

‘DETERRITORIALIZATION’ IN *THE WASTED VIGIL* BY NADEEM ASLAM

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Nadeem Aslam in his novel *The Wasted Vigil* is breaking the boundaries of trauma and loss raised around the 9/11 event by extending its tragic resonance across the globe. He traces the causes of the event by linking the separated and divided worlds of ‘us’ and ‘them’, by forcing readers to see the victims and the perpetrators exchanging their roles in the course of history to serve the vested interests of the political power players. Mostly 9/11 fiction revolves around the stories of the victims of the event domesticating the tragedy ignoring its global implications, while Aslam tries to trace the root cause of terrorism by questioning the role of the political power players in creating, funding and supporting the terrorists thus leading to the event that they are mourning over. The novel explores the destruction of Afghanistan because of Russian interest, American interference, creation of Taliban and post 9/11 war on terror. The paper will respond to two research questions: 1) How does *The Wasted Vigil* manipulate ‘the discourses of nationalism’ to connect global tragic experiences? 2) How does the text deterritorialize American exceptionalism that looks at this event in isolation? The discussion of the novel will explore its ability to deterritorialize American exceptionalism that looks at the event in isolation and relies on an ‘us and them’ binary.

Keywords: 9/11, War on terror, Deterritorialization, Exceptionalism, Terrorism.

Introduction

In his analysis of 9/11 fiction, Richard Gray in his book *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11*, argues that most fiction set in the context of 9/11 presents the insider view of the tragedy focusing only on American perspective treating it only as American tragedy. He contrasts the novels about family, home, and the domestic realm with those that offer a wider transnational and transcultural perspective, and argues that while the former “simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures,” the latter make “encounters with strangeness” and engage “a strategy of deterritorialization” (83), as they can break the boundaries of nations and regions providing a better insight into the causes and effects of the 9/11 event. Discussing the role of the writer to respond to 9/11 event, Gray sets certain standards to avoid the trap of personalizing the tragedy and limiting its scope at the expense of ignoring all other possible ways of looking at it. He writes:

What the writer has to do in the face of all this, surely, is to pursue some form of mimesis that dips above and below the discourses of nationalism, combining closeness and distance, registering at once the communal tragedy (the devastation wrought on a particular place and people) and the structural connections to tragic experiences

elsewhere (the devastation wrought on other particular places and peoples in other parts of the globe.” (Gray 83)

He demands the writer to present a more impersonal view of the tragedy, considering its global implications. I contend that *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam falls in the latter category adding a transnational perspective to the event. The paper will focus on the novel's ability to go beyond the domesticated traumatic projection of the 9/11 event to its global implications.

The Wasted Vigil invites the readers to analyze the causes of the event. It reproaches all the perpetrators of violence may they be Taliban, Afghanis, British, Americans or Russians. It spares no one of the responsibility of the tragedy of 9/11 tracing its roots in the history of war struck Afghanistan. Instead of creating binaries, the novel tries to break the boundaries by inviting all the involved parties to recognize their faults and move towards a workable solution other than war. *The Wasted Vigil* reiterates the need to look at 9/11 in connection with the tragic experiences across the American border. The text investigates the moral justification of Russian invasion of Afghanistan, American policy to establish Taliban to disintegrate Russia, Pakistan's role to support Taliban, political wars of warlords, and finally American post 9/11 war on terror. The paper will respond to two research questions: 1) How does *The Wasted Vigil* manipulate 'the discourses of nationalism' to connect the global tragic experiences? 2) How does the text deterritorialize American exceptionalism in looking at this event in isolation?

