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Postcolonial Enchantment

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The Blind Man's Garden by [Nadeem Aslam](#)

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In October 2001, media reports claimed that tens of thousands of Pakistanis had volunteered to help the victims of the American bombing of Afghanistan. Many of these men (and women), whose fate has remained largely obscure to us, crossed the porous Pakistan-Afghanistan border to fight the invading 'infidels'; others stayed behind to help arriving refugees. *The Blind Man's Garden*, Nadeem Aslam's fourth novel, and his most ambitious, seeks to describe both the communal nature of war – the bereavements and partings that afflict almost everyone – and the particular experiences of a few individuals in a Pakistani town called Heer. It may take a while to adjust to Aslam's cast of characters and his premodernist fusion of the individual and the historical more reminiscent of *The Charterhouse of Parma* than of any contemporary literary novel.

In an early scene a poor widow called Tara is commissioned to sew an American flag. In her town, where many people have stories about friends or relatives being killed, tortured or imprisoned, the flag can only be wanted for one purpose. 'Can you please make sure that it is of a material that doesn't burn too fast or too slowly?' her client asks. 'The flames have to look inspiring and fearsome in the photographs.' Over several pages Aslam describes Tara at work, 'setting fire to small strips of cloth to measure the texture, intensity and evenness of the various flames'. She makes the stars out of white satin then wonders 'what the various elements of the flag signify. Are the white and red stripes rivers of milk and wine, flowing under a sky bursting with the splendour of stars? Or are they paths soaked with blood, alternating with paths strewn with bleached white bones, leading out of a sea full of explosions?' Tara's speculation may seem lurid, fuelled by paranoia and ignorance, if not a primeval anti-Americanism, but Aslam appears unfazed by the possibility of provoking exasperated alienation in his readers. Beginning with *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993), which depicts a hardhearted small-town mullah in Pakistan, he has set himself the task of describing the ideas and beliefs of people in semi-modern lower-middle-class communities. His outspoken protagonists blithely disregard Anglo-American notions of tact and discretion. 'Two of their buildings fell down,' an Afghan remarks of his American enemies in *The Wasted*

Vigil (2008), 'and they think they know about the world's darkness, about how unsafe a place it is capable of being!' In *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2005), set in a small Yorkshire town, a defender of honour killing has his say: 'The West is full of hypocrites, who kill our people with impunity and say it's all a matter of principle and justice, but when we do the same thing they say our definition of "principle" and "justice" is flawed.'

Aslam writes with a special feeling for the conservative Muslim mind – unusual in someone working in the predominantly secular tradition of the novel. No character in *Maps for Lost Lovers* gets as much authorial attention as Kaukab, a devout housewife and mother, who chants the Koran in Arabic, a language she doesn't know, and whose stern prohibitions, emerging from a profound fear of the outside world, have damaged many lives, including her own children's. Here, Aslam describes her laboriously picking up the prayer beads she scattered when she slapped her daughter during an argument:

There is a sense of consolation to the activity her fingers are engaged in, almost as though contact is being made with the dead: as a child she had seen her mother and grandmothers, and the other women in the house, similarly bent over the myriad daily tasks of the day, and sometimes – but not today, not now – the feeling is close to celebration, a remembrance and a praising of those now dead and absent but still living in her mind, unsung elsewhere and otherwise. Gone so thoroughly it is as though she had dreamed them.

Aslam's novels are marked by this alternation of brutality and sympathy; tradition is seen as a source of both oppression and consolation. In *The Wasted Vigil* and now *The Blind Man's Garden*, he describes an overtly political lower-middle-class sensibility fed by reflexively anti-Western Urdu tabloids, readings in the Koran and the Hadith, and an entrenched view of the evolution of Islamic societies and the modern West. 'History is the third parent,' *The Blind Man's Garden* announces in its first sentence, and Aslam offers no further explanation for the instant solidarity with the Afghans felt by two young men called Jeo and Mikal and their family members in Heer. It is enough that Jeo knows of Islamic martyrs from the stories he heard as a child from his father: 'They were the men he was before he was this man, the ghostly thousands stretching back through the generations and as he slept they imparted things to him not just of life and death but of *eternal* life and death.' Students at a school funded by the ISI, the Pakistani intelligence agency, are told 'stories of rescue and heroism from Islam's past, of populations in distress saved by pious gallants'. The children, 'becoming impassioned', let out 'cries of "Fear not! Help is on its way from Heer!" Hoping to be heard across thousands of years.'

