

Women at the Edge: Crimes of Power against Women in the Context of Nadeem Aslam's Novel, the Wasted Vigil

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Abstract

This paper aims to give a clearer perspective of the reasons of crimes of power committed against women in the context of Afghanistan and talibanisation, as represented in Nadeem Aslam's novel 'The Wasted Vigil'. Through an analysis in the broader framework of socio- cultural and religio-political background, perceptions of the mindset of perpetrators of hegemony and power can be gained from the text. It aims to analyze the determinants of the mindset of those who wield power to punish, hegemonize and destroy, under the practice of honour killings, female oppression, and issue of the veil, religious extremism and ethnic and politico conflicts. Afghan society is worse than the panopticon prison, it is an enclosure where everybody is wary of everybody and women are the subjects of constant gaze and surveillance. Women in Afghanistan are not only petty subjects of a retrogressive hegemonic regime; they are abject targets of extremist religio-political forces. The Wasted Vigil minutely explores excesses of power against women. It explicates how women are considered unholy symbols of Eve and evil. The importance of such a study cannot be overlooked in the current scenario of worldwide implications of extremism. This study intends to provide insights through the context of the novel into the apparatuses of control used by misogynist fundamentalist, who control to kill as a holy act. This paper can be considered as a minute study of power in text and context of a war torn, strife ridden society; which in its blind conflict for gaining power has lost respect for human life.

Keywords: crimes of power, gaze, hegemony, misogynist, panopticon, religio-political, surveillance.

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Introduction

Aslam who was born in Gujranwala, as a teenager had to immigrate to Britain as his father had to flee the dictator Zia ul Haq's reign. Aslam has penned five novels, which have won acclaim all over the world, making him the winner of the Windham Campbell Prize for Literature in 2014. He is also the winner of the Author's Club first Novel prize and the prestigious Betty Trask award. He is the winner of the Kiriyaama Prize and the Encore Award. He was also considered for the Warwick Prize for Literature (2008), The British Books Award (2006), The International IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards (2006) and the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature (2014).

This study entails a detailed analysis in the broader framework of socio cultural and religio political background of his novel *The Wasted Vigil*, to find out how his fiction implicates the imperatives which lead to hegemonic oppression of women in the patriarchal and the retrogressive Afghan society controlled by Taliban. The predominant issues spring from the context of the postcolonial homeland that implicate patriarchy, hegemony, power, oppression, marginalization, and surveillance all related to feminine concerns of exploitation. This paper will seek to find out the reasons of atrocities committed on women in Afghanistan and how women were and even now are, pushed to an edge portrayed by the *Wasted Vigil*. *The Wasted Vigil* is set in Afghanistan with the backdrop of the imperialistic and neo colonial attempts of United States and Soviet Union to gain control over a strategically important region of the world. How this battle for power has led to the devastation of a civil society and how the phenomenon of the Taliban with its retrogressive stance has emerged and played havoc with the socio cultural norms of the society has been depicted by Nadeem Aslam in a subtly explicit manner. He depicts how this tug of war between conflicting forces has led to a reign of terror, traumatizing the Afghan people. In this whole scenario the position of women has deteriorated from free citizen with the right to vote even in the 1920s to creatures of oppression, targeted, marginalized, abused, defiled and persecuted. This paper aims to find out how this has happened and what the imperatives are, which have so driven the women to the edge.

Discussion

The Wasted Vigil is an explication of the affects of hegemony at play on different levels in Afghanistan. The hegemony of neo-colonial super powers has wreaked havoc with the civil society in Afghanistan. The neo-colonial modern day powers Russia and America have destroyed its culture, peace and civilization, involving neighboring countries like Pakistan in a strife that has repercussions on the society there too. Aslam relates direct experiential observations about atrocities in tales more harrowing than the barbarities of Changhez Khan. Aslam is extremely sensitive towards issues related to women persecution, marginalization, hegemonic cruelty, persecutive barbarity and cultural denigration turning Afghanistan into a Panoptican state, where women are watched and gazed upon as subjects always vulnerable to the atrocities of extremist fundamentalist Taliban. A country about which Aslam very poetically relates in *The Wasted Vigil*, that Afghanistan is a country so centrally located that it has been the hub of culture, art, mythology, religion and trade, with bundles of silk from China loaded on camels, carrying real pearls from the Gulf seas, and antique glass wares from Rome. (WV p. 9) Aslam writes of Afghanistan as it was before the destruction of its culture and civilization by the neo hegemonic super powers America and Russia and the birth of extremist organizations like the Taliban

