworlds@english.novell.leeds.ac.uk)  
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#### SUBSCRIPTION RATES FOR 2002

Individuals: 1 year £25.00

Institutions: 1 year £50.00

Cheques should be made payable to: University of Leeds (*Moving Worlds*)

Published by  
*Moving Worlds*, at School of English  
 University of Leeds  
 Leeds  
 LS2 9JT UK

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ISBN 0 9540751 1 0

ISSN 1474-4600

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## V.S. Naipaul, September 11, and the Nobel

FEROZA JUSSAWALLA

While teaching my usual class on 'Introduction to Postcoloniality' in the Fall of 2001, about a week before September 11, I stopped to point out that the British weren't the first colonizers to devastate India. Indeed, I went on to elaborate, India could be described as a palimpsest of colonialisms. Think of the Aryans who subjugated the indigenous peoples of the subcontinent, and the different waves of Muslim invaders who ruled before the British, and how these layers of colonialism are manifest in the remaking of the culture, particularly in terms of language, religion and one's sense of national identity. The Aryans brought Sanskrit and Hinduism to the anthropomorphic Dravidians, and then marginalized them, and formalized that marginalization through the structure of the caste system.<sup>1</sup> The Muslims and the Moghuls did basically the same thing, bringing Persian, Urdu and Islam with them and converting by the sword. Writing of Turkish expansionism at the turn of the eleventh century, Nehru remarked of Mahmud of Ghazni that he brought Islam

for the first time to the accompaniment of ruthless military conquest. So far for over 300 years, Islam had come peacefully as a religion and taken its place among the many religions of India without trouble or conflict. The new approach produced powerful psychological reactions among the people and filled them with bitterness.<sup>2</sup>

Other Muslim invaders followed the Turks over the next several hundred years, culminating in the establishment of the Moghul empire early in the sixteenth century. In the Preface to his novel, *Kanthapura*, the Indian novelist Raja Rao points out that English, 'like Sanskrit or Persian', was a colonizer's language that became Indianized.<sup>3</sup> Not many people, however, think of Sanskrit as being a colonizing language in India, or of Hinduism and current day Islam in India as aspects of colonial enterprise. We only think of the Europeans as conquerors.

In *Among the Believers* (1981) and *Beyond Belief* (1998), Naipaul makes two telling points. He forcefully describes Islamic colonization – specifically as tied to religion – and its effects, and he shows how American leftist academia has influenced intellectuals in Islamic Third

World countries – thereby spawning anti-Americanism. Naipaul 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 can 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 easily be set on the boil.<sup>4</sup>

It is chiefly for this treatment of Islam as a colonizing force that Naipaul has been taken to task by Edward Said. His review of *Beyond Belief* in *Al-Ahram Weekly* has been much quoted,<sup>5</sup> with its references to Naipaul as 'an intellectual catastrophe of the first order' and to the book as revealing 'a dislike of Islam as the worst disaster that happened to India'.<sup>6</sup> Other Muslim thinkers and Third World critics, too, seem to be refusing to admit at this time to Islam's colonial past, and the centuries of Islamization which found its way from Iran<sup>7</sup> to Malaysia. I wish to contend, however, that Naipaul's historical perspective has a crucial part to play in our understanding of September 11. It allows us to see, for example, that Osama Bin Laden is not an aberration. He is not a freedom fighter for the oppressed, trying to liberate his country from American imperialism. He is one in a line of Islamic imperialists.

On Wednesday, October 11, a month after the terrorist strikes on New York, the news was out that V.S. Naipaul was to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The next day, Mark Feeney of the *Boston Globe* called and asked me to comment on whether the Nobel Prize for Mr Naipaul was overdue. I said yes, that the Nobel was long overdue, since Mr Naipaul was a wonderful stylist. I added that the Nobel was particularly appropriate at this time because much of what Naipaul had written shed light on why September 11 happened. I quipped that George Bush should read *Among the Believers*.