Discussion

In the first two chapters of his book *After the Fall*, Gray is criticizing the use of old tools to record an event that requires some new response. Fiction writers like Don DeLillo, John Updike and Claire Messud fail to detach themselves from the media presentation of the event, and focus most of the time on personal narratives of the characters thus presenting the event as a national and American tragedy. Angeliki Tseti in her review of the book *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11*, writes that most writers fall in a trap “to define the nation in relation and contrast to the “sinister Other” – albeit now replaced by Islam, rather than Communism”. This “– proves sterile and unproductive, utterly reductionist, at a time when “everything has changed” and America has become a global nation” (Tseti 152). In the chapter, “Imagining Crisis”, Gray explores examples of writing where crisis is approached more holistically. He admires the use of the technique of deterritorialization in the works like *Twilight of the Heroes* by Deborah Eisenberg, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *Netherland* by Joseph O'Neill because they successfully try to bridge the gap between nations and cultures, past and present, personal and public, domestic and transnational by enacting Homi Bhabha's notion of “interstitial perspective”. Instead of focusing on 9/11 as an American tragedy alone, they present collective trauma experienced by all the parties involved; both the perpetrators and the victims of violence and terrorism. According to Gray these novels have the potential to “provide an intercultural connection and, issuing from this, the possibility of social transformation” (Gray 83). Appreciating these works for their potential to deterritorialize, Tseti in her review writes: “...the divided identities and fragmentation, the collision between cultures but mostly the mutuality of experience between these stories that are written from a position of liminality and the narrative of 9/11 strengthen the links between different cultures and the need to interrogate previous rhetoric and either/or discourses generated by the War on Terror.” (Tseti 153). The text in these novels becomes performative seeking the readers to participate in asking questions, finding their answers for themselves and keep revising their opinions in a process of continuous 'repositioning'.

9/11 changed the course of the history. It was America that felt the blow as an insult and like a wounded predator wanted its vengeance on the perpetrator, thus it decided to wage war on terror taking Afghanistan as its immediate target. *The Telegraph* writes in its review, “Something changed for Aslam after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Rahim quotes Aslam: “I asked myself whether in my personal life and as a writer I had been rigorous enough to condemn the small scale September 11s that go on

every day,” (Rham). Aslam tries to direct the attention to the plight of the people who have been labelled ‘the sinister other’, their misery and the cause of their misery thus leading the readers to reflect on the 9/11 event as an out-come of a longstanding conflict. Aslam tries to provide his readers with a holistic vision. He is not ready to confine himself to one perspective, therefore he brings in a Briton, an American, a Russian and an Afghani man, two Afghani women (who are already dead) as main characters to present a multifaceted image. *The New York Times* writes in its review:

...this novel is more expansive than his previous ones, documenting several decades intensely and several centuries tangentially. It seeks to reveal the psyche not just of one rural village or one immigrant community but of Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States and Afghanistan.” (Adamscot)

Afghanistan is a stage of action for the international power players to use it as a battleground for their vested interests. Mining of gems, geographical position to access the minerals and oil rich states has invited the British colonialism, giving way to Russian invasion, Civil war and American interest to outdo Russia and later to fight Al-Qaida and Taliban. I agree with Oona Frawley when she writes in her article “Global civil war and post-9/11 discourse in *The Wasted Vigil*”: “Civil war in Afghanistan was thus not a simple matter of one group pitted against the state, but a complex meshing of centuries’ worth of global and local expectations and desires” (442).

It is the story of ‘collateral damage’ and a collective loss of the main characters and the countries they represent. All the main characters Marcus who is British, David an American, Lara a Russian, Qatrina, Zameen and Dunia who are Afghans stand as much as persons as representative of their countries. Afghani women are the most helpless characters in the novel, as the most brutal things happen to them. They represent Afghanistan at the mercy of Russia, Afghan warlords, Taliban and now America receiving nothing but destruction from all sides. The novel takes us into a narrow bleak world of war, where art, music colour, fragrance, literature have no place, and where the light of reason is swallowed by the darkness of fanaticism, where feelings of love are destroyed by religious dogma, and where experience of loss and suffering is the only experience left for human souls. It is a country where animals die strange deaths ‘in death chambers’ (305), where doves are fed to falcons, where women are stoned to death, where non-muslims are forced to wear different clothes, where extreme punishments are rendered with least reason, where hands are cut off out of fanatic and dogmatic approach without even slightest understanding of religion.

