



Exploration of Environmental Consciousness in *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam

Jency James
Assistant Professor
St.Mary's College, Thrissur

Abstract

The natural protector, the nature seems to be declining in her health after feeding alarmingly increased occupants, their basic needs and unjust greed. The desperate state of the Mother Nature calls for an urgent and prompt action to sensitize the human world to observe and preserve the greenness around them. Nature Writing, a genre that has been fostered by a growing sensation towards nature engages our thoughts in a desirable direction. Writers of nature or natural world around us do play a central role in orienting humanity towards the act of preserving our green resources. Through the works of ecologists, a positive attitude to respect nature is aimed to be accomplished. As a result, literary works that echo the most appealing call to go back to nature and natural shades are found at an arm's length these days. Works on green enrich us with the sentimental feeling towards nature and certainly sensitize us towards the inner beauty of nature. But the question is whether the books that are not labelled as nature books do stimulate such constructive thoughts about nature. It is a common perception that narratives on terror are not concerned about the nature or even the language of nature. But it is a fact that such narratives do speak about the green and greenery. Environmental ethics need not be the greatest concern of such works, though reflections on nature do enliven the writing. *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam has glimpse of nature or environment in it. Though a stark and uneasy brutality runs through this elegantly crafted tale of latter day Afghanistan, it provides additional insights into our relation with nature. The red tinted leaves of brutality are comforted with green water of hope and life. This paper analyses the discourse of 'green' in the extremist novel, *The Wasted Vigil*.

Introduction

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment which examines the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. The study of green or greenery and its relationship between the literature is Ecocriticism. In his essay, "Literature and ecology: An Experiment in Eco criticism", William Rueckert defines ecocriticism as the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world. But Nadeem Aslam has taken this novel to a higher realm with its ecological implications. Nature is manifested as an entity so close to man and his thoughts. Natural responses of human community are strengthened by the reactions of nature.

The Wasted Vigil, by Nadeem Aslam is a novel about war torn Afghanistan which offers a meditation on the nature of extremism and its representations in post 9/11 era. Afghanistan is a land of mountains, caves and barren plains. The unromantic scenery of Afghanistan is coloured in a unique way by Aslam. As any other narratives on terror, this novel also speaks about global attacks, civil war, talibans, CIA, invasions, fury and revenge, refugee camps, torture and such unpleasant particulars. The work alarmingly shakes us with the documentation of savagery in it. A large population of amputees, architecture of mortared roofs and shell-shocked walls are seen and felt through the pages of this narrative on terror.

The novel opens when Lara steps in to Marcus' house which is more like a haunted house. Marcus is a British doctor who after marrying Qatrina, his Afghan wife settled in Afghanistan. Zameen is their daughter who is believed to have married an American. David, an American spy is the one who fell in love with Zameen and decided to live with her and her son, Bihzad. Benedikt is a Russian soldier who is the father of Bihzad. Lara is the sister of Benedikt who has come to Afghanistan to find him about whom no news was heard for long. Casa, the fundamentalist also finds his way to Marcus' house when he was wounded in a trip-wired field of flintlock guns. Marcus took care of him. But everywhere the touch of nature or environment is felt and the novel with all its savagery, soothes us with the incredible measure of greenery in its narrative form.

Nature's empathetic temperament is reflected in Marcus' character. As nature houses the good or the bad, the calm or the wild, the rich or the poor, Marcus' house provides an accommodation for an American, Russian and

an Afghan. A great humanitarian as he is characterized, Marcus seemed one of those few humans who lent dignity to everything his gaze landed on. When the food in the cupboard ran out and he had nothing to eat, Marcus one day thought of capturing a bulbul that had flown into the house. But in the end he knew he could never eat anything he had heard sing. Qatrina, the Afghan wife of Marcus was annoyed at the thought of a woman who was being pregnant by her husband every year and was almost dead. Her once youthful state is compared to a healthy sapling to illustrate how shades of green can be used to express indignation. “The tree was small then, a sapling but still rather robust.”(Aslam, 92) Out of her anxiety for the pitiable condition of that woman, she wanted to hit the woman’s husband with the branch of Apricot tree. After the description of vicious scene of capture and rape of Zameen by the soviet soldier ,Benedikt, the readers are made to traverse along the path paved by the branches of silk cotton tree enjoying a small breeze which rustles the leaves. The breeze normalizes the swift pulsations. “The breeze rustles through the branches of the silk cotton tree.” (34). When Lara was left alone in Marcus’ house and terribly waiting for Marcus to return she hears quivering of a tree that shakes in the glass pane, its leaves outlined in bright light against the sky which was the representation of her inner fear or quiver. When characters experience momentary bliss, nature partakes in their joy in her own form. After Zameen was helped by Benedikt to get out of Soviet basement, she was weak and fragile and curled herself to wake up to see a beautiful sight of pink blossoms “... that the branches above her had blossomed with the first rays of the sun, the late buds opening at last hatching white pink scraps against the clear blue sky...”(54). When Zameen fell in love with David and felt her life was secured, her eyes fell on to pomegranate trees. “Through the pane she watches the pomegranate trees, the blossoms and the foliage that would be dripping with dew in the morning.”(91). When David realizes that Zameen was driven out of her apartment in the street of story tellers, he felt helpless and his agony on her dreadful condition is explicated though the imagery of peepal leaf which David happened to spot. “A peepal leaf blew in on the wind one afternoon and over the coming days it lay there, became more and more shriveled and sickly brown, its veins prominent. To him, nightmarishly it was like a real person dying”. (179)