as a repercussion to the war for superiority in the region. Here culture and art once flourished, women were free to express their appreciation for aesthetics. According to Aslam only two decades ago a group of laughing college girls when they came to know, that the great poet from Pakistan Wamaq Saleem had come to recite his poems in Kabul, had covered his parked car on Flower Street with kisses; their lipsticks leaving impressions all over the car.(WV.P.245) And now women are the butt of fundamentalist repercussions and persecution banned from going out or attending schools or colleges. As Amnesty International (2003) records that women during the Taliban era were subjected to stringent physical punishments to the extent that if any woman inadvertently exposed some part of herself she was publically raped or flogged.

How Islam was misrepresented or misinterpreted could be understood through Asma Barlas' statement. She says that the Quran made the veil mandatory in a society which practiced slave ownership, and non Muslim men usually indulged in sexual abuse of slave women. To put an end to this disgusting practice and to create distinction between free Muslim women and slaves the veil was ordained. Thus though it was worn by free believing women it was a signification of the times of ignorance a reminder of the times when men could indulge in sexual abuse and indiscriminate laxity of morals and sexual violence making the women vulnerable and subjects of advantage without any law to protect them. The veil thus was a kind of protective coverage for free believing women. (Barlas. P.56) But in Afghanistan persecutive frenzy against unveiled women has increased to the extent that they are banned from going out without a male chaperon and that too wearing a burqa which covered them fully reports (US Congress 2001).

The Wasted Vigil is a poetic ode to the suffering women of Afghanistan. It is a creation of sensitivity and research, observation and experience poignantly related by the writer. A brief history of what has happened in Afghanistan to create the terror regime would initiate us into understanding the reasons for the unfortunate reign of savagery and violence, losing all compassion for humanity, and making victims of women pushing them to the edge. The history of Afghanistan has been full of turbulence. No efforts at any kind of reform could succeed in a terrain which is not only hard but conducive to tribal and ethnic differences. (Halliday, 1979; Weiner and Banuazizi 1994).The legislation in 1920s for the status of women in Afghanistan was thought to be greatly progressive (Massels 1974).Unfortunately an opposition that was retrogressive led to its cancellation by 1926. According to Khan (p,163) It was only in 1978 that the underground People's Democratic Party which had Marxist leanings brought about in Afghanistan re-instatement of women's rights. The PDPA however could not survive being supported by India and The Soviet Union, due to the hostility and resistance by anti Marxist countries, thus creating turbulence in the region. As Khan States, "The Soviets intervened militarily in 1979 to support the PDPA regime while the resistance received help from the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, Afghanistan became a cold war battleground for the two superpowers of the time, the Soviet Union and the USA." says Khan (F W.p.164)

Jennifer L. Fluri states in *Feminism and War* (p.143) that it is gender that actually shapes the experiences of violence of women and men, but there are other factors like ethnicity, race, location, socio economic discrimination and division which are also at play. Ironically the Soviets justified their invasion in 1979 with claims of saving the Afghan women from the patriarchal hegemonic social structure. But instead of fulfilling the claims the Soviet army devastated the land and defiled and abused the Afghan women. It is a tale of disquieting horror and a prologue to a reign of terror that was to set in. *The Wasted Vigil* (p.17) records the rampant terror that the Soviet soldiers pervaded in Afghanistan as it is known how they landed their helicopters and flew away after abducting a girl, the horrified parents terror stricken following the trail they left by throwing her clothing across the land. The excruciating painful torment to the parents could be imagined as her bone punctured naked body was thrown out after they had sated themselves on her. Aslam exposes the cruelty of objectives of the Soviet soldiers who had ironically come to save the Afghan women.

