



Apocalypse of Warring Ideologies in the South Asian Context: Deconstructive Analysis of *the Blind Man's Garden* by Nadeem Aslam

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Abstract: Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) is a replica of the political chaos which prevails in the South Asian region in the wake of 9/11. The present research aims at exploring the conflict of ideas manifested through binary oppositions in the novel in the light of Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. Warring ideologies bring forth the conflict between two major entities of the torturers and the sufferers, former are the Americans and warlords, while Pakistanis and Afghans make the latter group in *The Blind Man's Garden*. The analysis of binary oppositions reveals that the binary traits ultimately manifest a constant conflict beyond the apparent opposition of politically powerful groups, i.e., the USA, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The conflict lies between the freedom and imprisonment, humanity and bestiality, world of nature and the world of man, tolerance and intolerance, tradition and modernity etc. The research amplifies Nadeem Aslam's provocation for the need of humanity to be inculcated for the amelioration of the apocalyptic occurrences in the South Asian region involving innocent lives in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Key Words: Apocalypse, Binary opposition, Deconstruction, Ideologies

1. Introduction

The themes such as nationalism, tradition, community, and religion usually find expression in America based Pakistani novelist Nadeem Aslam's fiction. *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013), set partly in Pakistan and Afghanistan reveals the actions taking place in these two countries dividing people between two major groups of sufferers and torturers in the consequence of 9/11. In the novel, Aslam propagates the cause of neither of parties but instead the cause of humanity. The novel is about the post 9/11 war in Afghanistan but is narrated from the perspective of a Pakistani family who also faced the dire consequences of this war. It is set in a fictitious town in Pakistan called Heer and the idea of Heer is taken from the renowned legend of Heer Ranjha to replicate a blood drenched tender love story of Naheed and Mikal in *The Blind Man's Garden*. The historicity of violence and inhumanity is conveyed through the declarative opening line of the novel "History is the third parent" (Aslam, 2013, p.1). Pakistani Anglophone fiction is known for its depiction of the cultural, political, personal, religious, and ideological conflicts prevailing in the contemporary age. Any literary work built on views in conflict may or may not lead to certain answers to the existing situations but it undoubtedly exposes the crux of situation to the readers with an inclination to reduce violence by inculcating humanity. Aslam is known for enveloping and unraveling life upsetting experiences of Pakistani immigrants, status quo of the Afghan war, politics of terrorism, and conventional aptitudes of South Asian people. He has voiced conflicts on various levels in his novels which significantly helps in

understanding cross territorial sociopolitical dynamics existing in the life of modern man. *The Blind Man's Garden* is a story of violence, human miseries, traditional abuse of power, inhumanity, and ideologies on a trial.

Tara, a conservative widow has a nineteen years old widow daughter Naheed whose husband Joe wasted his life in mere belief that he could help the injured victims in Afghanistan. Mikal, an old friend of Joe and lover of Naheed, unfortunately, escaped death to be entrapped in more miseries ahead. Warlords, Al Qaeda, and Americans enslaved him one after the other to give air to their suspicions and justifications to the sinister plan of killing others. Aslam has developed a nexus of ideologies in his novel to disclose that instead of supporting any ideology, he stands with humanity for all.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Nadeem Aslam depicts various chaotic dilemmas in his novel *The Blind Man's Garden* in the context of 9/11 and the Afghan war to expose political crisis of the South Asian region mainly involving Pakistan and Afghanistan. The present research is an attempt to deconstruct various binary oppositions woven in his novel such as (imprisonment vs. freedom, guilt vs. innocence, tradition vs. modernity, nature vs. man, and humanity vs. bestiality), to understand the construct of apocalyptic warring conflicts. Among these developing conflicts the nature as a phenomenon will be studied in contrast to the world of men where the former represents productivity and positivity while the latter is utterly chaotic and destructive. All the contrasting values in binary opposition lead to expose the striking difference between these two worlds growing side by side. Moreover, the research will endeavor to study how Aslam exploits binary oppositions to support humanity instead of any defined ideology, let it be political, regional or religious. Similarly, by the use of binaries he exposes the sufferings of Pakistanis at the hands of powerful agents, i.e., Al Qaeda and the USA ruining the humanity under the guise of the war on terror while the world considers Pakistanis to be the accomplice to terrorism.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

- To analyze various ideologies in conflict represented through structural device of binary oppositions in *The Blind Man's Garden*.
- To critically evaluate the emergence of humanity in clash of ideological conflicts in the post 9/11 South Asian politics as depicted in *The Blind Man's Garden*.