As Jeo and Mikal are thrown into the 'mayhem and chaos' of a war that takes in the Taliban, al-Qaida militants, mercenary warlords and American soldiers and spies, it becomes clear that, for Aslam, ideology is a fourth parent. Towards the end of his life, Pasternak wrote a letter to his readers in the West in which he claimed that the Russian Revolution had inaugurated a new ideological age, and a new kind of man. 'However great the difference

between us,' Pasternak wrote, 'our revolution set the tone for you as well: it filled the present century with meaning and content ... It's us you have to thank for this new man, who is present even in your ancient society.' But novels that take ideological convictions seriously are still oddly hard to find although our age is saturated with quasi-religious belief of one kind or other. The last intense decade of war could have been expected to produce a major fictional recognition of the emotional appeal and social import of the ideological mode of thought, but it hasn't. The TV series *Homeland*, which depicts a white American soldier as a Muslim convert and terrorist, seems to be alone in hinting, if cartoonishly, at its power; as the post-9/11 efforts of John Updike and Martin Amis show, it is easier to reduce ideological belief to pathologies of sexual frustration, or the ordeal of constipation. A self-dissolving post-ideological irony is the dominant mode of the few narratives about Americans engaged in the struggle against 'Islamofascism' – where, that is, those narratives aren't assertions, following Hemingway, Mailer and James Jones, of physical and existential heroism.

As always, the apparent absence of ideology merely denotes its successful concealment. Writing in 1952, Philip Rahv warned that the rapid growth of American power and wealth after the war had created an illusion that 'our society is in its very nature immune to tragic social conflicts and collisions.' This was prescient. The prolonged postwar limbo, when the Cold War was safely exported around the globe in the form of innumerable hot wars, helped entrench the general belief at home that 'the more acute problems of the modern epoch are unreal so far as we are concerned.' The collapse of communism in 1989 created fresh illusions: that history itself had ended, and that, to put it crudely, the rest of the world consisted of aspiring Americans. The wholly unexpected attacks of 9/11 provoked some disquieting epiphanies: 'Our world, parts of our world', Don DeLillo warned, had 'crumbled into theirs', condemning us to live 'in a place of danger and rage'. Nevertheless the dominant assumption until the 2008 financial crisis was that 'the dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital.'

One of the ambiguous beneficiaries of this perennially renewed faith in the Pax Americana has been the Anglo-American novelist, who moved rapidly in the post-1945 period from chancy bohemianism to the institutional security of corporate publishing houses, university jobs and writing fellowships. But his vastly improved material conditions also cut him off from any experience of violence and deracination, things familiar to writers from previous generations, many of whom fought in the two world wars. Those still commonplace human ordeals have been recorded instead by writers in postcolonial countries, many of whose lives have been directly affected by the rapid unravelling of nation-building ideologies against a background of neo-imperialist fiascos. Aslam was born in Pakistan to a communist poet who fled to Britain after being persecuted by the pro-American Islamist dictator Zia-ul-Haq and his novels don't ration their bleakness: he writes at what Pasternak called 'misery's full tilt'.

An occasional caustic moment betrays Aslam's own view of the Islamists who peddle roseate visions of the past and future. When strident anti-Western protesters take to the streets of

Heer, a nurse says: 'Would someone tell the marchers that visas to Western countries are being given away in the next street? That'll disperse them.' But as *The Blind Man's Garden* goes on to show, Aslam is not content to describe the delusions of poor, under-educated Pakistanis and Afghans struggling with real and imagined dangers. He is interested in the way ideology – and propaganda – works among affluent, highly educated elites: how it invisibly moulds thought and shuts out all complex knowledge of the world. As Mikal contemplates an American prisoner, the brother of a soldier he has accidentally killed, he notes: 'The white man's eyes are a doorway to another world, to a mind shaped by different rules, a different way of life.' Even more than the long-bearded flag-burners who have become convenient totems of 'Muslim rage', the American politicians, soldiers, interrogators and torturers in *The Blind Man's Garden* are revealed to be in ideology's grip.

