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Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil*: An insider-outsider view of the Socio-Political scenario of Afghanistan

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Abstract: The status of an insider or an outsider has created interest and found place in the works of the sociologists such as Merton (1972) and Schutz (1976) long back. This term was first coined by Robert K. Mertonⁱ in his paper entitled *Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Merton holds that knowledge has been accessed in categories. Some groups have monopolistic access to the particular kind of knowledge while the others have the privileged access towards it. The paper aims to analyze Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* in order to throw light upon the socio-political scenario of Afghanistan both with an insider and the outsider's perspective.

Keywords: Diaspora Community, Nadeem Aslam.

Afghanistan is considered one of the most impoverished nationsⁱⁱ of the world. Years of continuous war have made it a war-torn, ravaged, and besieged nation. Owing to its geographic position between the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, Afghanistan has long been used as a battleground for strategic wars by the external powers. In addition, the fragmented and polarized nature of Afghan society, which is made up of many different ethnic groups, has led to its multiple internal struggles which have gained support from the different external powers. The continuous destruction caused to the country for over the past three decades is evidence to the strength and patience of its people and the groups who work towards rebuilding their country. Although Afghanistan is a difficult place for a serious writer, yet the happenings in Afghanistan have been captured by several literary figures. They have been writing about the life and politics of Afghanistan and its tragic and violent story continues to unfold over the last more than four decades in their writings. These writers can both be insiders and outsiders. Insiders comprise of the diasporic writers who were born in Afghanistan but due to the socio-political upheavals and turmoil in the country they left the country like Khaled Houssini, Tamim Ansary, Bashir Sakhawarz etc. Outsiders comprise of the writers who stay outside Afghanistan and writing about the situations prevailing there like Nadeem Aslam, Yasmina Khadra etc. Khalid Hosseini's novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Tamim Ansary's *West of Kabul; East of New York* and *The Widow's Husband* present an insider's account of Afghanistan and the life of its people. Both Ansary and Houssini are insiders with a difference. Both of them have delineated the situation of Afghanistan from their own perspective. The Basic difference in the

approach of the two novelists is that; while Tamim Ansary highlights the clan relationship, Khaled Houssini uses the backdrop of tribal framework of Afghan society. The account given by both the insiders and the outsiders about the country is different to some extent. As an insider they have focused on the things that they have experienced and they have more knowledge to the internal account of the country while the outsiders have seen the situation as their own perspective as a citizen of the neighboring country or the world perspective. Hence there is a need to compare the both the views. We can also find difference in the opinion of the insiders about the situation of their country. Hence the legitimacy of all these views is questionable.

Pakistani writer Nadeem Aslam too has written about Afghanistan. Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* emerges as nearest paradigms to Tamim Ansary and Khaled Houssini. Through this novel the writers have presented an outsider's account of Afghanistan. Since Afghanistan is not the land of their birth and they are citizens of other nations, their perception of Afghanistan is that of an outsider's. Nadeem Aslam is a writer originally from Pakistan who fled with his family to England when the regime threatened communists like his father. He published two novels about Pakistan culture, but *The Wasted Vigil* is his first novel about the socio-political complications prevailing in Afghanistan. He has visited Afghanistan extensively and after researching the land, its history, and interviewing refugees, Aslam brings a realistic picture of Afghanistan.

The Wasted Vigil is about the past experiences of the characters that haunts them in contemporary Afghanistan. Nadeem Aslam before starting his novel quotes Jimmi Carter, president of America in which he questions the legitimacy of rise of Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan and the collapse of Soviet Empire. Hence, indicating the writer's concern about the politics of Afghanistan. Both the rise of Taliban and the cold war proved dangerous for the world politics. As an outsider Nadeem Aslam is able to observe the situation of Afghanistan from the perspective of a distant observer. *The Wasted Vigil* spans 30 years of the conflict in Afghanistan to the front line of the 'war on terror' by the west. In the novel, the writer moves across the country's ancient and modern history, punctuates his narrative with cross-cultural allusions. The characters of the novel are international figures; a Briton, a Russian and an American, representing the players of recent history. None was born in Afghanistan, but all are connected to the country by loss. At one level, all the characters seem to stand for the forces that have shaped modern Afghanistan - an English doctor, a Russian woman, an American gem trader, another American spy, an Afghan woman who wants to run a school, and a troubled Afghan who wants to rid his country of all foreigners and non-believers. They represent different world-views that differ from each other. Russians, Americans and Afghans come together through a series of incidents and find themselves in the house of Marcus