1.3 Research Questions

- Which binary oppositions Nadeem Aslam exploits in his novel *The Blind Man's Garden* to portray contemporary apocalyptic world?
- How does Nadeem Aslam promote humanity in a world of chaotic dilemmas in the post 9/11 South Asia?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The present research is an effort to critically analyze the scheme of binary oppositions presented in literary works to understand human life and motives behind their actions. Moreover, it will also enhance the understanding of polarity existing between the plan of nature and man reflected in the world of nature and contrary world of man. The research will also further extend the concept of binary oppositions to understand the unsaid repercussions of the war on terror in the political issues in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It will also help in achieving SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries by developing a consciousness about peace and tolerance.

2. Literature Review

The Blind Man's Garden was appreciated well by literary critics and general public for its intense portrayal of political crisis in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Razeshta Sethna (2013) traces the themes of war, patriarchy, love, and consolation woven in the narrative of *The Blind Man's Garden*. She calls it "a gripping debut novel of female power and vulnerability set in a small town" (Sethna, 2013). James Lasdun (2013), considers the novel, "an impressive accomplishment." (Lasdun, 2013) Besides the aesthetic elements, the most thriving element in the novel is the hope retained by some of the characters in spite of the miseries they go through: "For all the grinding misery that Mr. Aslam reveals in this devastated and devastating world, his most admirable characters retain their humanity enough to hope just a little for something better" (Boyagoda, 2013). Isra Ansari (2013), in her review of the novel

deciphers the similarity between the garden presented in the novel and Pakistan for covert and overt manifestation of prevailing chaos. She commends Aslam for his, "inspiration for the breathtaking garden was Pakistan. The flowers, the trees, the birds all symbolized Pakistan" (Ansari, 2013). She also argues that Nadeem Aslam weaves through so many complicated human emotions, capturing each one almost effort lessly. While talking about Rohan, the blind man of the title, Lasdun(2013) finds a fine blend of pious spirituality and ordinary human love tragically combined in him which ultimately took him away from his own planted world of trees.

Aslam's characters not only yearn for love rather they are enticed by the power of love which creates an aura of positivity around them. Shamika Shabnam (2013), in her review of the novel makes insightful remarks:

Physical wounds inevitably align emotional suffering as Joe comes to terms with his wife Naheed and Mikal's former love affair. Alongside war the novel showcases the many obstacles that a Pakistani woman has to endure, one of them being the choice between love and society". (Shabnam, 2013)

Pankaj Mishra calls the novel, "an anatomy of chaos, of murders, mutilations, bombed-out villages and long wanderings through devastated landscapes" (Mishra, 2013, p. 23). Similarly, Maëlle Jeanniard du Dot (2019) unravels the dilemmas across territorial boundaries and brings forth miseries of Af-Pak post 9/11 traumas affecting innocent people on both sides of the border. Shazia Rahman in her article titled "Animals, Others and Postcolonial Ecomasculinities: Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*" endorses postcolonial ecomasculinity by collating the role of birds and animals with that of man in the novel. She writes,

Mikal, with his non-hierarchical response to the war on Terror, gender equity, and non-human animals, models much needed helpful rather than harmful behaviours. I call this stance postcolonial ecomasculinity and link it to the way in which a snow leopard cub influences Mikal's decision to rescue a US soldier by risking his own life and wellbeing. (Rahman, 2023)

Rahman also analyses how Mikal learns philanthropy by observing the birds, animals, and plants around him and ends up in rescuing an American soldiers. In a similar vein, Saba Pirzadeh (2018) analyzes environmental othering in *The Blind Man's Garden* which the opponent countries impose through narratives to declare the spaces in the rival countries generating hostility. Mamoona Yasmeeen Khan et al. (2021) explore how theme of trauma is incorporated in the narrative of the novel. According to them, traumas leave deep impact on personalities and resultantly transform individual traumas into society traumas (Khan et al., 2021). Riaz et al. (2021) focus on the analysis of political scenario involving the loss of innocent souls as a result of the war on terror. They argue that the novel educates the reader to support nonviolent ways of combating terrorism.