The Wasted Vigil unfolds before us a story of loss, an image of misery scattered along the beautiful images in the backdrop, only to highlight the poignant situation the characters are in. It is not just the story of America and her loss; not the image of ‘the bodies that matter’; rather it is an image of the loss of ‘abject beings’ like Qatrina, Zameen, Casa and Dunia who are vulnerable in a system that is a product of war, indoctrination of hatred and global political conflicts. Aslam presents Afghanistan as the action place of the novel where, “geology was fear instead of rock, where you breathed terror not air” (Aslam 179). This terror was not trademark of Taliban alone, but Russians, who once abducted and raped their girls, American militants implementing their policies there and warlords fighting for their hegemony, all were ruling the common masses crushing them, exploiting them with fear and terror each party disseminating its own theocracy (I am using the term theocracy for Communism and Capitalism as much as for Taliban ideology, for all of them have worked in a totalitarian way in Afghanistan).

Mudasir Altaf Bhat writes in his article “Counter-Hegemonic Discourse in *The Wasted Vigil*”: “After 9/11, American government has declared nothing less than a global state of exception through the occasion presented by the War on Terrorism’. The phrase War on Terror provided US government enough freedom over time and space” (103). Aslam presents American justification to wage war on terror in an incident in which James tortures an Afghan boy making him blind. He justifies this violence:

I did what needed to be done, David. These people have been trained in how to survive interrogation techniques. For some of them true jihad starts at capture. So we have to be

extreme, go beyond their trained endurance. I am just searching for our country's enemies, David. It's nothing personal against this man (Aslam 304).

This is the justification that America used to invade Iraq to destroy weapons of mass destruction that could never be found. Later, the invasion continued and the stance that justified it was to restore democracy to Iraq. Same plea is taken to justify militancy in Afghanistan. Aslam narrates the century long saga of Afghanistan war, war against British colonialism, Civil war, Russian war, Talibanization and American war on terror, to argue that war is no solution to the problem of extremism that America wants to curb. Afghanistan is paying the price for the geo-political and economic interests of the historical power players. Aslam says in an interview, "I wanted to explore and record all of that in *The Wasted Vigil*. Afghanistan – a crossroads of history – seemed an appropriate place to discuss the meeting of Islamic and Western culture, the 'civilising missions' and the 'bringing of democracy'" (Book browse).

The text challenges the common American perspective presented in 9/11 fiction and non-fiction alike by unveiling the historical fact that it was America who planted Taliban to fight Russians, it was America who provided them weapons and economic resources, and it was America that funded their training. Aslam writes: "...in the 1980s, convoys of ten-ton trucks filled with automatic rifles, with machine guns and grenade launchers, bought secretly by the United States" (Aslam 302) were sent to Afghanistan from Karachi and Peshawar. Local uneducated men, 'poor foot soldiers from primitive and impoverished backgrounds' were picked up to be trained (179). They were 'vulnerable and easy to control' (179). They were manipulated in the name of religion to fight against the Communist Russia. Once Russia withdraws, and the funding is stopped to support Taliban, they direct their extremism to US and its allies. The seeds of terrorism were cleverly sown with the least idea that war fought in Afghanistan would have an impact on US and allies. There is hint of the use of suicide bombers by Americans too to 'discredit' and 'blame' the concept of jihad (73). It is the lack of shared responsibility by America that is highlighted in the text. The unwillingness to look beyond the personal trauma is presented ironically when James says in rage without feeling for Casa:

We are not responsible for this. If he is half-blind or if he dies of his wounds__ it's not our fault. And those hundreds who died by chance in our bombing raids, and those who are being held in Guantanamo and in other prisons__ none of it is our fault. Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda and their Islam are answerable for all that (306).

Only David, an ex-American spy, realizes the shallowness of the political slogans. "The entire world it seemed had fought in this country, had made mistakes in this country, but mistakes had consequences and he didn't know who to blame for those consequences. Afghanistan itself, Russia, the United States, Britain, Arabia, Pakistan?" (Aslam 34). On returning to the country post-9/11 to see Marcus, David faces pricks of conscience by avoiding the responsibility for the course of action that history has taken in the region, in the bloodshed, in the indoctrination of young minds and the consequent destruction. His concerns are brushed aside by James, and his empathy is destroyed by Casa when he explodes himself to resist David's attempt to save him.

