



VIDHYAYANA

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

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ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

**Social and Political Aspects in *The Blind Men's Garden* and *The Reluctant***

***Fundamentalist***

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ISSN 2454-8596

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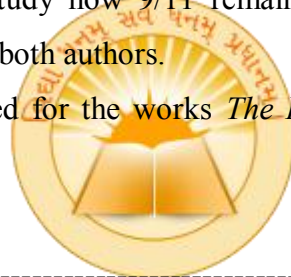
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**Social and Political Aspects in *The Blind Men's Garden* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

**Abstract**

The representation of social, political realities of contemporary world along with the impact of terrorism in *The Blind Men's Garden* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* respectively works of two Pakistani origin authors Nadeem Aslam and Mohsin Hamid have its similarity and contrast. Since the story of both the novels has Pakistani man as a protagonist, this paper will compare the treatment of the Pakistan civic under the various social political events and study how 9/11 remains the one of most powerful event which affected and shaped novels and writing of both authors.

Hence forth, following codes will be used for the works *The Blind Men's Garden* (TBG) *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (TRF)



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“I always say that I vote every time I write a sentence” Nadeem Aslam’s statement in his talk with Terry Hong says all about his political and social involvement through his writing. This involvement can’t keep the major terrorist attack on US. Ever since the attack of Sept 11, much of literary world, fiction and non-fiction portrayed the fateful event. In *Longitudes and Attitudes: Exploring the World Before and After September 11* (2003) Thomas Freidman compares 9/11 to World War III. Freidman remarks “World War III is a war being fought between open societies everywhere against religious totalitarians. America was simply the first target, but every open society is a potential target and every open society is being affected by the course of this war” (ix). Terry Eagleton had an opinion too “Since the destruction of the World Trade Centre, the ugly bulge beneath the West’s democratic garments has been embarrassingly on the show” (*Holy Terror*: 50)

A list of fiction authors were influenced by the fateful event and mentioned in their works. In *Maximum City* (2002) Suketu Mehta mentioned, “I woke up in Brooklyn one September morning to find a thick grey cloud outside my window; the debris blowing over the East River from the burning World Trade Centre. That morning, in the city I had moved back to (New York), set off a chain of events that changed the nature of the gang war in the city I had recently left (Mumbai) “(583). Monica Ali mentioned the bombing of the twin towers on television in her work *Brick Lane* (2003). In an interview with a British newspaper *The Independent*, Aslam stated that his "Maps for Lost Lovers" has an impact of September 11. The core idea was as he said is to "condemn the small-scale Sept 11's that go on every day." In his TBG a sentence appears, “Nine-Eleven. Everything about it is a lie...A conspiracy.” (30)

In similar fashion Mohsin Hamid said, “I grew personally more divided, saddened and angered by the heavy-handedness of the Bush administration's conduct abroad...Eventually, I realized that, just as in my exterior world, there was no escaping the effects of September 11 in the interior world that was my novel.” To *The Guardian* on writing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* he opined,

“ I completed the first draft in July 2001, a wistful account of a young Pakistani working in corporate New York who, after a failed love affair, grows a beard and moves back to Lahore. It was terrible, as my first drafts always are. My job is to write a book increasingly less badly over time. A few weeks later, the terrorist attacks of September 11 happened. My world changed. I wrote the novel again.”



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Same note ringed in an another interview with Hamish Hamilton, Hamid explained his struggle to choose 9/11,

“Then, of course, three months after I finished my first draft 9/11 happened. Delicate themes I was exploring became newspaper headlines. I decided to hold my course and wrote another draft still set in time before 9/11. But it was a struggle and seemed somehow false: pretending to ignore what I knew would happen later. I then completely revised the novel again and addressed 9/11 directly. I say "revised" but actually I don't look at previous drafts in the early stages of writing a novel. I write my first few drafts from scratch every time, incorporating elements from memory, and drafts can be so different as to be almost different novels. In any case, it took me a very long time to begin to digest 9/11, and Afghanistan, and the almost-war between Pakistan and India, and Iraq”.

Nadeem Aslam whose sensibility and research which includes himself blindfolded for three weeks to know what a blind man goes through. Aslam answered **to *The Herald*** on being asked about the genesis of *The Blind Man's Garden*,

“The first sentence of *The Blind Man's Garden* is "History is the third parent." The impulse behind *The Blind Man's Garden* was the extraordinary decade beginning with 9/11 and ending with the Arab Spring. Mohamed Atta's suicide at one end and Mohamed Bouazizi's suicide at the other. Mohamed Bouazizi was the Tunisian fruit seller who set himself on fire in December 2010 and died the following month. That contributed towards starting off the Arab Spring, and between these two moments we had the call to jihad, the War on Terror, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, the finding and killing of Osama Bin Laden, the murder of Benazir Bhutto. This clash between an incomplete understanding of the East and an incomplete understanding of the West.”