In the *Wasted Vigil*, Zameen and Marcus' sixteen year old daughter Katrina, was picked up by the Soviet soldiers, by breaking into the house in the darkness of the night in 1980.(WV.p.16)'Benedikt Petrovich guarded the room where Zameen was kept and he unbolted the door night after night and went in to her'.(WV. P.50) when he was defecting after stabbing Rostov his colonel, who lay bleeding, he turned back for her telling her, 'she would be drained of blood to save Rostov.'(WV.p. 54) for the soviet army practiced death by 'exsanguinations', which was draining a prisoner of blood after killing him, to transfuse blood to its wounded soldiers. (WV.p.34) Thus we see how horribly inhuman the soviet treatment towards Afghan's and especially the women was, exposing the falsity of Soviet claims of saving Afghan women from hegemonic structures.

On the other hand the mujahedin formed resistance brigades to protect Afghan women from the ideological and military onslaught of the Soviet Union. But unfortunately the lawlessness and abuse of women, violence and gang rapes by the Mujahedin initiated the Taliban into power on the pretext of saving the women from these excesses by the mujahedin (Rashid 2001). The Taliban were rampant now in a country abused first by the Soviets now used by the United States to forward its war for control (Sunday Herald. 2005). It is here that the Taliban came into the scenario. They are the product of modern repercussions induced by imperialistic concerns of modern societies like the Soviet Union and the United States of America. They are mainly Pakhtoon – the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan according to Khan in *Feminism and War: Confronting U.S. Imperialism* (p. 64). These students or Talibs were politicized in some of the local religious schools, (madrassahs) many of which received funding from outside. These Taliban who belonged to poor starved backgrounds were vulnerable to all kinds of retrogressive preaching's and it was not difficult to provoke them into hysteric frenzy by teaching them concocted religion and mythical truths. One of these was domination over women by men as legitimate in religion thus giving them that taste of power by subjugating women, hegemonizing and controlling them. According to Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi, the "tenacity of the Taliban can be understood only by situating them within the history of Afghanistan and its heterogeneous regions and peoples. Shifting from a focus on how the Taliban originated". Crews and Tarzi's book "investigates" the evolution of the Taliban Movement and "its capacity to affect the future of Afghanistan". They contend that the Taliban are "the legitimate incarnation of traditional Afghan values", while others

attributed the “brutality of Taliban fighters” to a “rural society marked by ‘tribalism’ and ‘religious fundamentalism’” (Crews and Tarzi p.7-8), The CIA trained the Talibs or student recruits from these madrassahs for the oncoming jihad against the Soviets according to Khan (Feminism and War p.165). With the fall of Peoples Democratic government in 1992, fight to gain control ensued among the diverse groups of mujahedin. In the ensuing chaos the Taliban emerged as the strongest group, recognized peremptorily by the US according to Khan (FW.p.165) Afghanistan became a battleground of global and local forces, devastating civil society and clamping upon women all kinds of contradictory indictments (Zoya 2006).

Aslam’s remark bears pertinence in this disturbing picture, in which he portrays Afghanistan as a heap of rubble collapsed and broken at all levels. (WV.pg 39) The mujahedin took advantage of the vulnerability of women cornering them in the image of “pure woman” giving birth to future warriors thus serving the community and ironically on the other hand these same mujahedin inflicted violence, rape and abuse on these women. (Gannon 1996; Burns 1996) According to the Amnesty International 1994 assessment the position and condition of women and their rights depend upon the political and economic conditions of a country. While the Mujahedin permitted veiled women to go outdoors, when the Taliban gained control in Afghanistan in 1996.they clamped strict restrictions on them according to Khan(p. 166).Girls were banned from going to schools and later it was the boys too who were forbidden attendance. Public violence on women reached indiscriminate heights in the reign of the Taliban. Women were publicly flogged in the streets. No man dared to stop this cruelty; if ever anyone dared he was set upon as a punishment to teach a lesson. All that they could do was try to flee the place of violence or look the other way. Afghanistan became synonymous with fear and terror instead of its significant rugged terrain as Aslam puts it.(WV.p.241) This was a time when the mujahedin commanders rich with heroin trafficking, supported by United States to fight the Taliban were armed to teeth with weapons, and announced jihad against one another creating a reign of terror. Thus in a way the Taliban were welcomed, believing them to be the saviors from the corrupt mujahedin who were destroying the country by their personal feuds. (Zunes 2006) How detrimental to the country was the American support to mujahedin can be gauged from Aslam’s narration of what was going on. He narrates how in Usha at the end of 2001 the Americans decimated everything within a radius of hundred yards to kill Nabi Khan on the report of Gul Rasool a rival war lord. “Both men are little short of bandits and the cruelest of barbarians”. (WV.p.71) This same barbaric bandit Gul Rasool is elected minister and Aslam further narrates in indignation the extent to which these subhuman people could stoop to in their hatred against women.

