

Problematizing the Contested Notion of Nation in Afghanistan: A Reflection on the Afghan Conundrum in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil*

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Abstract

The portrayal of nationalism in the context of establishing reconciliation, justice, and peace in the conflicting zone of Afghanistan has been stereotypical in mainstream literature, often referring to radical religious beliefs as the source of violence and inherent instability in the region. Of late, critics have been resounding the problematics of conflicts in various dimensions, like economic, cultural, social, religious, and so on, to focus upon the probabilities of reconciliation, justice, and peace, which are the basics of a desirable human civilization. While nuclear weapons and postmodern dissatisfaction are leading the entire civilization onto the brink of complete annihilation, the worst crimes are being witnessed in many disputed territories, making these regions' geopolitical standings prone to renewed discovery. The literature of recent times, dialoguing their discourses, opens up fascinating facades to explore. The present study intends to show how Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* provides a critical understanding of the contested notion of Afghan nationalism in its multidimensional fledglings.

Keywords: Afghan nationalism, Conflicting zones, Reconciliation, Stereotyping, Peace.

Introduction: A troubled region weakened by internal divides

While documenting the idea of nationalism in the context of Afghanistan, it is important to emphasise the absence of a unitary and integrated notion of Afghan nationalism, with its different ethnic groups subscribing their allegiances to various rival ideas of the nation. This is precisely the point emphasised by the historian Thomas Barfield: "[...] the push towards ethnic fragmentation had never been a powerful force in Afghanistan because of a seeming paradox: ethnicity without nationalism and a pragmatic politics that was largely immune to ideology" (Barfield 8). In order to fully comprehend the formation of the idea of Afghan nationalism and

its eventual disintegration, it is essential to reiterate the history of colonial endeavours in Afghanistan. Although various foreign imperial powers like the U.K., USSR, and USA have attempted to exert influence in Afghanistan since the turn of the twentieth century because of its geo-strategic significance, a form of internal colonialism already existed, with the dominant ethnic group of the Pashtuns exerting dominance in the region, keeping other ethnic minorities like Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Tajeks on the fringes (Hyman 219–215). All these issues associated with the interventions of foreign powers in Afghanistan and the existence of inter-ethnic rivalries have led to the creation of various inherent fractures within the Afghan nation-state, making it vulnerable and unstable from the inside. The present crisis after the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan can be attributed to these inherent fault lines in the formation of the Afghan nation. After so many years of warfare and civil wars among various warlords in the country, these hostile leaders have failed to come to a truce and attempt to establish a unitary political establishment in the country. Abubakar Siddique aptly argues that “Afghans face a stark choice: either they will find a way to resolve their differences, or the country is likely to descend once more into civil war [...]” (Siddique 212). With reference to Nadeem Aslam’s well-acclaimed fiction, *The Wasted Vigil*, the present paper aims to analyse various socio-political and cultural causes that prompted the failure of the Afghan nation-state, and fragmented the country into multiple factions.

In the absence of a unitary and structured grand narrative from which the notion of continuity and commonality can emerge, the nationalistic and patriotic fervour has remained very weak in Afghanistan, circumscribed among a few educated urban elite classes, who have hardly any connection with the people living in the rural areas. These rural people striving to make ends meet and living in extreme poverty are devoid of any political consciousness about Afghan nationalism (Hyman 299–315). Since the notion of nationalism is fundamentally a