The postcolonial scholars listserv, however, was agog with questions: Had Naipaul won the Nobel Prize because he was a 'stooge of neoimperialism'? Was it 'a nice little slap on the face of Islam'? I hardly think so. Having been involved in the nomination process for Chinua Achebe for the Nobel Prize, I know that the deliberations were underway at least a year prior to September 11. So the theory that these two coincidental events – the destruction of the World Trade Center in

New York and the awarding of the Nobel Prize to V.S. Naipaul – were linked could not possibly be the case. Postcolonial scholars, however, felt that the award was a direct result of his attacks on Islam, and his ‘overwhelming contempt’ for the Third World in general. It was assumed that those in the Third World who felt themselves under assault by the West would in general resent this news.

In actual fact, the Nobel committee had cited Naipaul for his sympathetic treatment of postcolonial peoples. One recalls, for example, his advocacy of the displaced Hindus and Buddhists of Indonesia and Malaysia. When Mark Feeney asked me what I thought of this, I pointed out that, in my introduction to *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul*, I had already made the case for Naipaul as a postcolonial writer.<sup>8</sup> I had in that essay seen much of Naipaul’s writing as his bildungsroman. ‘Everything of value about me is in my books,’ Naipaul said in his Nobel acceptance speech.<sup>9</sup> And it is in his books that we find chronicled his growing into a knowledge of himself as Indian, and not just Indian but of indentured labourer background, from Trinidad, writing repeatedly about his father’s struggles to gain acceptance from the colonial regimes. Furthermore Naipaul is deeply concerned with the history of peoples caught up in migrations, and cultural conflicts, and political movements, which are not solely restricted to encounters with ‘the West’. It is interesting how we have come to accept this monumental label, ‘the West’. Young children from Muslim schools, teenagers in Afghanistan, are all quoted on CNN talking about the dangers and the effects of ‘the West’. And yet, as Salman Rushdie, who knows about Islamic hostility, has remarked:

Twenty years ago, when I was writing a novel about power struggles in a fictionalized Pakistan, it was already de rigueur in the Muslim world to blame all its troubles on the West and, in particular, the United States. Then as now, some of these criticisms were well founded; no room here to rehearse the geopolitics of the cold war and America’s frequently damaging foreign policy “tilts,” to use the Kissinger term, toward (or away from) this or that temporarily useful (or disapproved-of) nation-state, or America’s role in the installation and deposition of sundry unsavory leaders and regimes. But I wanted then to ask a question that is no less important now: Suppose we say that the ills of our societies are not primarily America’s fault, that we are to blame for our own failings? How would we understand them then? Might we not, by accepting our own responsibility for our problems, begin to learn to solve them for ourselves?<sup>10</sup>

This is the point that Naipaul has never ceased to assert in his writings, whether in, say, *An Area of Darkness* or *Among the Believers*, and in the hope that his criticisms of governmental foibles and failings would make

us look at them again and correct them.

But it is for these criticisms that Naipaul has been harshly taken to task by Said, and even by Rushdie. A frequent accusation is that he has ignored the ‘diversity’ of Islam. In fact, Naipaul all too frequently describes the diversity of Islam – the Indian Muslim in Iran, dejected at the turn Islamization has taken, the Hindu convert to Islam in Malaysia, and so on. Each chapter in each book dealing with Islam, and, indeed, each character in a book like *A Bend in The River*, portrays a different kind of Islam. What Naipaul also does is to highlight the fundamentalist effort in the global reaches that Islam has spread to, and that effort at Islamization is both militant and homogenizing. In passing it needs to be pointed out that, critical though he is of Naipaul, Rushdie has been known to strike the same note: ‘Highly motivated organizations of Muslim men ... have been engaged over the last thirty years or so in growing radical political movements out of this mulch of “belief”.’<sup>11</sup> He then differentiates ‘Islamicists’ – those engaged in this project of Islamicizing the world – from Muslims, and, in true Rushdie fashion, coins the word ‘westoxicated’ – those who are afraid of being made toxic by the West.