that is in ruins but filled with memories and symbolizing kindness. Marcus is an elderly Englishman who lives alone near the Tora Bora Mountains. His Afghan wife and daughter are dead. A Russian woman named Lara arrives at his house searching for her brother, a soldier in the Soviet army who went missing in the 1980s. David, a former CIA operative, has arrived on a search of his own. The story of their linked pasts is revealed in collage. Unafraid of political complexity, Nadeem Aslam unflinchingly examines depravity, torture, rape and violence. Yet his writing sensitively portrays tenderness. Aslam took outsiders in the novel as his characters that are intricately connected with each other. The introduction of the foreign characters from the other nations in the novel brings in the outsider's perspective as he asserts in an interview that the reason for representing foreigners in his novel set in Afghanistan is, that he does not belong to Afghanistan himself and being an outsider he wanted to depict the perception of the First World countries and the other neighboring countries on the affairs of Afghanistan.

The insider's doctrine given by Merton holds that the outsider has a structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien groups, statuses, cultures and societies. Unlike the insider, the outsider has neither been socialized in the group nor has engaged in the run of experience that makes up his life, and therefore cannot have the direct, intuitive sensitivity that makes empathic understanding possible. In contrary to the above statement Nadeem Aslam as an outsider has successfully shown a realistic imagery of Afghanistan.

He has taken up the issue of the missing girls in Vietnam, the early days of Soviet space programme and the spread of Buddhism in Afghanistan along with the core of the novel that presents the intersecting lives of the characters destroyed by the ongoing war in Afghanistan. The story centers on the house of Marcus who had spent a major part of his life in Afghanistan and married an Afghan woman. Marcus' home symbolizes Afghanistan. Like Afghanistan it is the graveyard of a great, unique, desecrated, moth-eaten culture that is protected within the remains of shell-shocked walls. A Russian woman named Lara came to Afghanistan to the house of Marcus in search of her brother who was in army during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Lara stays as a guest in the house of Marcus. She gives the reason for her presence in Afghanistan.

...she said that a quarter of a century ago her brother had entered Afghanistan as a soldier with the soviet army, and that he was one of the one who never returned home. She is here this time because she has learnt that Marcus's daughter might have known the young Soviet man.

(7)

The writer gives the information about The First World intervention of Afghanistan that led it towards destruction. The information given by Lara about her lost brother serves as a medium for Nadeem Aslam to throw light on the history of Russian invasion of Afghanistan. During the

Russian invasion of Afghanistan, several soldiers were displaced from their home and lost in war and they never returned to Russia. The writer explores the repercussions of war where both the sides involved have to bear the brunt of violence. The novel brings out the paradoxes inherent in a war situation. As a Nation Russia is the perpetrator of violence but at an individual level Russian soldiers too become victims of violence they initiate:

Always hungry, always ill, the weak soviet antibiotics of little use if ever they were to be had, many soldiers had thought of and talked about deserting about defecting an arc of movement in their minds, from Afghanistan to a country in Western Europe perhaps even the United States of America. (28).

The writer has presented his views of the intervention in Afghanistan with both the insider and outsider perspective. He further adds that the atrocities of the Soviet invasion followed by the civil war in Afghanistan and after that the rise of Taliban. He also gives the reference of 9/11 attacks and the American invasion of Afghanistan. Nadeem Aslam has also put a deep insight into the situation that prevailed during the rule of the superpowers in Afghanistan one after another. Through Lara's visit and the difficulties she faced during the visit, Nadeem Aslam throws light on the connection of Russia with Afghanistan and the views of a Russian towards Afghanistan have been projected. When she enters the house of Marcus as a guest, she finds a large mirror hanging on the wall:

The mirror is large - if it was water she could dive and disappear into it without touching the sides. On the wide ceiling, are hundreds of books; each held in place by an iron nail hammered through it (5).

The depiction of books nailed on the ceiling reflected through the mirror states the literary destruction that occurred during the time of Taliban regime where the books, kites, paintings or any kind of art work was banned. Qatrina, the Afghan wife of Marcus had nailed the books on the ceiling, so that they might be protected from being burned or destroyed by the Taliban. The act of nailing the books and burying artifacts highlights the regressive approach of Taliban and at the same time keeps her alive in the memory of her husband. The past seems to be buried in the house in the form of books and the pieces of art, but it lies just beneath the surface, or stuck on the ceiling. He further depicts each room of the house in detail:

Beginning on the ground floor, each of the first five rooms was dedicated to one of the five senses, and as the courtship slowly progressed over the following weeks, the couple went from one to the next. (11).