Pakistan had been a matter of controversy, ever since the Operation Neptune of US. With this deteriorating image of country and allegations of the US and India about terrorist camps made it worse. Known for his research on the subject matter, Aslam expressed his views on the war prisoners and Afghanistan in one of his interview about his novel *The Wasted Vigil* (2008)

“I traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan during the writing of the book: talking to teahouse owners as well as professors, graveyard attendants as well as museum curators. And in Britain I interviewed almost 200 Afghan refugees about their memories of Afghanistan, about their grief at what had happened to their country.”



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This trip made the book *The Wasted Vigil* possible, same experience helped in TBG. Jeo, son of Rohan, decided to go to Afghanistan after Invasion of US. Mikal, Jeo's best friend is happy to accompany. This is a common practice in Pakistan, young men go to Afghanistan to offer service to their Muslim brothers. Jeo is married to Naheed since a year and keeps her in dark about trip. Nadeed, a girl Mikhal loved and sacrificed for his best friend. When Jeo readies himself to help fellow Muslims there, he recalls

“It's October. The United States was attacked last month, a day of fire visited on its cities. And as a consequence Western armies have invaded Afghanistan. ‘The Battle of World Trade Centre and the Pentagon’ is what some people here in Pakistan have named September's terrorist attacks. The logic is that there are no innocent people in a guilty nation. (6)

This is reflected in TRF Changez in his monologue with an American man, confesses how he contempt United States of America's active participation in the war.

“I had always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country's constant interference in the affairs of others was insufferable. Vietnam, Korea, the straits of Taiwan, the Middle East, and now Afghanistan: in each of the major conflicts and standoffs that ringed my mother continent of Asia, America played a central role.” (156)

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Another character in TBG Major Kyra, an ex-militant wants to take over the building of Ardent Spirit, a school founded by Rohan and his wife Sofia. He makes sure that Jeo and Mikal don't return to the town Heer and get killed in Afghanistan. Heer is backdrop of Nadeem Aslam's second novel *The Map of Lost Lovers* and will be in his upcoming novels too. During Lahore Literature Festival Aslam said to *The Tribune* he chose the name Heer because her legend is related to rebellion. The screening of the Punjabi film Heer Ranjha was banned in Jhang, the city where it was based. “She had rebelled to be with a man her parents were dead set against...I made up my mind to dedicate the entire town to her. The next 11 novels I plan to write will also be based in Heer” Jeo's dead body reaches to his home. Mikal is kept as a prisoner by a landlord, to be sold to American troop. During a plan to rob a 1400 year old clock of Prophet Muhammad at a mosque on mountain, he was forced to join and manages to flee. Unfortunately he is captured by American troops, held prisoner, tortured, physically and mentally, sent to same mosque again with two American soldiers, somehow kills both and escapes. Rohan is blinded



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by enraged landlord while he was to rescue another boy named Jeo. Sharif Sharif a neighbour, who set his eyes on Naheed since she was teenager, comes with an offer to marry her and to pay for the eye treatment for Rohan in exchange. Rohan's daughter Yasmin and son-in-law Basie, Mikal's younger brother, both serves as a teacher in a missionary school. Major Kyra, the fanatic wants to take over the house where Rohan and Naheed resides. He broods terrorists in Ardent Spirit in the holy name of Allah and jihad. During his time in Ardent Spirit "Pupils were selected to be trained in combat at Jihadi camps run by the ISI, and ultimately sent to carry out covert operations in Kashmir." (31) He is notoriously famed " He had specialized in urban assault training, his ideas proving to be the most important element in the series of fearful guerrilla attacks on Indian barracks" (213) Their first mission is to blow a Christian school building, to kill white principal father Mede. The logic is that killing a white man will draw more attention of authority and establish a reputation in terrorist groups and bring more fame to them. Basie and Yasmin were in school during seize. Basie is killed

Mikal while roaming in search of food and shelter, on the run terrorist who killed two US nationals finds a place in Akbar's house in a town named Magiddo. Akbar, his fellow prisoner is involved in all terrorist activities and runs a gun factory. Smelling terrorist activities and danger, he leaves Magiddo, arrives in Heer to meet Naheed. Before he can stretch the period to stay there, Akbar asks him to send a parcel to his sister Salomi, who is now on run with her husband to settle down in US. Unable to find them, on his way back home he finds an US soldier unconscious on road, who happens to be brother of the American soldier Mikal has killed. They cannot communicate due to language barrier. Despite his several attempts to save an US soldier from the hands of Pakistanis, he gets caught. Both are kept prisoners. Mikhal saves American at the cost of his own life. In the last chapter Yasmin and Naheed are raising their kids, under the pretext that both the kids are of Yasmin and late Basie. Naheed is thinking about Mikal and sees him.