As a result of my conversation with Mark Feeney, I tried to persuade a local journalist to write about why George Bush ought to have read Naipaul in the months following the terrorist attacks on New York. But when I told the journalist, ‘a confirmed Carter Democrat’, that I believed Jimmy Carter should be held responsible for the proliferation of Middle Eastern terrorism, he thought my views altogether too outrageous. Like Naipaul in *Among the Believers*, I see Carter’s policy to oust the Shah as having destabilized the region. I remember, as a newly arrived graduate student at the University of Utah, watching the debate between Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford. As a newcomer to the States, and as a Parsi who had, along with other Parsis, revelled in the Shah’s celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of Cyrus the Great and the Shah’s own connection to this ancient Persian lineage that all Parsis claim, I was outraged that Carter had wanted the Shah deposed and, even more unthinkable, replaced by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Was Iran to become Islamic again just as we were close to being Persians again? I was horrified. I came close to fisticuffs with my fellow graduate students who insisted on the Shah’s violation of Human Rights. Ah, the Human Rights violations that Iran has seen since, and how unmatched! To borrow from Naipaul:

It wasn't of [the] hidden messiah that Iranians had written on the walls of London and other foreign cities before the revolution. They had written – in English – about democracy; about torture by the Shah's secret police; about the fascism of the Shah ... [B]y his emergence, he [the Ayatollah] annulled or made trivial, all previous protests about the fascism of the Shah.<sup>12</sup>

Poignantly, he goes on, 'Individualism was to be surrendered to the saviour and the avenger. But when the revolution was over, individualism – in the great city the Shah had built – was to be cherished again.'<sup>13</sup> His words bear in mind the difficulty of creating an Islamic constitution because no such thing has ever existed in Islam. And such an enterprise would have to be one 'the Prophet approved of'.<sup>14</sup> As for US President Jimmy Carter, he was soon to pay for his tacit support of the Iranian revolution with the hostage situation which only Ross Perot could bail him out of. In fact Perot, the Texas billionaire who later ran for President, did not bail out Carter, but sent in his own commandos to rescue his staff of Electronic Data Systems from the notorious prison in Tehran.

In *Among the Believers*, Naipaul tells us how the Islamic revolution in Iran drew strength from the power of religion. He quotes from the *Teheran Times*,

The history of Pakistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran is a reminder of the power of religion and the hollowness of secular cults. How the world works is the concern of science, and how society is to be governed is the affair of politicians, but what the whole thing means is the main concern of Iran and Pakistan. Politics is combined with religion in Islam. Iran and Pakistan can join hands to prove to the world that Islam is not just a faith of the past, practicing ancient rituals.<sup>15</sup>

This is quintessential to our understanding of contemporary Islam's desire to colonize. In the question-answer period after his reading from *Half a Life* in Washington, Naipaul, it is reported, made this point again:

In reply to another question, he said it was difficult to see an Islamic country becoming democratic. The tradition of Islam was to have spiritual and political leadership combined and to have a strong ruler. He said he had great worries for countries including Indonesia, Pakistan and Iran. He also commented on the support that Osama bin Laden finds in Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Iran.<sup>16</sup>

Among Islamic countries, modernization is essential – but technologically, not culturally. 'The concern of science' is important,<sup>17</sup> but while it is important to know how to blow up the World Trade Center it is not important to let women out of purdah. Those ancient rituals can keep on being practised. And it is important to prove to the

world that Islam is not just a faith of the past, but one that can mix politics with religion and become a world power.