myth that requires impingement upon the hearts and minds of the people, it cannot hold its ideological appeal among people in a society that fails to integrate them by fulfilling their basic survival needs (Nayar 176). The postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha precisely emphasises this issue in his well-acclaimed book *Nation and Narration* by arguing that “Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realise their horizons in the mind’s eye [...]. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force” (Bhabha 1). As nationalism has much to do with “finding one’s identity as a member of that society” (Thapar et al 5), the failure to align the people within the coherent structure of the society leads to the dismantling of nationalism in a region. Another fraction is also quite visible in Afghanistan, with modernization and development taking shape only in metropolises like Kabul and Kandahar while the vast rural areas get deprived of this process. As a result of this gulf, various “regional and ethnic power brokers had emerged that stood in opposition to Kabul-based elite” (Barfield 13). This urban-rural divide gets compounded by the gulf that exists between different ethnic groups, with the Pashtuns claiming to stand for the authentic Afghan culture and disclaiming the cultural heritage of the other minority communities as not representing the true essence of Afghanistan as a nation. As a consequence, the region fails to open up “the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 5). This division and prioritising of a particular cultural trend can be seen in the way urban elites in Kabul have adopted the Persian way of speech and culture, while the majority of people living in rural areas have still adhered to tribal laws and practises. The widespread gulf between the urban and rural is also starkly visible in the way the extreme fundamentalist groups of the Taliban have acquired widespread popularity among the rural people, while the urban elites of metropolises like Kabul detest them (Badakhshani 30). Since Afghanistan has failed to integrate itself under one centralised political structure, people are found to be aligning themselves with various tribal communities

with the tribal aristocracy at the helm of them, and, as a result, this is the region “where tribal and ethnic groups take primacy over the individual” (Barfield 17).

Language is another very important cultural signifier that unites the people of a nation. In his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World*, Samuel Huntington has harped on the significance of various cultural and symbolic signifiers in assimilating the people of a nation together:

Cultural identities [...] are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world [...]. A civilization-based world order is emerging: societies sharing cultural affinities cooperate with each other; efforts to shift societies from one civilization to another are unsuccessful; countries group themselves around the lead or core states of their civilization. (Huntington 20)

Although Afghanistan is dominated by its majority Pashtun tribe, their language and culture are mainly influenced by the Persian ambiance of the court. In the Constitution, which came into prominence in 1964, two languages—Pashto and Dari—were recognised as the official languages, basically the Afghan version of Persian or Afghan Farsi. The name Dari is emphasised to draw a distinction between the Afghan Persian and the established and structured Persian of Iran. The issue of language has always been a contentious factor in the country, as the majority of the people subscribe to Dari as the lingua franca of the nation. Although many efforts were made to enfranchise Pashto into the mainstream of society, all went in vain, as the other ethnic groups considered Pashto a barbaric language compared to the sophistication of the Dari. This aversion towards Pashto is a clear marker of the animosity that non-Pashtun communities harbour for the Pashtuns, who, they claim, try to assert political dominance there (Hyman 300).

Along with the existence of all these internal divides, which weaken the fundamental structure of the Afghan nation and invite intrusion into the sovereignty of the country,

Afghanistan has encountered constant foreign interventions, becoming a battleground for many superpowers to exercise their strength. Siddique asserts that the Afghan people consider themselves the most ‘maligned’ people in the world because “their lands have been transformed into a staging ground for a global conflict [...]” (Siddique 11). Set in the post-9/11 context, Nadeem Aslam’s acclaimed novel *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) dramatises the hidden fractures within the creation of the Afghan nation, which are fostered by internal conflicts and various foreign interventions, leading to the country’s submersion in the long-staying chaos and conflict. Instead of solely focusing on the 1979 USSR’s intervention in the region as the primary cause of the dismantling of the Afghan nation, as portrayed in the West-centric narrative, Aslam’s interpretation is not monochromatic but layered, offering a more nuanced understanding of the Afghan crisis (Kiran 258). Through its retrospective narrative, Aslam depicts the 9/11 event as the primary driving force behind the crisis in the region, channelling attention to the past events leading to the future crisis. The present article reflects how, through the traumatic and fractured experiences of the four characters—Marcus, Lara, David, and Casa—Aslam entwines the entire gamut of the Afghan conundrum, foregrounding the causes behind the emergence of radical insurgency in the region. The article also highlights how the altering dynamics of global geopolitics have manipulated the internal instability of Afghanistan, denying them any possibility of having a modern nation-state of their own.