The relevant literature review shows that conflicting ideologies beyond political scenario are yet to be studied in the novel, and the current research explores these themes through deconstruction of binaries working both at individual and social level.

3. Methodology

The research is qualitative and content analysis will be done to evaluate the novel with emphasis upon the construct of binary oppositions.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This research utilizes Jacques Derrida's conceptual construct of binary oppositions from Deconstruction theory. Deconstruction means the pursuit of the meaning of a text to the point of exposing the supposed contradictions and internal oppositions upon which it is founded. According to Derrida (1976), small and marginalized things are important to be given meaning. It means that each reading of text has opposite but related meanings. Binary opposition is a set of two contrasting ideas such as good/bad, light/darkness freedom/slavery etc. They are studied to evaluate the structural development of plot through contrasting ideas by highlighting two water tight compartments for opposing categories.

The text for content analysis in this research is *The Blind Man's Garden* by Nadeem Aslam.

4. Content Analysis

Nadeem Aslam has introduced a world where multiple warring ideas not only exist but reinforce the prevailing chaos and destruction that leads to the call for humanity in the post 9/11 world.

4.1 Imprisonment versus Freedom

The contrast of imprisonment is given with freedom, which shows that the imprisoned only yearn to be free; while warlords are free to imprison others. Aslam has presented the brutality of warlords who imprisoned humans for the sake of ransom or best price paid by Americans for them. In a gruesome scene described in the holy place of a mosque, children, women, and old are brought to be sold to Americans for 5000 dollars per a suspected terrorist. Apparently, Akber and Mikal along with many others are imprisoned in cages in a brick factory but Aslam exhibits that the most of the characters are bound in seen or unseen chains/traps. For instance, the father and the son who delivered Mikal (as a terrorist) to the mosque, are also bound to do the task, otherwise their families will be killed by the warlords. Humans are bargained against each other's wish of freedom and security for themselves and their loved ones. After 9/11, South Asian region has distinctly emerged as a neo-colony of the USA where glimpses of imprisonment are often witnessed. *The Blind Man's Garden* draws a parallel between the world of humans and nature revealing the cruelty of human beings. Aslam uses an analogy between the caged birds and the imprisoned humans; caged birds are kept by the bird pardoner at first and then released to absolve sinners' sins while the humans are sold and bought by the warlords and the Americans to fuel the war on terror which makes this world hell for human beings. This bargain of humans is gruesome and horrifying as compared to bird selling. Aslam raises a pungent objection to the first capture of the birds by the bird pardoner and provokes a query whether he will be punished or rewarded for that. Similarly Mikal, a Pakistani orphan who accompanied his friend Joe to Afghanistan for the sake of social welfare is concurrently captivated by Al Qaeda, warlords and then Americans. Wherever Mikal is kept, he never knew the reason behind his capture. His friend Joe escaped misery by dying early but does it prove that Mikal had to pay the price of existing. The death seems to liberate and proves a savior while life keeps wounding the soul in this apocalyptic world. The freedom has been sharply raised against paranoia of imprisonment. There is a larger and more suffocating imprisonment growing after 9/11 specifically in South Asian region which is persistently suffocating humanity. Mikal is afraid of reaching his loved ones on coming back to Pakistan which left him with the feeling that "the cage is just bigger" (Aslam, 2013, p. 199). Similarly people are so afraid of Taliban that an English teacher of the school refuses to listen to an American lest she should be punished, "frightened of the Taliban to speak to an American: 'She says they'll cut off her tongue'" (Aslam, 2013, p. 329). *The Blind Man's Garden* alludes to the foreign interference within Pakistan and Afghanistan which has transformed the South Asia as a larger prison cell which is under persistent surveillance of the USA. Aslam has tarnished the image of globalization for eliminating the redundant hope in humanity because everyone is forced to struggle for individual security and freedom. The American who was enchained by Mikal is a constant threat to all people for being white and presents the binary opposition between the natives and the intruders. The locale of this novel revolves around Heer, Afghanistan, and Waziristan but threatened people are locals and the imminent threat is of the Americans. This global picture of pervading terrorism and war against it, has imprisoned all living souls in the region. On a larger level, everyone seems to be enslaved and in South Asian region, power game has ruled over all actions of various groups mainly existing in the scenario.