The text criticizes American exceptionalism and her failure to look at her own mistakes as a superpower in carrying out misadventures in other countries to maintain her hegemony. Casa challenges American perception of Afghans as barbarians by referring to the incident of flight United 93, when the pilots were informed that their plane might be used to hit the white house. "A group of Americans – 'civilized' people, not 'barbarians' – discovered that their lives, their country, their land, their cities, their traditions, their customs, their religion, their families, their friends, their fellow countrymen, their past, their present, their future, were under attack, and they decided to risk their lives – and eventually gave up their lives – to prevent the other side from succeeding (Aslam 212). This is a sort of epiphany that people fighting on our side are fighters while those on the other side are terrorists, each side fighting with a belief that God is on their side.

Taliban and warlords are equally responsible for the plight of Afghanistan. Aslam refers to many historical events to highlight the suffering of commoners at the hands of the warlords like Gul Rasool and

Nabi Khan, who are smugglers, killers and rapists. Two-third of Usha was destroyed and there were rocket shells all around (167). There are stories of injecting poison into fruits to kill Russians, of recording sounds of murders and screams of soldiers, of vicious rapes of girls to convince us that fault also lies with ‘the character and society of Afghans,’ (66) Qatrina also condemns her society for the abuse of religion to implicate common ignorant people. Later, she herself becomes the victim when her long marital relationship is declared an adultery, with a speaker installed near her mouth so that everybody could hear her screams. It is a society where everything has gone topsy-turvy. Common pleasures like ‘smoking, music, television, kite flying, Ludo, chess, football’ (177) become sins. Education is banned for both girls and boys. Art and culture are ripped out of every nook and corner. Marcus for the fear of Taliban, who look at every piece of art and literature as heathen, hides every painting or relic of art under mud, and Qatrina nails all books to the ceilings, while the head of Buddha keeps us reminding of a possible ‘zone of piece’ in a house that stands as much as ‘the ruin of golden Islam’ as for Afghanistan (307).

The text deconstructs the notion of Taliban as ‘a few men willing to die’ as presented by media and fiction alike. Taliban are implanted there with foreign funding and they are involved in killing the locals more than any foreigners. Adam Mars Jones writes in his review: “Nadeem Aslam sees the reasons for fundamentalist misogyny as pragmatic rather than doctrinal, the simplest way of giving vulnerable, uneducated recruits a sense of power”. The presentation of Taliban is a critique on the misinterpretation of Islamic ideology to construct a jihadi narrative that has nothing to do with true teachings of Islam. The extremist version is constructed by the clerics sponsored by national and international power players to use the local youth as cannon fodder to fight against Russians and then US. The Islamic laws are twisted misused to implicate the personal enemies, to maintain one’s dominance in the regime. The religion is used as a plaything. The youth at the mercy of Taliban is brought up with partial, one-sided narrative with no choice or chance to have first-hand access to the teachings of the religion in whose name they are exploited, manipulated to lay their life to serve the interests of local and international power-players. Any progressive attempt or counter narrative is dealt with iron hands. In an interview, Aslam talked about his visits to Pakistan and Afghanistan, where he had a chance to meet the boys in the training camps, who felt that they were justified to take the bloody course, because the most important thing in their life ‘Islam’ was under attack. He highlights the indoctrination of the boys at the training camps. He argues: “These boys and these young men are being lied to. Nothing that is loved by a billion people can ever be destroyed. America and the West are loved by the people who live there, the way Islam is loved by Muslims. But Muslims do hate Islamic fundamentalism, and that can be destroyed.” Aslam hopes that the things can change for the better.” (Gale)

Afghanistan was not like that always, a country of rubbles and mortared walls. Only two decades ago, Marcus remembers, it was a different city, where women used to go to the college and universities; when they used to wear make-up and ornaments; when poets were invited, when women enjoyed painting and calligraphy; when singers were famous for their songs; when inter-religion marriage was allowed; when the art was as much a part of life as the pastoral backdrop of ruined Afghanistan. Marcus remembers the time when a Pakistani poet visited Afghanistan, “... a group of laughing college girls... had covered it (the poet’s car) entirely with lipstick kisses” (Aslam 181). Fanaticism and extremism were indoctrinated in training camps to be used against Russia. David remembers the time when the idea of suicide bombing seemed quite appalling to Afghans when Americans suggested it to them, for they thought it to be a sin taking to hell.