Aslam’s keen observation of the natural world has coloured the pages of brutality with shades of green, the nature. When David helped Marcus locate the school run by him, which was beyond palm trees along a curved road, Marcus made a remark on the love of trees. “So great is the love of a male palm tree for the female palm tree,

that it always grows leaning at an angle towards it, even if it is in a neighbouring garden.”(56). The precise detailing of trees, orchards, vineyards and creatures of nature exalt the narrative out of the realm of world of terror. When moments before sunrise are described, Aslam proceeded to describe birds which awakened David from his sleep. “...to the left of him a chakor partridge bites the bars of its cage. They are gregarious birds, moving in large family group in the world, but are kept like this all across Afghanistan...”(45) Aslam’s very description of the dusk, the evening hours of the day as the hour between the butterfly and the moth itself is a testimony of his tender treatment of the natural world. Aslam’s keen observation on nature and natural things render naturalness and tenderness to his narrative. The truck which is parked against the wall of English school run by an American which is to be blasted to reduce the school to rubble is described as docile looking as a cow. The implications of nature enrich the dialectics of terror with a higher sense of calmness and an aesthetic touch. When Bihzad, the grandson of Marcus was referred to by Marcus, he is reminded of Qatrina who once said, “Two things make everyone beautiful: youth and the light of the Moon”(70). Aslam’s love for nature echoes itself when Zameen is compared to a river of loveliness and when moon compared to a jewel that glitters as well as the night in which scarcely anything could be seen is compared to a creature that licks objects into oblivion. Each star, Aslam writes is a drop of transparent nectar, just large enough to fill a moth’s stomach. The beauty of the rose is considered a medicine healing through sight, through the act of looking with all veils swept aside. The orchard is described as a lace of linked greenery around them as Marcus and Lara walk between the trees in the morning, where Marcus inhaled the green scents of the Spring morning. Lara’s deplorable condition is compared to that of being buried alive under the ruins of the universe, under the weight of the extinguished and smashed suns and moons.

The human temperament is pictured as having close association with the elements of nature. Bihzad, the boy who has been instructed and decoyed by the fundamentalist Casa is introduced to have opened his eye onto opium flowers. Opium meant for taking people away from the reality or real sensations, has rightly been chosen to depict Bihzad’s dreadful state of having been fed by Casa with unreal ideologies. When David, the American is introduced and is engaged in a conversation with Marcus, Aslam effusively explains a valley which is famous for its orange blossom which attracts verse makers from across Afghanistan gather in City of Jalalabad full of Citrus trees in Mid-April every year for a Poets Conference to recite poems dedicated to blossom. Casa later understood

his misguided path to terrorism and wanted to step back from those murderous acts of madness in the presence of David.

Harsh realities of human nature are compared with unpleasant facts of natural world. The news about the bombing of school children was known and when Lara exclaimed whether it was true David didn't give a reply and instead he talked about chinaberry trees. They were walking under the Persian lilacs. "The berries are poisonous. My brother and I would dissolve their pulp in a deep slow-moving part of the river and when the fish passed through those waters they'd be stunned. We'd just pick them up with our hands"(106). He reveals the hypocrisy of the Americans who condemn this killing of the children but whose president had shaken hands with the people who in the 1980s had blown up a passenger plane carrying Afghan schoolchildren for indoctrination in the Soviet Union. The pomegranate when was seen with Lara, Marcus was tensed because he doubted whether it would be poisoned by Afghan vendors because they had the habit of poisoning fruits being sold to Russians. Afghans hatred for the Russians is expressed in this fatal way. "Afghan fruit vendors would sometime inject poison into the oranges, melons and pomegranates they sold to Soviet soldiers" (91). While David was being reminded of his brother Jonathan when they were into military force and pitied they were too young for resisting or even thinking of resistance. He says

