



प्रतिध्वनि कला एवं
संस्कृति की

ISSN 2349 - 137X
UGC CARE-listed, Peer Reviewed Journal

आनन्द लोक

वर्ष-11, साहित्य विशेषांक, 2025
(जनवरी-जून)



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(जनवरी - जून)
(अर्धवार्षिक शोध पत्रिका)

सम्पादक

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109 डी/4, अबुबकरपुर, प्रीतम नगर, सुलेम सरांय
प्रयागराज - 211011

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Beyond the Blindfold : Individual's Faith and Enlightenment in Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*

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Introduction :

Nadeem Aslam is renowned for his evocative, heart-breaking stories and his deep commitment with the social, political, and cultural intricacies of life in South Asia, predominantly in Pakistan. His works often explore themes such as identity, migration, loss, faith, and the impact of war and political turbulence. **Season of the Rainbirds (1993)**, *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), **The Wasted Vigil (2008)**, *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) and *The Golden Legend* (2017) are some of his prominent works. In *The Blind Man's Garden*, Aslam ventures on a realistic portrayal of the pitiful truths, treacherous acts, and outrageous conditions tormenting Afghanistan and Pakistan, where life and honour are sadly slacken off. Conversely his writings go beyond the argumentative topic. His prose pours like a river of allegories and vivid imagery and it reflects in his opening lines, "wounds are said to emit light under certain conditions –touch them and the brightness will stay on hands– and as the

candles burn Rohan thinks of each flame as an injury somewhere in the house" (Aslam, 2014, p.5). Umashankar, in her review disclosures the alarming symbolism of the bird snares set in the trees of Rohan's garden without his permission. It not only forecasts the fates of many of the characters but is a lasting allegory of humans caught in the hazardous state of affairs. She further puts forward that the reader's path will be littered with radiant images at every turn and he risks missing them in the blink of an eye. (Umashankar, 2013)

The Blind Man's Garden is an emotional and traumatic fiction set in the aftermath of 9/11, discovering the distressing effect of war and religious extremism on individuals and communities in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The story spins around two friends, Jeo and Mikal, who embark on a journey to Afghanistan with the intention of providing service for those wounded in the war. However, their philanthropic

operation takes a dark turn as they are caught in the crossfire of the intensifying violence and becomes entwined with the Taliban. As a thought-provoking novel, it has numerous themes like war, trauma, migration, familial bonds, women's struggles, friendship, love and hope. Out of all these, faith and spirituality is one major theme that accentuates the transformative power of positivity to individuals in despair.

Religion, spirituality and faith are interlinked to each other. In any nation, People rely on their own faith and spirituality regard-less of any religion they abide. The setting of the novel takes place in Pakistan and Afghanistan where almost all the people follow Islam and its principles. As a Pakistani land, majority of the individuals are Muslims. Muslims pray five times a day. They are very pious and are adherent to their religious oaths and chastisements. Almost all the character's personal beliefs, suspicions, brawls, and transformations in the face of challenging circumstance highlight the internal, subjective heights of religious experience. They are self-proclaimed vigorously with their own religious views irrespective of following any religion of their faith. The majorities as well as the minorities have their own level of perceiving spirituality to enlighten their souls. "Religious dogma refers to the established beliefs and doctrines that are held as authoritative and essential within a religious tradition. These doctrines often dictate what is considered true or false within the faith, shaping the moral and ethical framework for its followers" (Fiveable).

The Erosion of Religious Dogma and the search for individual meaning can be analysed through each of the characters

faith and beliefs. Rohan believes in Islam and its aphorisms. He intensely trusts in the concepts of Paradise, Purgatory and Hell. Unlike others, who may not dwell on the afterlife, Rohan reads Koran and prays for the repose of Sofia's soul. He believes that his act of pre-dawn prayer will make her enter Paradise. He is a disciplinarian strictly enforcing religious practices in his family. His faith and spirituality is seen as a major force in building his confidence despite the country's political and economic instability. Rohan's firm belief in Islamic tradition commands that marriage to an apostate is illegitimate. He longs to make his wife adhere to his Muslim faith in marriage. He desperately wants Sofia to embrace his words. He believes that divine intervention will one day lead her to become a devout Muslim like him.

In contrast to Rohan, Sofia's journey leads her towards apostasy, losing her faith in the principles of Islam. Even in her final moments, Rohan refuses to accept her lack of faith, adhering to his belief that she will face eternal damnation. Being aware of her mental state, he remains resolute in his principles. In Pakistani society, being labelled an apostate carries severe consequences, even the threat of death. Sofia keeps her true beliefs hidden from the public eye, a necessary precaution for her safety and well-being. She confides in Rohan, saying, "I will continue to pretend for the sake of appearances and for our safety. But I have to share with you the fact that I am no longer a believer" (Aslam, 2014, p.41). She is forced to live a lie to protect herself while coping with her own evolving spiritual understanding. As a believer of God, Rohan's faith in God makes him move forward in life even in

crisis. Sofia trusts in no God after life. Beliefs and faith differs from one individual to another. The diversity of beliefs within the same religion is seen as Sofia says, “‘God is just a name for our wonder’” (Aslam, 2014, p.44).

After Sofia’s death and in the face of rising religious extremism, Rohan terribly reflects on his own actions, regretting the day he added “Islamic” to the school’s name, a decision that now seems tragically imprudent. “Over the years it has been amended further, going from *Islamic education is the basis of law and order* to *Islam is the basis of law* and then to *Islam is the purpose of life*, while these days it says *Islam is the purpose of life and death*” (Aslam, 2014, p.31). They both abide by their own beliefs and have a positive inference of life. While their interpretations of faith differ significantly, both Rohan and Sofia maintain their own personal principles and approach life with a sense of positivity. Two conflicting ideas of faith and spirituality are seen through these characters who offer a varied standpoint of individuals living under the same roof.