There were portraits and paintings on the walls of the house, but Marcus has smeared mud over them because the Taliban forbade any kind of art. Through the presentation of the books nailed on the ceiling the writer brings forth the destruction of history, interpersonal relationships and

faith by Taliban. Marcus gifts a book to each of the guests from his collection so that when they disperse around the globe they could recognize each other through them. There is a connection forged through these books:

Perhaps everyone who comes here should be given one so that no matter where they are in the world they can recognize each other in a fellowship of wounds. (9)

Here the books given by Marcus to his guests serve as the token of remembrance and are also the messengers to the world about the socio-political destruction of Afghanistan. Being a Muslim, Nadeem Aslam is aware of the lapses arising from the conservative approach of Islamic fundamentalism as depicted in the insider's doctrine that an insider is more competent to access the knowledge regarding his society and culture than an outsider. Due to his Islamic faith Nadeem Aslam has an insider's understanding to some extent. Merton asserts :

...only through continued socialization in the life of a group can one become fully aware of its symbolism and social shared realities. Only so can one understand the fine grained meanings of behavior, feelings and values.

In the same way in order to become fully aware of the problems of Afghans Nadeem Aslam himself visited the country and stayed there for two months. He talked to and interviewed people about their reaction to the contemporary scenario. Burgess'sⁱⁱⁱ theory is applicable on the work done by Nadeem Aslam as an outsider. Burgess writes:

Being a stranger, an outsider in the social setting, gives the researcher scope to stand back and abstract material from the research experience.^{iv}

In the same way writer Nadeem Aslam has used his experiences, thoughts, memories and emotions in his novel. Through the characters of *The Wasted Vigil* he has presented the information he got from the war torn Afghanistan. Both physically and psychologically people of Afghanistan were devastated by Taliban. Suffocating rules and regulations regarding their freedom made their life miserable. After the Taliban lost power, Afghans were not only happy but also psychologically relieved. The loss of power by Taliban was welcomed by people who were relieved to be free of its tyrannical regime. There was a sense of freedom among people who were celebrating by breaking the Tabbos laid down by Taliban:

There is hunger that declares itself only while it is being satisfied, and so for the next dozen hours he listened to music without pause, cassettes on every surface around him. (18).

A drawback of being a writer with an outsider's view is that Nadeem Aslam being a 'non-member', a term used by Merton^v, is not aware of the history of the country he is writing about. His lack of knowledge regarding history makes his writing questionable. Nadeem Aslam uses

his resources and materials in an attempt to access the History of Afghanistan. He traces several historical events in *The Wasted Vigil*. The historical events are intertwined with the personal lives of the characters:

Continuing downwards and around the mass, they understood that they were excavating the head of a great Buddha lying on its side..... too heavy to move, he decided to continue with his plan for the factory with the head in it... (19).

In the above lines Nadeem Aslam hints at the destruction of the Giant Bamiyan Statues by the Taliban. Being an outsider, the writer does not give the elaborate details of how the destruction was caused but the excavated head of the Buddha found near the house of Marcus is indicative of the cultural destruction of National treasure by fundamentalist group of Taliban. Through the views of Marcus, Nadeem Aslam indirectly depicts that the conservative approach of the Afghan society is responsible for its degradation. The outside world took an advantage of the internal wars in Afghanistan for their personal gains:

The entire world it seemed had fought in this country, had made mistakes in this country, but mistakes had consequences and he didn't know who to blame for those consequences. Afghanistan itself; Russia, the United States, Britain, Arabia, Pakistan? (34)

Nadeem Aslam questions the outside invasion of Afghanistan especially the invasion by The First World that worsened the situation in the country. In this never-ending war the Soviets, the Americans, Pakistanis and the Afghan Mujahideen are all equally responsible with the ordinary Afghan caught in the tumult. Critic Adam Richardser asserts that the Soviets invaded the country for their personal benefits and for the spread of communism in Afghanistan implicating CIA and Pakistan too:

...once inside Afghanistan, the Soviets found themselves forced to commit more and more troops and material to prop up the unpopular PDPA government. Several Islamic fundamentalist groups sprang up and began waging guerilla warfare, many of them operating from camps set up by the CIA and Pakistani Intelligence within Pakistan, from which they could strike into Afghanistan, and then beat a hasty retreat over a guarded border.^{vi}

The above lines present an outsider's perspective about Afghanistan. Outsider can bring a fresh perspective of looking at things and understanding of them. This could prove to be a positive contribution towards the growth of community at large. Nadeem Aslam, in his novel has presented the history through the medium of a story that impacted the lives of the characters. Rose^{vii} in her critical work concurs:

There is no neutrality. There is only greater or less awareness of one's biases. And if you do not appreciate the force of what you're leaving out, you are not fully in command of what you're doing.^{viii}