He was twenty. 1971. Last month I was looking at a photo of him from that time. How young he was, how amazingly young we all look at that age! Like one of those miniscule new leaves found at the very tip of a branch, the ones that can be crushed into a watery green smear between thumb and forefinger-so unformed ----- so resistance less (106-107)

Aslam's adoration for nature is explicit when he speaks about Afghanistani women's ardent love for nature. They sing songs in which they express that they do not desire Allah's Paradise after death, wishing instead to become streams, grasses, the breeze and the dust. The soil placed upon them in the grave, they sing, they'll take as their lover. When they wished to end their lives Afghanistani women often choose water instead of the noose or the knife in breast. Different colours of nature are used abundantly by Aslam. "An olive grove outside jalabad-grey, white, green. A mallow blossom-red orange, Sulphur, yellow bone, red-wine shadow. The mountains beyond the house-silver, evsive grey, blue, sapphire water."(93)

Nature has been elevated to the level of speaker when human being is helpless to speak. Lara asked if David knew somebody by name Christopher whom she believed might give information about Benedict, her brother, David was reluctant to reveal all he knew. He suddenly opened his door and was about to leave. “Outside the wind rustles in the trees as though trying to speak someone’s name.”(144).

Aslam laments on the condition of Afghanistan because Peshawar which was a city of flowers or the city of grain has been transformed into the city filled with conjecture, with unprovable suspicions and frenzied distrust. A nature writer could be seen in Aslam when he is nostalgic about the beauty of Peshawar city and is one of the characteristic features of nature writing. The shade Aslam abundantly used to colour his pages is green in close relation with nature. Only once has green colour been used to represent the Islamic green when Picture of Muhammed is described in which he was dressed in Islam’s green. The poetry of the land is made aware when Aslam states “ ...Night arrives and pulls off flowers from the jasmine grove. As when a groom helps his bride take off her ornaments in the bed chamber...” (301)

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, the landscape serves as a backdrop to the human conflict. Aslam vividly describes the rugged terrain of Afghanistan, scarred by war and strife. This serves as a metaphor for the damage inflicted by human actions on the environment. The barren landscapes and ruined villages reflect the toll of warfare on nature, highlighting the interconnectedness of ecological and social systems. The novel depicts the loss of biodiversity resulting from conflict and exploitation. The characters often reflect on the disappearance of wildlife and the destruction of habitats due to war and human activity. This loss symbolizes the broader environmental degradation caused by conflicts in regions like Afghanistan, where ecosystems are disrupted and species are driven to extinction. Water scarcity is a recurring theme in the novel, mirroring real-life challenges faced in arid regions. The struggle for control over water resources exacerbates tensions among the characters and communities. Aslam portrays water as a precious but finite resource, highlighting the environmental consequences of its mismanagement and overuse. The novel explores the complex relationships between humans and nature, emphasizing both exploitation and reverence. While some characters exploit the land for profit or power, others exhibit a deep respect for the natural world. Through these interactions, Aslam underscores the need for sustainable stewardship of the environment and

the consequences of ignoring ecological balance. The novel raises questions of environmental justice, particularly regarding the unequal distribution of environmental burdens and benefits. The marginalized communities in Afghanistan bear the brunt of environmental degradation caused by war and exploitation, highlighting the intersectionality of environmental and social justice issues. Despite the bleak portrayal of environmental degradation, the novel also offers glimpses of hope and regeneration. Characters demonstrate resilience and a commitment to restoring damaged landscapes and communities. These acts of resistance suggest the possibility of redemption and renewal, emphasizing the importance of collective action in addressing environmental challenges. The novel ends with Marcus who is unwilling to give up his hope of finding his grand child, Bihzad and proceeds to the city centre to find him. Nadeem Aslam never justifies fundamentalism and has hinted at how Marcus' sympathetic and generous treatment has directed Casa to be concerned about others feelings and how Casa is driven to his fate because of his love for Dunia.. Thus the novel which is abundantly colored in green directs us towards eco consciousness in spite of being a narrative on terror. The greenness in any narrative form of any genre enhances its literary charm and provides it with an aesthetic touch which makes it appealingly readable.

Bibliography

Arnsperges, Levin. *In the Shadow of the Pilot: Representations of Muslim Terrorists in 9/11 Literature* 2013

Aslam, Nadeem. *The Wasted Vigil*, New Delhi: RHI, 2012.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory : An Introduction*, Minneapolis: UMP, 2008

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Meyer, Jane. *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals*, USA: Anchor, 2008.

Paul, Don. *The World is Turning: 9/11 The Movements for Justice and Reclaiming for the World*, USA: I/R, 2008

Rueckert William. *Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism* “, *Lowa Review* 9.1(1978):71-86