“Last month Gul Rasool was among the dozen of male politicians who had hurled abuse at a woman MP as she spoke in parliament, shouting threats to rape her. “ Harassed and fearful she changes her address regularly and owns burkas in eight different colors to avoid being followed”. (WV.P.166.) This refers to the actual incident of attack on Malalai Joya, a member of parliament with the Loya Jirga (a ‘grand assembly’ meeting of representatives). According to Khan as she denounced those who committed violence and atrocities under the umbrella of the government some of the parliamentarians physically assaulted her, calling her a prostitute an insult which is extremely derogatory. There were catcalls, and a call to rape her to teach her a lesson (FW.p.167)

This is the backdrop against which *The Wasted Vigil* is set. It is a record of the atrocities committed under the imperatives of religion, retrogression, extremist fundamentalism, letting loose upon the society terror and trauma. The victimization of women reaches insane heights. This is not just patriarchal hegemony or oppression. It is offensive cruelty which these Taliban deem as cleansing. The distorted vision of these crazily driven men makes them misogynist of the worst order. It is women, the weak and vulnerable on who excesses of power are inflicted. They control these women to kill as a ritualistic punishment. Aslam in a rage narrates the most horrifying incident of killing for the sake of punishing. The public spectacle on the day Qatrina is put to death by the Taliban is an evidence of the inhuman brutality of the upholders of morality. Her killing was to be a public spectacle after Friday prayers. She was proclaimed an adulterous at sixty one, after thirty nine years of marriage, deemed null legally in the eyes of the Taliban because it was a female who had conducted the ceremony. She was to be stoned for living in sin thus and a microphone placed close to her to make her screams be heard. (WV.p.40) “She had to wear the burka while they were killing her. Afterwards while she lay on the ground, a man had gathered the hem of the burka and tied it into a knot and dragged her away as he would a bundle, and he grinned at his own ingenuity the while, as did the spectators. Blood was draining steadily out of the embroidered eye grille”. (WV.p.135) It was afterwards that Marcus learned she hadn’t actually been killed through stoning. She had been dragged off the field in heap making people think she was dead. Everyone had had the wanted spectacle. So she was dumped in a mud hovel where she was subjected to coercion to ask Allah’s forgiveness for her sin. There she remained for the few days she lived afterwards, infested with maggots in her nasal cavities, which dropped in her mouth. (WV.p.267)

The tapestry of savagery is crafted by Aslam in a poignantly sensitive manner declaring in a subtle style how reckless, ruthless, inhuman savages in the garb of religion, politics, morality and ethics exceed limits in their extremist retrogression in Afghanistan which is the setting of the novel. They carve human bodies to purge the souls, a ruse to satisfy their subhuman urge to destroy. Women under the Taliban in Afghanistan are not only petty subjects of a retrogressive hegemonic regime; they are abject targets of extremist religio-political forces. They are watched upon for surveillance. *The Wasted Vigil* minutely explores excesses of power against women. It explicates how women are considered unholy symbols of Eve and evil. Arts and aesthetics are denigrated in Afghanistan, and works of art were considered sinful, but looting them was justified. Qatrina who was a doctor by profession, and thwarted countless times from helping suffering men because of their gender, had a passion for painting. On visiting a patient’s home one day Marcus noticed the chest with Qatrina’s paintings, looted from the ruined house by the lake when they went on exile to Peshawar. The man of the house said the pictures belonged to him. He and the man were arguing in the street when a Taliban vehicle drew up and the pair was taken to the mosque. Marcus had no proof that the paintings were his. Thus the indictment to cut his hand after Friday prayers was proclaimed, (WV.p.242) the narration of this spectacle precedes Qatrina’s killing, the cruelty and savagery of the incident a nightmare for the reader, who is drummed with modes of torture the Taliban exercised to punish under the false imperative of religion, taking it to extreme limits. This is how the writer narrates it. Marcus was taken to the place for the punishment where his hand was to be decapitated. He saw a woman on her knees in the dust. Her burka was bloodstained and there was blood around her. For a moment he fears her hand must