Deconstructing memories: Unveiling the riddle surrounding the Afghan crisis

In *The Wasted Vigil*, Aslam projects an alternative discourse by alluding to the 1989 Soviet defeat not as redemptive for the Afghans but as a collapse of any possibility of having a modern Afghan nation-state of their own, an onset of radicalization and corruption, and the demise of fundamental human rights in the burgeoning civil wars. Aslam very subtly draws upon history, analysing the myriad ways various historical facets have circumscribed human possibilities and

urging the readers to comprehend issues like inherent vulnerability, the interplay of power, and the surrounding geopolitical games that have generated the present crisis:

This country was one of the greatest tragedies of the age. Torn to pieces by the many hands of war, by the various hatred and failings of the world. Two million of deaths over the past quarter-century. Several of the lovers on the walls were on their own because of the obliterating impact of the bullets [...]. (Aslam 14)

The characters with their traumatic past memories, drawn together in Afghanistan in quest of redemption, are projected in such a manner that their nostalgic memories are symbolically entwined with the history of the demise of Afghanistan as a nation, imploring them to make sense of the present crisis while focusing on the various past events impinging on the present. In contrast with the overwhelming projections of the journey of the Afghan nation as “a kind of aberration” in global history deprived of the process of modernization and looming largely in mediaeval times, Aslam constantly reverts back to the 1980s cold war era, when Afghanistan became a hotbed for the proxy war between the USA and USSR, thereby coming to the centre of global political dynamics (Gregory 51). In opposition to this process of ‘othering’ that actually projected “Afghanistan as an anachronism in global politics” (Gregory 52), Aslam highlights the country as the epicentre of the world’s politics: “Pull a thread here, and you’ll find it connected to the rest of the world” (Aslam 319). *The Wasted Vigil* is a perfect portrayal of how the amalgamation of the world is reflected through the journey of Afghanistan as a nation.

Aslam’s narrative roams around mainly two places: Usha, a small and beautiful mountainous town in the south-western Nangarhar province of Afghanistan, and Peshwar, on the eastern side of the contested Durand Line in Pakistan. Set against the backdrop of America’s Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) after the 9/11 terrorist attack, the novel constantly switches back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in order to make sense of the present

political turmoil, covering almost twenty years from 1979–2001. Aslam brilliantly mediates his retrospective narrative through the projections of the four characters who are haunted by their past traumas: Marcus, the British doctor spending the majority of his life in Afghanistan, has endured the deaths of his family members, while Lara, the woman from Russia looking for his lost brother, who had disappeared in the conflict between the Soviet forces and the Mujahideen jihad fighters; David, the American spy instrumental in orchestrating many anti-statist operations during the Soviet occupations of Afghanistan and who later married Marcus's daughter Zameen; and Casa, the radical orphan spending the majority of his life in the refugee camps, later became a professional mercenary, killing people under the instructions of different warlords he served.

Aslam's portrayal of these characters' experiences not only represents the causes behind the tumult existing in the region, but also the global history submerged in the chaos of Afghanistan. Through the memories of Lara, whose 'mind is a haunted house', Aslam highlights the devastating repercussions of the disastrous Soviet-Mujahideen conflict, leading to the fallout of the USSR and the beginning of the Western dominance in Afghanistan in particular and the world in general, while David's experiences decentre the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 1993 and the Twin Towers in 2001 by reverting back to the time when the Mujahideen forces were funded and trained by the NATO-backed Pakistani military, and how after the fall of the Soviets, they were left out by the West to fight for the power vacuum emerged in Afghanistan, which led to the devastating civil war and some of the worst humanitarian crimes committed against humanity: "human rights reportage and humanitarian medical work functioned in tandem with the CIA-orchestrated weapons smuggling and Islamist militancy" (Ivanchikova 122). David's experiences also hint at how constant foreign interventions in the country have hindered any possibility of Afghanistan existing as an

inherent, integrated, and independent nation-state. Similarly, through the character of Marcus and his age-old experience, Aslam projects the culpability of the British colonial endeavours and Western imperial projects in destabilising Afghanistan, countering the Western projections of the country as mediaeval and barbaric, cut off from the rest of the world, and projecting it as the main focal point of the global geo-strategic locations. Just like Slavoz Žižek, who argues that “charity is the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation” (Žižek 19), Aslam decries various humanitarian narratives justifying Western intrusion in the sovereignty of the region by referring to their culpabilities in creating the chaos.