4.2 Guilt versus Innocence

Guilt and innocence grow side by side and generate the powerful need to develop sympathy for the weak. Aslam pricks the conscience of the bearers of social welfare and asserts, "The logic is that there are no innocent people in a guilty nation" (Aslam, 2013, p. 6). Pakistan and Afghanistan in the South Asian regions are the two countries where the commoners pay the price of the brutality exercised by the people in power. The novel begins with the determination of a student of medicine at Heer to go help sufferers in Afghanistan. He was brutally killed and this further led to innocent losses. In Aslam's bleak world, the guilty is shown to let loose such as the American managed to flee after the massacre, Sharif Sharif remained unaccountable after having harassed the mother first and then the daughter, Major Kyra's solace is not shattered after the demise of innocent children, the warlords won the battle after having blinded Rohan and getting ransom from his parents. Rohan's blindness and his garden metaphorically depicts Pakistan's miserable state, which is exposed to hostilities and traps. Rohan became blind in helping a poor child and nothing went wrong in the world of human rights. Therefore, at one dismal stage, Naheed asks her mother which of their prayer God granted. It echoed Hardy's complaint that all is wrong in this world and God is happy in heaven. The world torn between the tragedy of the sufferers and the escape of the guilty speaks volume of the demise of humanity. Aslam seems to share the distress in justice delayed by God in this world. Naheed questioned the unending prayers of them and mocked the bird pardoner's belief who says, "God never ignores the prayers of the weak" (Aslam, 2013, p. 7). The caged birds represent thousands of Pakistanis and

Afghans whose prayers have remained unheard and they lost their loved ones in a war which they neither wished for nor supported. When Rohan tells his son the story about good and bad in the opening pages of the novel, he comforts the terrified child by saying, “‘But have you ever heard a story in which the evil person triumphs at the end?’ The boy thought for a while before replying. ‘No,’ he said, ‘but before they lose, they harm the good people. That is what I am afraid of’ (2013, TBG, 18). Aslam reflects on the damage inflicted on social fabric and humane thinking which left the society torn and people aggrieved, like Rohan and the blind man’s garden.

Aslam’s world also ends with loss of good people such as Joe, Mikal, and then Basie; no matter whether the bad people win or lose. It leaves behind a glimpse of hope because someone rescued a poor guy, an American, a helpless blind man, hundreds of innocent hostage school children, a helpless widow, and above all the innocent free birds. Humanity is not associated with great and noble cause and missions because Aslam highlights the worth of every living being. Guilt and innocence are no more defined states as they are not judged on poetic justice in Aslam’s fictitious world. The innocent merely remains the same since the situation will turn soon. Therefore, when Mikal got a chance, he injured the father and killed the two white men. Later on, he felt guilty of having killed two humans that led him to rescue an American though he learned that sparing his enemy would have not been the sensible choice, however, he leaves the message that humanity should grow beyond the bounds of rationality.

4.3 Humanity versus Bestiality

Aslam’s world is in conflict of various warring oppositions which refers to the utter loss of humanity in the wake of 9/11. *The Blind Man's Garden* reveals that community bonds have sucked away the warmth and the soul of humanity. He has used analogy of the angel’s tale and human’s world. Mikal, the angel took Adam back to God for forgiveness. Adam was gregarious and wanted to stay with Eve, yet his ultimate wish was to be embraced by God. Mikal in the novel, also resembles the angel in bringing that message of humanity to get closer to God. In a community, we accommodate others with their sins and crimes for the sake of shared identity e.g. the Americans save the Americans and Mikal was left behind; on the other hand during their journey, Mikal always offered food to the American though he had no provisions as a captive. Joe went to Afghanistan because he wanted people to be rescued, injured to be attended without any discrimination of cast and creed. He died innocent when he was put on siege with other Taliban.