And that power is to be kept by hook or by crook. Even as he recalls Islamic colonialism briefly in epic terms – 'In the imagination, the Arabs of the seventh century, inflamed by the message of the prophet, pour out of Arabia and spread East and West, overthrowing the decayed kingdoms and imposing the new faith', Naipaul digs into history to show us how in many instances trickery is involved in maintaining power. Citing the *Chachnama*, he notes how some Islamic rulers learned from the Brahmins, like Chach, a Machiavelli to one of the first Moghuls, that 'Power is power; a king's first duty is to keep himself in power. There are no rules.'<sup>18</sup> But he also notes, 'The Great God says in the Koran, "O true believers, when you encounter the unbelievers, strike off their heads".'<sup>19</sup>

It is important to read Naipaul today because, both looking forward and going back to historical examples, he gives us insights into how Islam functions and desires to function. He also gives us unique and amusing insights into how American academia, particularly the liberal establishment, exports anti-Americanism through its Third World intellectuals, particularly to the Islamic world. Finally, here is why I would recommend Naipaul to the non-scholarly lay readers and to postcolonial scholars who are interested in trying to understand how September 11 happened. Through all his work on Islam as well as through the fiction/travelogue of books like *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul outlines and emphasizes the colonizing impulse of Islam, a fact that is often overlooked by postcolonial scholars who write against British imperialism but forget that Islam colonized India and Asia Minor with a similarly exploitative economic zeal for land and currency, and it was always colonization by the sword. There was no genteel option left to the colonized to follow their own religion or culture. This continues to be true as Islam – I say Islam, not any renegade group like the Taliban – continues to want to spread Islamic fervour in the non-Islamic world. The attack on the World Trade Center was a form of *jihad* as they understood it. My liberal journalist colleague whom I attempted to persuade to write about the importance of Naipaul in relation to the current events did not want to accept the fact that the attack was meant as a holy war. That would be too reactionary and conservative. On the other hand, whatever we think of President Bush's injunction to 'hug' a Muslim, we all have Muslim friends. They are not the Taliban nor the regimes that Naipaul writes about.

## NOTES

1. According to Nehru in his landmark work, the caste system was 'a device to keep the Aryan conquerors apart from and above the conquered people'. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* ([1946]; London: Meridian, 1956), p. 241.
2. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p. 231.
3. Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* ([1938]; New York: New Directions, 1963).
4. V.S. Naipaul, *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* ([1998]; London: Abacus, 1999), p. 1.
5. Edward W. Said, 'An Intellectual Catastrophe', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, (<http://web.ahram.org.eg/weekly/1998/389/cu1.html>)
6. Amuna Elbendary, 'Nobel Questions', *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 18-24 October 2001. Edward Said sees the attack on the World Trade Center as a counter-offensive to American colonialism: 'Anti-Americanism in this context is not based on a hatred of modernity or technology-envy: it is based on a narrative of concrete interventions, specific depredations and, in the cases of the Iraqi people's suffering under US imposed sanctions and US support of the 34 year old Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories [sic]: 'Islam and the West are inadequate Banners', *The Observer*, 16 September 2001. (<http://www.observer.co.uk/comment/story/0,6903,552764,00.html>)
7. As is well known the Zoroastrians were driven out of Iran then Persia, by the Muslims. I am sure that very few intellectuals today recognize that even Iran was not Islamic at one time.
8. Feroza Jussawalla, ed., *Conversations with V.S. Naipaul* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).
9. See Nobel site.
10. Salman Rushdie, 'Yes, This Is About Islam', *New York Times*, 2 November 2001. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/02/opinion/02R.ush.html>)
11. Rushdie, 'Yes This Is About Islam'.
12. V.S. Naipaul, *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (New York: Knopf, 1981), p. 10.
13. Naipaul, *Among the Believers*, p. 24.
14. Naipaul, *Among the Believers*, p. 20.
15. Naipaul, *Among the Believers*, p. 85.
16. I.K. Sharma, 'Naipaul finds US aims, allies dubious', *DH News Service*, Washington, 31 October 2001 (cjewallia@indiaStar.com).
17. Naipaul, *Among the Believers*, p. 85.
18. Naipaul, *Among the Believers*, p. 134.
19. Naipaul, *Among the Believers*, p. 138.