Through these layered and palimpsestic representations of the memories of the characters, Aslam converges various past events from the archives of Afghanistan to make sense of the present disintegration of the country. The projection of the landscape in the novel is a very significant trope used by Aslam to excavate the rich and ancient history of the country lying buried, of which the landscapes bear a subtle witness and remembrance. The excavation of the Buddha statue from the perfume factory of Marcus actually bears testimony to the rich Buddhist heritage of the country, which is ironically obliterated by the subsequent Muslim rulers and their ‘bias towards Islam’ in Afghanistan:

Neither ancient nor medieval history has become well integrated into the emerging nationalist presentation of Afghanistan’s history. The image of the colossal Buddhist statues at Bamiyan did appear on national postage stamps, but it was never adopted methodically as the symbol for the nation’s past glories. (Hyman 307)

As a result, the country has failed to establish important symbolic markers from which the idea of commonality and continuity can emerge. Since the idea of a nation is ‘imagined’ into existence, it is essential for a nation to revive its rich cultural heritage, which could generate a feeling of connectivity among the people (Anderson, 7). The novel refers to the dismantling of the Buddha statue in Bamiyan in an attempt to obfuscate its past heritage by the radical Islamic

forces of the Taliban: “The Taliban have destroyed what heritage Afghans had. You saw what they did to the giant Buddhas in Bamiyan” (Hosseini 309). The memories that the characters and the landscape carry within bear testimony to the thousands of years of history of loss and suffering that still haunt the region, craving peace and stability.

The novel goes beyond the monochromatic representations of the 1979 event as tied to Afghan history and projects it as the nodal point of various multi-dimensional national and international issues submerged in one frame. In contrast with other narratives, which are basically identitarian, focusing on particular group identities or political ideologies, Aslam’s narration dismantles such particularization by focusing on multiple factors at work in destabilising the country. Rather, the novel projected the legacy of 1979 as “a multidirectional point of origin for many traumatic histories that still haunt the world today” (Ivanchikova 121). Aslam’s discourse, refraining from adhering to a particular identity-based framework, insists on projecting multiple forces at work, like nationalist, socialist, Islamist, and capitalist, in creating the traumatic vision of the country’s existence.

Unpacking the ‘Dark Histories’: Decentring the 9/11 event

Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* clearly reflects the necessity of minutely digging into past histories in order to unearth the culpabilities leading to the present crisis. Aslam’s work can be analysed from the perspective of ‘dark history’, the theory propagated by Levi R. Bryant, which basically argues that the power exuded by the dark object is more potent than the visible one (Bryant 116). Unpacking these ‘dark histories’, which are basically subterranean and hidden and exercise enormous amounts of influence in the present without creating the grandeur of a spectacle, can illuminate the causes behind the fallout of the Afghan nation in the past forty years. Literature is better equipped than any other narrative to provide a thorough and

comprehensive understanding of these silenced histories and the violent legacies of the past (Andrews and McGuire 1). Unlike some of the West-centric grandiose and well-publicised narratives like Khaled Hussaini's *The Kite Runner*, which vindicates the Western humanitarian intervention in the region by projecting them as a kind of benign force fighting to annihilate radicalism and establish human rights, justice, and peace in the region, Aslam is critical of America's proxy war in the region since the 1980s, attempting to defeat the Soviets by supporting the Mujahidin jihad fighters with ammunition, which leads to the devastating humanitarian crisis in the region: "John Wayne didn't really speak Farsi and he wasn't Iranian! He was American, just like the friendly, long-haired men and women we always saw hanging around in Kabul, dressed in their tattered, brightly colored shirts" (Hosseini 25). Aslam projects a separate discourse by referring to the 1989 Soviet defeat not as emancipatory for the Afghans but as a demise of any possibility of having an integrated Afghan nation-state of their own, an emergence of fundamentalism and corruption, and the destruction of basic human rights in the ongoing civil wars.