What differentiates the perspective of an insider and an outsider and from where do the differences arise? These are the important questions

that Nadeem Aslam attempted to interrogate and resolve through his work. The difference between the insider and the outsider's view can also be traced through language - specifically, the words and usages a writer chooses when he writes the fiction. Language plays a very important role in presenting the perspective of the writer and determining whether it is that of an insider or an outsider. Nadeem Aslam's use of language, the selection of words and the way of presenting the story of Afghanistan makes him an insider. He has included all the documented savagery of Afghanistan: torture and rapes of girls, rough public justice that includes stoning and the amputations; warlords and their intractable feuds; misguided Americans and their obstinate meddling; awful methods of torture, inflicted by both warlords, Soviets and Americans etc. He seeks to reveal through the story of the characters or through the one immigrant community, the psyche of Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States and Afghanistan too. He depicts through the novel how a superpower enters a country, plays its geo-political games as the US did in the 1980s when it supported the mujahedeen and then left the country without taking responsibility for the consequences of its intervention. *The Wasted Vigil* is a reflection on certain decisions taken by the first world countries during their intervention in Afghanistan, and were opposed by the people. His interest in politics and religion finds reflection in this novel:

...the west was involved in the ruining of this place, in the ruining of my life. There would have been no downfall if this country had been left to itself by those others. (74).

Through the words of Marcus, Nadeem Aslam provides an insight into the political maneuvers of the west in Afghanistan. The interference of The First World has been considered to be the reason of the destruction of Afghanistan. Being an outsider the writer's view of the country is not partisan. Marcus, an individual who is initially an outsider to a particular group may with greater interaction become more of an insider:

His skin is dyed to fawn after the decades of strong sunlight and heat, making him look almost like a native of this country, may be someone from the Nuristan province. (48).

Marcus is an Englishman, an outsider, but owing to the several years spent in Afghanistan, he becomes an insider both in terms of the knowledge regarding the country and his physical appearance. He adapted himself according to the social and the climatic conditions of the country. His life reflects several upheavals experienced by him and his closed ones. Insider and outsider constructs can be understood through the terms coined by an anthropologist Pike. Pike^{ix} coined the terms 'etic' and 'emic' in 1994 and Harris further elaborated them. The emic point of view is associated with that of the insider and the etic point of view with the outsider. Pike is of the view that an insider can learn to analyze like an outsider. The goal of a writer is to get both etic and emic knowledge.

Through the story of Zameen daughter of Marcus and her son Bihzad, Nadeem Aslam provides both the etic and emic knowledge about the country. Their abduction of Zameen by the warlords reflects the brutality of the civil war in Afghanistan and the vulnerability of women and children. The war between the internal sections of the country led to the destruction and suffering of the lives of the innocent citizens.

Juliette Wade^x informs in an article *Insiders and Outsiders* that Modern anthropologists strive to understand how a group of people defines itself, rather than contenting themselves with observing details of its behavior and judging them from the outside. For The writer, seeking to achieve the sense of an insider perspective for a world culture or for a fictional culture becomes important to extend his access to the sensitive area of listening to language, because the language is used as a tool for delivering messages. Language conveys the messages about the perceived social relationship to the person and the situations, the writer speaks about. Sentences carry messages about judgment and emotion, and about how reality is divided into objects, concepts and categories. Juliette wade forges a link between anthropological approach and literary creation. Nadeem Aslam depicts the society of Afghanistan through the characters of *The Wasted Vigil* seems to consider typically the society of Afghanistan that he visited, described and judged them from the perspective of his own cultural viewpoint:

Even the air of this country has the story to tell about warfare. It is impossible here to lift a piece of bread from a plate and, following not back to its origins, collect a dozen stories concerning war-how it affected the hand that pulled it out of the oven, the hand that kneaded the dough, how war impinged upon the field where the wheat was grown.(49).

In the above lines Nadeem Aslam shows the omnipresence of war and violence in Afghanistan. Most of the people of the country, in some way or the other were devastated by war and their memories were tainted by the specter of violence. A writer must possess great sensitivity in his approach to the writing. These sensitivities are based on the Power relation between the writer and the society or country, he is writing about. It is important to understand that who speaks for whom? This power relation can also be related to the history of the research of the Blacks by the Whites. Historically the empowered one was often white and male and the one without power was colored and female. Being a popular Pakistani writer, Nadeem Aslam seems to be aware of his variants between his position as an observer-creator and Afghanistan, the war torn society. He is an informant and his power lies in how he presents the information and his decision of inclusion and exclusion. *The Wasted Vigil* provides the minutest details of Afghanistan and the Afghan people, through the episodes, incidents, tragic statistics, and cruel objectives of both the insiders and outsiders. The writer presents the political complicity that is responsible for the growing terrorism in Afghanistan