There are number of people introduced in the novel who served humanity regardless of any creed. Father Mede serves all children without any partiality, so did Basie and Yasmeen. Rohan’s wife, an atheist and Rohan, a devout Muslim are committed to serve the people and educate the children. The religion has never been any distinguishing quality among believers of humanity. Rohan lost his eyes in rescuing the child of a poor bird pardoner with whom he does not relate at any level. Aslam identifies an unending war between humanity and bestiality, the former knows no bounds and limits to serve, the latter has no excuse or justification to crush and destroy. The history has revealed chapters soaked in human blood where both the believers and the non-believers played their role in weaving history. The Americans and Taliban are playing havoc with the lives of the natives in South Asia. They try hard to strengthen their nexus and their beliefs were blindly followed either out of fear or out of affiliation. There is a growing frustration among people due to this unseen pressure of gradually growing strong lobbies. That is why Ahmed the moth is brutally killed by a mob when he was meeting his Taliban friend. The hatred against Taliban was poured into every blow against him. It unknowingly supported “America’s covert help” (Aslam, 2013, p. 43). This growing frustration and distress manifest inhumanity and a series of tortures that people have been bearing, that is why when Ahmed and a Taliban boy was caught by mob:

Every ounce of rage --- every rape, every disappearance, every public execution, every hand amputated during the past seven years of the Taliban regime, every twelve year-old boy pressed into battle by them, every ten-year-old-girl forcibly married to a mullah eight times her age, every man lashed, every woman beaten, every limb broken – was poured into the two men by fist, club, stick, foot and stone, and when they finished and dispersed nothing remained of the pair. It was as if they had been eaten. (Aslam, 2013, p. 43).

In the new emerging world of globalization bestiality is brewing inhumanity and both the colonizer and the colonized are grotesque bearers of violence therefore no such binary opposition can relate them to the two wings of oppressors and sufferers. The whole novel is spun around two opposite entities which the dervish envelopes as, “*Ahl-e-Dil* and *Ahl-e Havas*. We all are divided into these two groups. The first are the People of the Heart the second are the People of Greed ... The first people will not trample anyone to obtain what they desire. The second will. Here lies this world” (2013, 77). Rohan got irritated on Fakir’s non sense talk and burst out that the entire

philosophy of *Ahl-e-Dil* and *Ahl-e-Havas* does not explain what is happening in Afghanistan. The Fakir voiced Aslam's woven mindscape of these contrasts; "Whoever has power desires to hold on to power. That is the case both with the Taliban and the West" (Aslam, 2013, p. 78).

Major Kyra pushed many people into siege plan without informing them that innocent children will be trapped in the school building. Aslam has used the title "Ardent Spirit" to magnify the difference between passion and extremism. That is why, some terrorists at school revealed their unwillingness to continue harassment of children and teachers at school. No religion propagates such heinous acts of killing God's created beings. Aslam has also raised suspicion against such parameters of goodness, "If a bird will say a prayer for the person who has bought its freedom, wouldn't it call down retribution on the one who trapped and imprisoned it? And on the one who facilitated the entrapment?" (Aslam, 2013, p. 7) The freedom is yearned against imprisonment throughout the novel. Somewhere larger or smaller, outer or inner as Mikal on his run out of brick factory cage is in a larger cage because he cannot go back to Heer. His loved ones might have been ruined by the American army.