The dark side of the country is attacks on church, attack on people of any religion except Muslims and those who don't follow religious regime strictly, In TBG, no one is allowed to offer their prayer at graveyard under the strict rule of fanatic (92) 9/11 brings changes like situation in the market. The weapon factories, AK47 and Kalashnikov become important cultural accessories. . "At the gun shop, AK-47s were stacked six high on the shelves...The day after the West invaded Afghanistan, a 'piety discount' was introduced for those who wished to buy the weapon to go the jihad."(16) The argument and so called reason for the rise of terrorist activities, the falling economical state is not convincing. The agitated and frustrated youngsters join Jihad. The religious establishments do teach



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lessons of violence “Around them the madrasa was noisy with the voices of children who, knowing little but of life’s deprivations. Prayed the way they ate, with a deep hunger.” (14) During a conversation between Rohan and Sophia, Sophia declares, she lost faith in Allah. Rohan thinks and keeps the secret to himself as he is afraid “Apostasy was punishable by death in Pakistani law” (41)

A normal scene to witness a Taliban using guns to rule, to torture women, men, children and anyone who opposed them. While explaining women’s status to Naheed, her mother Tara sees a flashback “During her adult life there has not been a single day when she has not heard of a women killed with bullet or razor or rope, drowned or strangled with her own veil, buried alive or burned alive, poisoned or suffocated, having her nose cut off or entire face disfigured with acid or the whole body cut to pieces, run over by a car or battered with firewood.” (113) During a conversation with Razeshta Sethna Aslam talked about the character of blind man, Rohan. Rohan is portrayed as Jinnah and blind man’s garden is Pakistan. To interpret the title *The Blind Man’s Garden*, we can say it is Pakistan itself.

“He is the blind man of the garden. The school was at first called Pure Land and that is Pakistan. At the beginning of chapter three, I tell you that the boundary wall of the school is draped in jasmine, Pakistan’s national flower; at one point I say Rohan is dressed as Jinnah when he goes to rescue Mikal [his adopted son]. For me the garden is Pakistan and Rohan is someone like Jinnah who made this garden based on the ideals of Islam and decency and the six main centres of Islamic civilisations. One of the most moving ideas that I know of is that of Pakistan and it has been corrupted.”

Nadeem Aslam captures blind Rohan’s garden as Pakistan, so much in turmoil and loss of its own people through fantasists. Rohan was drawn keeping in mind Jinnah’s religious ideals, collapsed eventually under the different rulers. Later on mixing politics with his writing he replied, “These are human issues but with a socio-political and religious background.” In his second article of *Granta* Pakistan *Where to Begin*, Aslam talks about the representation of Pakistan, its people in his work.

“Pakistanis are as complex as any other people on the planet. I think of a beam of light entering a prism and emerging on the other side split into seven colours. What you see depends on which side of the prism you are standing on: on one side the light is uniform, of a single colour. On the other, it’s violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange and red. I am on the coloured side. I have encountered good as well as bad in a Pakistani person, love as well as hatred, virtue as well as vice. In real life, and in my writing, I can’t pretend that all Pakistanis are angels any more than I can pretend that all Pakistanis are deceitful. As to the question of what to put into a book, and what to leave out ”



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He adds,

“If I am critical of Pakistan in my writing then it is only of the power structures – the generals, the venal politicians, the unholy holy-men”

True to this point, TBG narrates religious sham, terrorist organisations, how they began from unfair reason and blossomed through financing war mongering rich fanatics. During his visit to Jaipur, where he was nominated for the DSL literary prize for *The Blind Man's Garden*, Nadeem Aslam talked about his inclination to political and social issues his books bring forth.

“The idea of politics... I am not one of those writers who say that politics has no place. I am perfectly willing to accept that there might be other writers who think I don't care about politics - Nabokov was one of them - fine you know - but I am interested in the politics of my time and I am happiest when I do something which pays off some of the political debt that I feel I owe to the world as well as being a work of art... the workings of the world around me with its various elements, political, social, anthropological, economical, historical and how they come into me. ”

Nadeem Aslam elaborated to *The Herald Scotland* for his involvement in political issues as,

“I am a politically engaged writer. For me, the news is the most emotional programme on television. People don't understand what Pakistan went through, is going through – 30,000 people have died there in the last decade, which is one 9/11 every year. For me, the situation I want to write about comes before the characters. I always need a small amount of reality and out of that my fiction grows..”

Mohsin Hamid didn't touch societal aspects of Pakistan as Aslam does. “Mohsin delights in symbols and grand ideas but is unable to humanise them. His characters are mere stereotypes that stand for a particular attribute, and we can't feel them breathe...[we] are never given full understanding of [their] motivations.” (35 Animah Kosai) In his *My Reluctant Fundamentalist* Hamid added further that,

“*Moth Smoke* had for me been a look at Pakistan with a gaze altered by the many years I had spent in America. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, I thought, would be a look at America with a gaze reflecting the part of myself that remained stubbornly Pakistani.”