The myriad memories of the four characters, with their variegated reverberations and resonances, unveil the complexity of the region as a space of victimhood and vulnerability. Employing Cathy Caruth's arguments putting emphasis on the necessity "to understand the nature of the suffering, without eliminating the force and truth of the reality that trauma survivors face", it can be argued that memory, while revealing the gulf between these characters, also exposes the interconnectedness of their experiences through the painful suffering of loss (Caruth vii). Through the narrative, the readers encounter the harsh truth about Zameen, Marcus's daughter, being raped and impregnated by Lara's brother, and the bastard child of Zameen being adopted by David, the retired CIA agent. The interconnectedness of these characters' experiences symbolically represents the links between different past events

that have fostered the present crisis and disaster in the novel. Zameen could be taken as a symbol of the Afghan nation defiled initially by the Soviets (Lara's brother), while Zameen's bastard son is the representative of the Mujahideen jihad fighters born out of war and, later on, adopted and nurtured by America (David) to overthrow the Soviets from Afghanistan. The traumatic kinship of all these characters beautifully portrays the continuation of foreign intrusion, from British colonial expansion to the Cold War rivalries between the USSR and USA, to exert its influence in the country, leading to the dismantling of any possibility of forming a unitary nation in the region. Just like Yasmina Khadra, who in her *The Sirens of Baghdad* asserts that "We have nothing more to hope for from the West" (Khadra 9), Aslam's narrative projects similar views about the hypocrisies of the Western forces in the region. Unlike many West centric narratives in which the Taliban regime is portrayed as a kind of aberration in the history of Afghanistan, thereby vindicating the Western intervention in the region for a humanitarian cause, Aslam reverts back to past events, fostered by the West, which paved the grounds for the emergence of such a radical regime harbouring some of the biggest terrorist organisations in the world. Here, Aslam's views are in line with those of Edward Said, who in *Culture and Imperialism* argues how former colonial empires are being supplanted by new ones, keeping the basic essence of imperialism alive in a subtle and disguised manner:

Yet the idea of American leadership and exceptionalism is never absent; no matter what the United States does, these authorities often do not want it to be an imperial power like the others it followed, preferring instead the notion of 'world responsibility' as a rationale for what it does (Said 366).

Unpacking these hidden truths and hypocrisies actually counters the mythologizing discourses surrounding Afghanistan as a society still eulogising the mediaeval and barbaric tribal laws of the past. Rather, Aslam's narrative is much keener on analysing the causes that have compelled different communities in Afghanistan to adhere to mediaeval rules and tribal laws.

The novel is an implicit plea to the international community to recognise and acknowledge the mistakes and culpabilities that have been committed in the past, work towards establishing a coherent Afghan nation with a vibrant democracy, and bring back human rights, justice, and peace in the region, which is witnessing some of the worst humanitarian crimes committed against its own people. Instead of putting the blame on others for creating rubble in Afghanistan, it is high time to work towards solutions. While Marcus and Lara have realised the culpabilities that have been enforced on the country, both David and Casa are stuck to their faith, believing in the righteousness of their respective causes: “A passionate servant of Allah has carried out a glorious act in Jalalabad...We have hundred more young men like him...who are willing and eager to give their lives in this Jihad against the infidels” (Aslam 74). While the Western forces have attempted to bomb democracy and human rights in Afghanistan without realising the cultural nuances of the people, various radical organisations like the Taliban have attempted to cut off the country from the rest of the world by taking recourse to stringent and inhuman tribal laws: “they began whipping women in the streets for showing their faces. They banned smoking, music, television, kite flying, ludo, chess, football” (Aslam 232). Through the characters of Casa and David, Aslam hints at the failure of both these forms of governance—Western capitalism and radical Islam—to address the complexity of the region, making it one of the poorest in the world. Through the very subtle and nuanced projections of the characters and their past experiences, Aslam not only shows the truth-unveiling capacity of his narrative but also the limitations that entail this propensity of revealing truth, obfuscating one’s access to authentic reality. After spending the majority of his life in Afghanistan, Marcus realises that “he knows little about Afghanistan let alone the world” (Aslam 249).