The novel seems to relate to the fact that where ideologies clash, it ends up in violence. The people in Afghanistan are groups in power at war with each other. Similarly violence is an outcome of imposition of ideology upon others. Various characters are introduced in the novel to accept others beliefs such as Basie, Yasmeen, Mikal, and Rohan. Rohan is caught up in past memories where he feels that a whore's son should not pollute the school where the son seems innocent. Major Kyra also represents the rigidity while religion specifically Islam emphasizes the worth of a human being. Moreover, during the siege, children were made to stand on chairs in front windows as a safeguard to the terrorists inside. This shows that personal ego is at stake and, therefore, the religion is being used as a tool to victimize others and baptize one's self by the façade that religion demands sacrifice. The old gate keeper at Ardent Spirit seems to help because his life is at serious clash with the world around, therefore his faith readily shifted, "over the years he had guarded the mansions of any number of Heer's rich people and he was repulsed by what he had observed – the indecency of the woman, the abominable traitors' talk," (Aslam, 2013, p. 188). Community ethics seem to overrule humanity, yet there are traces where humanity emerges such as a few terrorists wanted to break away from the others.

4.4 The World of Nature versus the World of Man

Aslam's novel is replete with the details about Rohan's garden, and the nature in Waziristan and Afghanistan. Nature with its all shades is in a constant ongoing circle, death comes after life and life chases death. Destruction makes room for the new budding flowers. Nature is benevolent to all and teaches us humanity which is in stark contrast to devastating humanity in the world of blood and flesh. Erika Banerji states, "The garden, Aslam's metaphor for the world, a place of beauty and innocence, is in the course of the novel corrupted and tarnished with innocent blood" (Banerji, 2013) to compare the positively growing world of nature and apocalyptic world of man.

Similarly, Mikal tries to stay with the cub because it was with him without any expectation of a reward. While humans are only destroying others, they have conflicts and their inhumanity often suffocates others. The world of humans is subject to constant threats, few are killed because of them and others are killed to nurture these fears further. Nature repeats the cycle and conveys positivity and productivity while humans fail to maintain their quintessential banality which they were born with. The clash of nature with community pressure has been made obvious when "Flora and fauna are wonderfully observed – moths 'like shavings from a pencil sharpener'; a tree trunk 'twisted as though struggling with some unseen force' – forming a decorative braid around the frequently brutal human interactions they coincide with" (Lasdun, 2013).

4.5 Tradition versus Modernity

Tara always suppresses her daughter that what would people think about her. At first she did not let her marry Mikal, then she pressurized Naheed's abortion, as once Naheed shouted at her mother in anger, "you should never ever frighten those younger than you with your own fears. Caution is one thing, but you filled me with terror. Just leave me alone please. Just take this world of yours and go away with it somewhere and leave us alone" (Aslam, 2013, p. 187). Naheed's mother Tara represents tradition and Naheed has stepped into modernity, thus the mother expresses fears which never come out to be true. Mishra opines that tradition brings both oppression and consolation. Naheed had to end up her conceived child when she was under the fear of her mother. Then she dared to stay with the illegitimate child because she has learnt to fight with their developed fears of communal opinion. The relationship between marriage and duty is intrinsic to the story. Rohan, the father and the blind man of

the title, constantly prays for the soul of his wife, who died in a state of apostasy. Rohan cannot bring himself to accept that he was in love with someone who was not a believer. To cope with this blow, Rohan embraces religion with such fervor that, looking back from a vantage point in his old age, he realizes that he shoved religion down his children's throats, when a far more nuanced approach was needed.

5. Conclusion

The only message of the novel is, "Love does not make lovers invulnerable ... But even if the world's beauty and love are on the edge of destruction, theirs is still the only side to be on. Hate's victory does not make it other than what it is defeated love is still love" (Aslam, 2013, p. 120). Acts of love and kindness emerge against the larger drama of human tragedy in *The Blind Man's Garden*. In the last, the American's rescue by somebody who was brutally mistreated, devastated, and had lost much because of their violence, is the only hope in the victory of tolerance and goodness. *The Blind Man's Garden* depicts some warring ideologies manifested through binary oppositions which add layers of meanings to the narrative, making a demand from the intellect of the readers to comprehend the sub-text. The conflict among multiple ideologies and approaches towards life leads to death, decay, and destruction. Aslam successfully attempts to raise a voice in favour of humanity by presenting hazards involved in rigidity and inflexibility.

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