Hamid remarked on the *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, both the novels were born out of shifts in perspective that occurred as a consequence of his travelling between a life in the US and his





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home in Pakistan. TRF is a story of the great American dream, almost achieved and crumbles with the post September 11 event. It is one fine novel in the form of dramatic monologue. The protagonist's final conclusion to know himself as a "modern day janissary" (Hamid, *TRF* 152) The protagonist Changez has achieved a degree in Princeton, began working with the Underwood Sam, which symbolically represents US. His love interest Erica stands for America. This fairy tale no longer continues as the twin tower bombing changes Changez's perspective to work for United States began changing. The day he sees the falling towers on television during his last day in Manila, his reaction to the fall of twin towers is interesting as well as controversial.

"I was in my room, packing my things. I turned on the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one --- and then the other ---of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased." (72)

Changez goes on with his monologue, "So when I tell you I was pleased at the slaughter of thousands of innocents, I do so with a profound sense of perplexity...(B)ut at the moment, my thoughts were not with the *victims* of the attack --- no, I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so someone had so visibly brought America to her knees." (73)

Changez's Pakistan is in his mother's poems of Ghalib and Faiz ( TRF: 38) He is off to an assignment in Manila, he expects the filth and dirt of East and disappoints himself as he sees a better "I expected to find a city like Lahore --- or perhaps Karachi; what I found instead was a place of skyscrapers and superhighways...New York was more healthy than Lahore, but quite another to swallow the fact that Manila was as well" (64) He seeks some sitcoms to distract his mind from the after effects of 9/11, and could not stop keeping a tab on the news of Pakistan, he sees " When I changed upon a newscast with ghostly night-vision images of American troops dropping into Afghanistan for what was described as a daring raid on a Taliban command post. My reaction caught me by surprise; Afghanistan was Pakistan's neighbour, our friend, and a fellow Muslim nation besides, and the sights of what I took to be the beginning of its invasion by your countrymen caused me to tremble with fury." (100) The interesting thing is India is also Pakistan's neighbour, but not a fellow Muslim nation. "I spent this time online, reading about the ongoing deterioration of affairs between India and Pakistan, the assessment by experts of the military balance in the region and likely scenarios for battle, and the negative impact the standoff was already beginning to have on the economies of both nations." (131) This argument is supported by America's role in war and encouragement to the bigger nations to invade weaker ones. "This, I reasoned, was why America



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ISSN 2454-8596

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felt justified in bringing so many deaths to Afghanistan and Iraq, and why America felt justified in risking so many more deaths by tacitly using India to pressure Pakistan.” (178) “A common strand appeared to unite these conflicts, and that was the advancement of a small coterie’s concept of American interests in the guise of the fight against terrorism, which was defined to refer only to the organized and politically motivated killing of civilians by killers not wearing the uniforms of soldiers. I recognized that if this was to be the single most important priority of our species, then the lives of those of us who lived in lands in which such killers also lived had no meaning except as collateral damage. After his assignment in the Chile, where he values a book publishing firm, owner Juan Batista tells him about the Janissaries, young boys who were taken by this talk plays a catalyst, Changez at a point where he choose Pakistan over US dream, decides to leave his job, US and goes back to Pakistan to work as a professor and make youth aware about the issues in their own land.

When we compare Mohsin Hamid and Nadeem Aslam there is a striking similarity how both of them are affected by the event of 9/11. The event made them change their writing a great deal. Their active support to their mother land and their protest against US policies is clearly written in their work. Terrorism and its impact on normal Muslim, treatment of West to such innocent lives are the concerns and areas they contemplated and essayed. Nadeem Aslam nailed the social conditions of a common man who is in dilemma to help his brothers in Afghanistan and at the same time not involved with the government policies and schemes of lords who favours war for their personal materialistic advances. The conditions of women is another take TRG successfully elaborates. Naheed’s mother Tara is a typical Pakistani middle aged woman who is afraid of any changes in her life, Naheed is a strong women who desires to be independent, willing to read and learn more about world. Rohan’s daughter Yasmine and his wife

One cannot deny how Mohsin Hamid is more on a radical side of the line, whereas Nadeem Aslam wants peace and justice with no personal bias to mar his point of view. From critics’ point of view Nadeem Aslam presents social and political aspects far better, Mohsin Hamid represents the new generation angst through his work, which is limited to the reactions of an infuriated Muslim youth. Since he belongs to upper middle class, the brutal rigid social realities cannot be seen in his novels. None of the authors fail to voice their opinions and brings a fresh perspective to the political, social and real events in Pakistan through their literary works.



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