The Wasted Vigil highlights through the tragedies of all the main characters that it is not only Americans who feel traumatized taking 9/11 as a blow to capitalism or the technological advancement they stand for, others as well are going through traumatic experience, may they be Afghans, Russians, or Britons. It is a saga of terrorism with all the parties involved, reaping the seeds of extremism that they sowed raising Taliban on the doctrine of hatred. The text successfully breaks the territories and proves that the ‘others’ have also sad stories to narrate. “*The Wasted Vigil* thus offers a critique not only of definitions of civil war, but also, and perhaps more significantly, a far more damning critique of the American-centric perspective on globality and media’s normalization of the unimaginable image”

(Frawley 455). The situation on the other side is more ghastly and traumatic to look at. It connects all the characters suffering from loss. Their pain is mutual. The wounds of race, ethnicity and nationality ache alike. There is a reference to Turner's painting of 'victory at Waterloo' making Marcus comment: "...there was no glory to be seen there. Just the dead bodies lying on the battlefield with wives and sweethearts searching among them. And this was the winning side." (Aslam 175)

Marcus comes up with the humanist vision, a sympathetic solution that all the colliding nations of the world need to resolve their conflicts. The money and resources spent like water to fight wars could be spent on building schools, parks, libraries and hospitals thus bringing relief and peace to the suffering humanity in Afghanistan (in Iraq, Syria and other war stricken countries). "No, I am talking about the difference between greed and need. And not just this country, there is a world out there that I would try to help." (308) Lara's words, "It all depends on how big you think your family is." (308) emphasize the need to deterritorialize America to include the traumatic experiences of the rest of the world and to look for more compassionate, sympathetic and human solutions than war. The governments are strong. We cannot change them, yet we can always point out a need to change. We can always register the need. "The goal is to have goal, honesty the striving for honesty." (308) Failure does not matter. Attempt must be made to bury our hatred and enmity for the sake of those who died. Marcus sees the heroes of 'East and West' 'slaughtering each other in the dust of Afghanistan.' (314) He reiterates the idea of war as brutal massacre with no ethics, "Both sides in Homer's war, when they arrive to collect their dead from the battlefield, weep freely in complete sight of each other. Sick at heart. This is what Marcus wants, the tears of one side fully visible to the other" (315). He invites us to look for the truth in others. Marcus and David represent the need of the hour to develop an impersonal and impositional self that has the capacity of self-reflection.

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Wasted Vigil* successfully looks beyond the borders and boundaries to present the shared experience of pain and trauma and to stress the shared responsibility of all the nations involved. Marcus realizes "the West was involved in the ruining of this place", (64) Katrina stresses the problem of ignorance and illiteracy of Afghans to the extent of becoming complete barbarians. Engaged in a century long war, the country has been cut off from all possibilities of getting education and making progress. British, Russians, Afghans and Americans are all responsible for this terrible state of affairs. Capitalism is as expansionist as is Imperialism, Communism or Terrorism. Any doctrine in its extreme becomes a dogma and as such a danger, a threat. Aslam says in an interview, "Writing this novel is a way of warning. It draws attention to something we forget: warlords in Afghanistan used the weapons after Russians left the country. Then came the American interest. Then ... Afghanistan was ravaged so badly. It was a mistake to go on in Afghanistan." (Gale) Gray is right in his demand that writers need to reimagine their positions while writing a book about 9/11 to take into account the transnational and the global implications of the event. *The Wasted Vigil* succeeds in accomplishing this by inviting all parties involved to feel for the others.

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