have been cut off, but then he notices both her hands intact in the folds of the burka. To his horror he had discovered she was Qatrina, and she had just amputated some ones hand, and the blood around her was of the victim and the scalpel lay in the dust. She had fainted and on recovering she had screamed on seeing Marcus, realizing what was to come. Someone from the crowd came and picked up the severed hand from the ground of the earlier victim “above a cluster of children who laughed and tried to grab it as he encouraged them to leap up higher and higher”. (WV.p.243) Her way was barred as she tried to run by a man dressed in black, who pointed to the bloody block of wood which glistened blood in light. “She was screaming defiance, hurling aside a tray on which was a butcher’s knife and several glass syringes---there was wood workers small saw and a rust speckled pair of scissors”. She was ordered to amputate Marcus’s hand at gunpoint, the scalpel being thrust in her hand. She enraged them by her defiance inflicting shame on them, lifting her burka to look straight into the eyes of a boy facing her putting the crowd to stunned silence. (WV, p.243) But the deed had to be done. Qatrina could not bear the trauma of it, losing sanity and interest in life subsequently. This was before her being stoned to death. This was all done on the instigation of the corrupt cleric who had killed his two wives. He had ingratiated himself with the Taliban to take revenge after his return to Usha, revealing the details of the sacrilegious marriage of Qatrina and Marcus, telling them that their daughter ‘was a fallen woman too’ in Peshawar. To provide them safety when they invaded their house he had also given them amulets. (WV, p.267) Afghan women are faced with other serious issues too. Amnesty International reports (2005) that Afghan women are a victim of all kinds of excesses and crimes. They can be raped, abducted, forced into marriage or sold for petty bargains.

Zameen’s narrative is a narrative that encompasses accounts of woe of countless Afghan women. Zameen had to prostitute her body for three months, to earn money to save her illegitimate son in the refugee camps hen she arrived with him from Afghanistan having no other alternative. (WV,p.180) Hers is a tale of unending physical and mental torture. Like so many Afghan women she is repeatedly displaced and sexually abused, subjected to violence and degradation first at the hands of Soviet invaders then the Taliban. Dunia, is another victim of the atrocities of these Taliban’s in the Wasted Vigil. Her father had tried to persuade her not to become a school teacher. Now she had to face the punishment for her initiative. The cleric at the mosque had publicly accused her of being dissolute and the school had been forcibly shut down ----- They had succeeded in locking the school now and at the very least they would hold her down and mutilate her face, cut the shame permanently into her features. (WV.p.288) She was to be punished for refusing the clerics proposal and this was the revenge.

Conclusion

According to Khan, Women in Afghanistan were reduced to make “unfortunate choices “as they struggled to survive in these throttling circumstances. With ever growing violence faced with oppression and marginality, scarce opportunities for employment, the Afghan women resort to self immolation or drowning by choice. (Esfandiari 2004; Sadid 2006; Salihi 2006). According to Aslam in *The Wasted Vigil*, “Women in Usha had always felt they could sink into the earth anytime”. They could not venture a single step out of the house without accounting for “every single step she had taken since leaving the front door”. (WV.p.289) According to Amnesty International Report the government is unwilling to redress women’s complaints; in fact they have to face extreme repercussions being discriminated instead of being protected from perpetrators of force and violence. Ironically even the courts are helpless and unable to provide any protection. Violence is committed upon women even in police custody according to Amnesty International (2005) Even today we read unfortunate incidences of women being lynched or punished publicly, a continuing torment without redemption for the Afghan Women.

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