Tara misses her pre-dawn prayer and so she compensates it with Qaza prayers. Tara’s justifies that God knows about the weak and never chastise in the Judgement days. Aslam mentions that Muslims trust that it is a sin to look at the husbands’ body after his death. Rohan divulges his internal commotion of longingness to see Sofia’s face before she is buried. He states “‘It is always better to begin atoning for them as soon as possible. That way we won’t have to fear the consequences in the grave and later on Judgement Day’” (Aslam, 2014, p.96). Later, Rohan doubts his own spirituality when Naheed atones for Jeo

and regrets for the same. In her article A Critique of the Misuse of Religious Discourse in South-Asia in Aslam’s *The Golden Legend* mentions,

Religion has been one of the most powerful discourses or meta-narratives which direct human actions and behaviour. But extremists start using it as a tool in order to maintain their own hegemony to blight the peace of the world for their own benefits. Pakistan is a country where religious sensibilities are being (mis)used in order to sabotage the social space. (Ifzal, Tabassum, & Murtaza, 2021, p.132)

Jeo is influenced psychologically by Rohan’s religious insights. He donates a few drops of blood for calligraphy in the Koran. He was full of pride doing this for God. After Jeo’s death, a ruby is found in his stomach and the cleric believes that the calligraphy of his Koran had appeared as a jewel within him. Jeo epitomizes a pious Muslim, illuminating how individuals often internalize their faith from a young age, influencing their perspectives and actions in profound ways. Ahmed burns his hands at the age of five when he is misinformed that the burning bag contains Koranic pages. He sturdily safeguards it at the cost of risking his own life. Ahmed’s procession of his own faith eases his pain and makes it a pleasurable one. The psychosomatic thought of doing anything for God overlooks the reality of enduring the pain in his burned hands. “There one day he was told that the bag thrown onto the fire contained money and toys and he had watched it burn, but when he was told that the bag was in fact full of Koranic pages, Ahmed had burnt his hands trying to retrieve it, carrying the scars and the name into adulthood”(Aslam, 2014, p.30).

Maslow's theory has two concepts, the concept of self-actualization and self-transcendence. Lorry M. King, mentions

Self-actualization is a process of becoming the most authentic version of oneself, driven by intrinsic motivation and characterized by a robust value-based system. It is the pursuit of personal growth, achievement and the realization of one's inherent capabilities. In contrast, self-transcendence extends beyond the self-focused nature of self-actualization. Self-transcendence involves a sense of connection to something greater and is marked by a shift from personal concerns to higher, other-focused goals. (King, 2024).

Ahmed and Jeo's actions set examples for self-transcendence, where they move beyond their own basic needs and desires to connect with something superior. For Ahmed, burning his hands could be an attempt to go beyond personal comfort to line up with a higher spiritual calling, seeking self-actualization through strong religious devotion. For Jeo, giving his blood could be seen as an act of self-transcendence, where he is prioritizing the calligraphy as a symbol of faith over his own physical safety. In both cases, individuals struggle for spiritual achievement, not just for substantial or personal advantage. They may possibly be chasing a sense of personal growth through religious or spiritual sacrifice, reflecting the highest form of personal satisfaction in Maslow's model.

A substantial character of intense faith is Father Mede who brings together both Muslims and Christians in a linear way. In a Muslim land, he never enforces any Christian notions. As a Christian, his religious spirituality is obvious through his school and also by the descriptions made in the arch. His Muslim friends appreciate

him as a well-wisher in their hard times. A Muslim woman asks Father Mede "'You are so good, how can you be a Christian? Why won't you convert to Islam?' She said she didn't want him to burn in Hell, and he had asked her to pray for his salvation" (Aslam, 2014, p.200). He becomes a sacrificial victim in the hands of the jihad's of Ardent Spirit, who plan to immolate him to interest the Western media's attention. This underlines the endangerments met by religious minorities in the region.

Father Mede exemplifies Western values of education and lenience, which are endangered by the rise of extremism. Father Mede connects the Muslim names as that of Mikal to the Angel Michael in the Bible. Aslam connects both the angels and projects the faith and spirituality of both the religions through these characters. Mikal is an Angel with emerald-green wings covered with saffron-coloured hairs. He is believed to be the Angel of Mercy. He serves as a bridge in connecting the humans with God. His duty is to please God in forgiving the sins of the people. "The Chief of the Order of Virtues and the Chief of Archangels, he is also the Prince of the Divine Presence, the Prince of Light and the Prince of God. He is the Angel of Repentance, Mercy and Righteousness, the Guardian of Peace and the Angel of Earth, and the patron of Policemen and soldiers" (Aslam, 2014, p.202). This shows the fondness of Afghanis in spirituality and the strong faith in their own religion. His character highlights the clash of cultures and religions revealing the vulnerability of religious minorities to extremism. His death is a distressing prompt of the human cost of conflict and the fragility of harmony in the region.

Conclusion :

Blindfold is a symbolic representation of all the characters' limited perspectives, societal restrictions and their helplessness to perceive the consequences of their actions as well as the intricacies of their faith. It entails a journey of discovery, moving past ignorance or inflexible ideas. *Aslam* suggests that true spirituality lies not in blind observance to belief, but in the daring and often painful process of enquiring, pursuing, and struggling to connect with something larger than oneself, even amongst commotion and dejection. It is in this personal journey, rather than unbending devotion to religious structures, that Aslam locates the prospective for resilience, hope, and eventually, a deeper understanding of the human condition.

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