Aslam highlights the dark history of these shadowy wars behind the apparent ‘spectacle’ portrayed in the mainstream narrative through the characters of David and Casa. Their stories mark the overlapping of two histories of Afghanistan and the USA, interacting and influencing one another. Casa’s story is reflective of the brewing up of the radical elements within the refugee camps of Pakistan, while CIA agents like David, entitled with the duty of dismantling the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, foreground the groundwork smoothed by the USA and her Western alliances for the emergence of radicalism and terror, initially designed to unleash upon the Soviets but which later haunted Afghanistan in particular and the world in general, as the shadow of terrorism still looms large across the globe. Here Aslam echoes Tabish Khair, who argues that “Violence, in other words, is not a free choice at the social level [...] however shocking an act of violence might be, behind it lies the rubble of shattered hopes, of real and imagined injustices, of human desperation and, consequently, inhuman hatred” (Khair 10). Casa’s character is a perfect example of how young and vulnerable men, attempting to find a point of reference to survive and assert their identities, are used as instruments of terror, injecting them with radical beliefs, to be thrust upon the world. The character of Casa is very significant, as he symbolises thousands of young men stuck in the whirlpool of war and conflicts, finding no way out, but to submerge themselves in the chaos through the adoption of radical ideas. Incorporating the radical ideas taught in the madrasas of Pakistan, Casa almost became a mercenary jihad fighter, killing the Russians early, then fighting for the rival warlords, and finally bombing the American bases in the name of fighting the Jihad.

The dismantling and displaced status of the Afghan nation-state is allegorised through the life journey of Casa, who, an orphan child of conflict and war, finds himself constantly displaced, hankering after fulfilling his survival needs, and in the absence of a very bright future

prospect in life, resorts to violence and radicalism as the only means of tackling the harsh realities of life. Instead of blaming religion as the sole driving force behind the existence of radicalism in the region, Aslam emphasises the socio-political causes behind this fanaticism, which requires an objective understanding of the causes. In this context, Aslam's views concur with those of Arun Kundnani, who argues that:

In the context of the evolving war on terror, this new discussion of radicalization could present itself as the wiser, more liberal alternative to the simple accounts of terrorism offered immediately after 9/11. It acknowledged that terrorism was a problem that could be investigated, analyzed, and subjected to policy solutions beyond the use of physical force. (Kundnani 115)

Similarly, the Afghan nation, in the presence of inherent instability and vulnerability, is being manipulated by the foreign power to further and promulgate their self-interests at the behest of the Afghan nation and its people, and the country is now resorting to violence, harbouring and producing some of the most prominent terrorist organisations in the world, which are inflicting terror and intimidation worldwide (Ivanchikova 89). Mohsin Hamid has expressed the same sentiment, highlighting the Western culpabilities in creating the mess they are fighting against: "I stared as one- and then the other- of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased" (Hamid 72). This remark from Hamid's protagonist reflects the narrator's pleasure in seeing the perpetrators of crimes suffer the wrath of their victims.

Casa is not a typical Afghan civilian born and brought up in a village, but a product of a modern scientific lab-like refugee camp perfected in the art of murdering people. Because of his foreign upbringing as a mercenary, he could neither comprehend his country nor harbour any love for it (Ivanchikova 90). From Casa's soliloquy and inherent conversations, we get a glimpse and insight into the shadowy works, not to be found in the grandiose and mainstream Western media, orchestrated by various CIA agents like David to transform an arbitrary and

scattered rural resistance against the Soviets in Afghanistan into a well-organised Jihad, which was fostered and sponsored by the CIA, adding radical elements into it, and these young men were trained by the Western backed various Pakistani institutions like the Pak army and ISI to perfect them in the art of warfare. Badakhshani, while highlighting the devastating consequence of Western interference in the region, argues that “the overall impact of European imperialism was the destruction of the political and economic structure and social order of Afghanistan” (Badakhshani 34). Instead of focusing on all these socio-political reasons for the rise of radicalism in the region, the Western discourse emphasises religion as the source of hatred for the West:

Given the tendency to reduce Islam to a handful of rules, stereotypes, and generalizations about the faith, its founder and, all of its people, then reinforcement of every negative fact associated with Islam-its violence, primitiveness, atavism, threatening qualities-is perpetuated. (Said xvi)