The force of that ideology isn't always easy to discern behind the claims to a benign and universalist liberalism that help the West rationalise large-scale violence – what Camus called 'massacres justified by philanthropy'. Take *Zero Dark Thirty*, Kathryn Bigelow's new film about Osama bin Laden's assassination, which renders invisible the calamitous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and – with its grittily resourceful, liquid-eyed American heroine battling hirsute terrorists – naturalises torture into a necessary weapon in the arsenal of liberal democracy. Compared with the YouTube videos of jihadists, the films shot by American soldiers during their long combat duties – showing them urinating on dead Afghans, or goofing around with blindfolded captives – seem lighthearted: these, you might think, are not men moved by any passionate conviction. In *The Blind Man's Garden*, however, they are seen by their adversaries to be fighting with their backs to the wall to defend American power. Everyone, even children, has been enlisted into the homeland's Manichean militarism. They send letters and exhortatory pictures to their faraway protectors in Afghanistan, sketches of soldiers with 'guns shooting at men with beards and helicopters dropping bombs on small figures in turbans'. They write: 'we are praying for you.' And: 'go get the Bad Men and I hope you kill them all.'

Aslam's novel has some unexpected turns: at one point Mikal helps his American captive escape a group of vengeful locals. But moments like this – intimations of a common humanity – only occur in Aslam's writing after he has categorically established the real differences and incompatibilities (socioeconomic, political, cultural) between human beings, after he has described a reality in which the rule of local tyrants can be preferable to the mayhem of war or the massacres justified by Western philanthropy. History, in this view, isn't about progress: it is a nearly senseless accumulation of incidents and episodes. The novel is an anatomy of chaos, of murders, mutilations, bombed-out villages and long wanderings through devastated landscapes:

In deep twilight they cross a broad flat valley with a river and river flats in it, every bit of it scorched black where a Daisy Cutter bomb had been dropped, reducing everything to ash, pumice, lava, the sides of the hills torn up into segments, and scattered over it all is the yellow haze of the unrisen moon, the

cold night falling on them out of the east, the stars beginning their slide through the black slopes.

There's also a love story, a romance between Mikal and Naheed, Jeo's wife, which gives Aslam's packed account of suffering some moments of serenity: 'What woke them was the sound of the rain stopping, the sudden calm in the middle of the night. A silence packed with distances.' But Aslam doesn't need a love story to generate his arresting visions. He moves smartly from scene to scene, but his prose still has time to register a 'vehicle's paintwork smeared here and there with petals where the roadside wild flowers, dew-covered, must have thrashed against it during the journey.'

The novel contains some quasi-surreal images: horses held captive underground which burst out of the soil, a snow leopard that is passed from one hand to another, and a graveyard of lichen-covered Soviet planes and helicopters. Many of these scenes could be counted as sins against realism. Mikal, for instance, encounters the brother of the American he has murdered in the middle of a desert. Much of Aslam's skill, though, lies in showing the way such coincidences become normal during war, as people are tossed aside and thrown up against one another. Even so, it would be a mistake to see him as a conventional realist. The most striking thing about *The Blind Man's Garden* is its resemblance to a fairy tale. Dramatic partings and reunions, stories of betrayal, captivity, exile and rescue, historical legends, Islamic folklore, rumours, superstition: the novel aims at a kind of enchantment that has something in common with the *Hamzanama* and the fables of the Pakistani writer Intezar Husain; the cavalcade of characters as they embark on long journeys, fall in love, endure pain and loss, and die, wouldn't be out of place in the friezes of Borobudur. But the apparent lack of individuality and psychological depth in the Western sense doesn't mean that Aslam's claim on realism is false, or that he is just another writer serving up postcolonial tragedy with the spices of magical realism. The last decade of heedless war and the traumas it has inflicted on voiceless peoples makes itself felt throughout *The Blind Man's Garden*.

As the book ends, there is an ambiguous hint that Mikal may be reunited with Naheed:

She looks up from the page she has been reading just as the gate opens to admit Mikal. Perhaps it is his ghost, here to convince her to continue with her life without him. He raises his hand slowly and she stands up and walks towards him, her own hand held out. The insects weave a gauze of sound in the air. She moves towards him and her eyes are full of a still intensity – as though aware of the unnamed, unseen forces in the world, and attempting in her mind to name and see them.

This invocation of invisible, omnipotent powers is a rejection of the modern world's third and fourth parents. Against the historical necessity of violence insisted on by liberal humanitarians and Islamist millenarians, Aslam is here describing the way history in the raw, bereft of faith in the future or a grand project, feels to the people most exposed to it – the

ancients called it fate, hidden and incalculable.

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