In spite of being raised in a place, with a kind of transnational character, Casa seems to have a limited vision about the happenings around the world, as he was taught to remain within the narrow framework of his belief systems. According to the socio-political scientist Noam Chomsky, when the weakening socio-political structure does not offer the people enough space to align themselves with a particular identity, they look for other symbolic signifiers like religion to assert themselves: “[...] since you’re not going to offer them anything they really want, you offer them symbolic things [...]” (Chomsky 51). Along with making them militarily equipped to fight against the Soviet army, their moral and ethical beliefs were strengthened by the radical and fundamentalist teachings they received in the various madrasas of Pakistan (Aslam 119). The Pakistani city of Peshwar became a breeding ground for these skilled and highly trained radical Muslim fighters coming from all over the world, who are ready to go to any extent to further their cause. David, like Casa, was a child of war and conflict, because he was instrumental in aggravating the conflict in the region. Since David and Casa have blind

faith in the righteousness of their respective causes, they are projected as complementing each other in spreading radicalism in the war-torn country. After witnessing the devastating consequences of fundamentalism on his own family members, David actually got disillusioned, and “he can feel the ground vibrating through his skin” (Aslam 359). This changing mental state of David could allegorise the Western forces realising their culpabilities in creating the monster of radicalism, which is inflicting wounds on their home soil. Through the individual trajectories of the characters described in the novel, Aslam hints at the global geo-political dynamics submerged in the chaos of Afghanistan, with the Soviet forces intervening in the region and the USA attempting to choke the Soviets with the help of the Mujahideen forces in the graveyard of civilizations. The fundamentalist groups, seizing the opportunity, attempted to exert influence in the region. All these hidden ‘dark histories’, which are not spectacled in Western narratives, find a proper manifestation in Aslam’s discourse.

Conclusion

Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* has superseded the limitations of suffering and trauma associated with the 9/11 incident by including its reverberations worldwide. Going beyond the West-centric ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narrative in which the West is projected as a kind of innocent victim of terrorism coming from various radicalised zones like Afghanistan, Aslam reverses this binary by foregrounding the perpetrators as the victims of larger geo-political games played by multiple superpowers in order to fulfil their self-interests. While the majority of the fictions surrounding the 9/11 event are channelled to domesticate a particular tragedy, attempting to create the image of the perpetrators as people harbouring an immense amount of inborn hatred

and jealousy for the West and their culture without considering its worldwide implications leading to the present disaster, Aslam traces some of the fundamental causes that led the young and vulnerable men to take up arms against the West by critiquing the roles played by the Western powers in creating and nurturing various radicalised groups, and thereby facing the repercussions of their own culpabilities. Just like Vikram Chandra, who, “through the fractured friendship between a Muslim and a Kashmiri Pandit boy” (Karmakar 428), has shown the dismantling of humanity and the causes behind the rise of militancy in the conflicting zone of Kashmir in his *The Srinagar Conspiracy*, Aslam’s discourse excavates the dismantling of the Afghan nation and the suffering of the common civilians through the traumatic relationship of the four characters, representing multiple facets of the conundrum. In the narrative, Aslam very successfully highlights multiple stakeholders involved in creating a mess in Afghanistan as a nation by going beyond the limitations of Afghan borders and boundaries and situating it in a kind of transnational space. While Marcus realises that “the West was involved in the ruining of this place” (Aslam 64), Katrina emphasises the reluctance of the Afghan people to leave their mediaeval practises and adhere to the tribal laws as one of the reasons behind the existence of radicalism in the region:

Most Afghans have actually regarded the state as an intruder, even an enemy, and therefore, Afghan state institutions have always remained weak not necessarily because of a lack of military or political resources, but because of a strong society and regional leaders that have purposely sought to undermine central authority. (Chishti 182)

As a result of Afghanistan’s involvement in these long-running wars and conflicts, the country has been denied any possibility of having a sovereign nation-state of its own. Instead of putting the blame on a single force, the article recognises the responsibility of all the stakeholders, like the British, Russians, Americans, and Afghans, in creating the rubble that is Afghanistan now. To conclude, it can be argued that Aslam is very successful in projecting a worldwide and

transnational implication of the Afghan crisis, refraining from seeing it from the 9/11 perspective only.

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