

## Voice of Dissent: A Critique of Nadeem Aslam's Representation of Islam

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### Abstract

*The politics of representation has changed with the end of colonization. In the past, black people were depicted with dehumanized features. For the black man there was only one destiny and that was to be like the white man. Now the black has become the brown: portrayal of Muslims as the contemporary other is at the helm of racial discrimination. The task of misrepresentation is given to the native informers who claim to have an expert knowledge of their native cultures. They misrepresent their own cultures in order to serve interest of the imperial power, the U.S. and also to secure their own material benefits. The aim of this paper is to develop a critique of Nadeem Aslam's prejudiced representation of Islam in his novel Maps for the Lost Lovers. Aslam is a native informer who has misrepresented Islam in the novel. He criticizes Islam for oppressing women. He has shown Muslims as backward and diabolic in the novel. Islam is portrayed as a primitive religion. However, his criticism is prejudiced and also reveals his limited knowledge about Islam. He is inspired with Eurocentric ideas such as free sexual relationship between a male and a female out of wedlock. He is charlatan and a self-loathing Muslim who questions Islamic practices through characters who do not have any belief in God. He as a native informer justifies brutality and humiliation inflicted on Muslims. According to the native informer the only way of salvation for the Muslims is to adopt Western culture. Being a self-loathing Muslim, Aslam (2012) does not articulate voice of the Muslims.*

**Key Words:** Representation, Euro centrism, Native Informer, Islam.

### Introduction

The politics of representation has been used as a tool in order to colonize people of weaker countries. It was naturalized in the past through colonial discourses especially in case of black people. Frantz Fanon highlighted this problem of racial discrimination in his two prominent books, *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Mask*.

Racial discrimination is more obvious in case of black people. Fanon (1986) has highlighted psychological depression of black people

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who were treated as different from human beings. White men constructed their superior status which was naturalized through colonial discourses, “White men consider themselves superior to black men” (p. 12). It has created feelings of inferiority among black people who aspire to be like white people. Black people can achieve the level of acceptability only by achieving what White men have:

*The black man wants to be like the-white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. Long ago the black man admitted the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence. (Fanon, 1986, p. 228)*

Black people were victimized due to their blackness. They were considered as inhuman, primitive and brutes who needed to be civilized. They are still discriminated on the basis of their color. They still need more fight against racism in order to achieve level of humanity.

Discrimination against black people is relevant in this paper because, “brown has become the new black... Blackand-white was yesterday, brown-and-white is today, and tomorrow the color-coding apparatus of domination might yet again change” (Dabashi, 2011, pp. 20-21). The white has remained the same. Muslims, especially after 9/11, are depicted as a threat to the peace of the world. Their identity is distorted in order to prove them savages:

*“The most significant lesson in the current recodification of racism in America is that racism as a phenomenon stays constant while its signifiers change visual and affective registers—from black to brown, from Jew to Muslim, at the center of which bifurcations remain a fictive white Christian interlocutor who demands and exacts racialized superiority.” (Dabashi, 2011, 128)*

Different stories are fabricated for the negative portrayal of Muslims. They experience systematic dehumanization. They are depicted as inhuman people who have primitive culture. However, this task is given to the native informer who “plays a key role in making the inversion of fact by fantasy appear logical” (Dabashi, 2011, p. 19). The native informers pave ground for the brutality inflicted on the Muslims. They help the U.S. in defeating and humiliating the Muslims. They devalue their own cultural values.

The native informers sell their product of cultural market by giving it the touch of backwardness which, according to the native informers, need to be refined in Western market. The Western market shows its interest in refining the raw product. Native informers play a

key role in making their native cultural products acceptable to their masters. They create space for the West which takes responsibility of refining cultures of the third world countries. The native informers are rewarded with bright future and acclaimed by the international publishers.

These native informers do not have strong attachment with their native countries and their cultures. They do not secure bright future in their own countries. Thus they find an opportunity to shift to Europe or the United States and identify themselves with these countries and their cultures:

*The typical native informers ... move to Europe and/ or the United States for their higher education. They may come from modest or opulent backgrounds; their financial means may be either inherited, the result of advantageous marriage, or payment for services to their American employers. They rarely hold a stable job with professional accountability, remaining rather on the professional margins of the society whose interests they serve. Whether or not they have made a career in their native land, they have always felt alienated from it, but they are no more at home in the country they have adopted just because it is where they can sell their services best. Their image of the adopted country, however, is very much white-identified. (Dabashi, 2011, p. 15)*

The native informers write in order to please their white masters. They serve their interests and want their services to be acknowledged by their masters. They identify themselves with the new culture and get alienated from their own native culture. They consider their own culture as backward and primitive which they criticize in order to please their masters, "Most important, they can feign authority while telling their conquerors not what they need to know but what they want to hear" (Dabashi, 2011, p. 16). They exploit attachment with their native countries in order to justify the dehumanized portrayal of their cultures. Their voices are considered authentic and thus "There is no longer any need for "expert knowledge" when you can hear the facts from the horse's mouth" (Dabashi, 2011, p. 18).

Most of the native informers are Muslims who have written after the event of 9/11. They write about the Muslims and insecurity in the world due to Muslims. They link terrorism with Islam in order to satiate their material interests. Depiction of the Muslims as dehumanized people and especially enemies of the West, has turned out to be a massive and lucrative industry for the native informers who develop a prosperous career in it. They also help in materializing interests of the imperial powers who pretend to be the saviors of the world, "The Americans turn

to expatriate intellectuals to tell populations targeted for liberation (Afghans, Iraqis, Somalis, Palestinians, Iranians) that they intend to invade, bomb, and occupy their homelands for those populations' own good (2011, p. 18).” The native informers are given the task of propagating the positive image of the imperial powers such as the U.S. These intellectuals justify the atrocities of the Americans in the name of liberation, democracy and protection of the people. However, the imperial power occupies the homelands of these people only for the sake of securing their own interests, “Next to national-security interests, human rights and women's rights in particular are now routinely cited as the principal objectives of American imperial interventions” (p. 36).

The novel in the present study is also about oppression of women especially in Muslim society. Nadeem Aslam has attempted to portray Islam negatively for victimizing women. He has depicted many cultural practices such as marriage and divorce in a Muslim society in his novel. The novel is discussed and analyzed below in order to know his spirit and insatiable thirst for being appreciated by the West.

### **Maps for the Lost Lovers**

As most of the native informers are Muslims who “have consistently denigrated Islam, in both its cultural and religious aspects” (2011, p. 17), Nadeem Aslam, a British-Pakistani novelist, also touches upon the themes of love, religious bigotry and patriarchy in a Muslim society in his novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*. The story is about Pakistani-born immigrants who live in a British town, Dasht-e-Tanhaii. The story unveils cultural problems of the Pakistani immigrants, Shamas, his wife (Kaukab) and their children. A pair of lovers, Chanda and Jugnu, develop illicit relationship. They disappear and are found dead. The novel is mainly about the secret of their murder which is finally revealed in the end. Chanda's brothers are found guilty and arrested in the end of the story. Shamas is the main character who reveals and supports point of view of the author. He is not a believer in God, “He is not a believer, so he knows that the universe is without saviours: the surface of the earth is a great shroud whose dead will not be resurrected” (Aslam, 2012, p. 27). Shamas believes in evidence based on scientific rationalization. His son, Jugnu, is also secular and questions Islam on many occasions in the novel:

*I was born into a Muslim household, but I object to the idea that that automatically makes me a Muslim. The fact of the matter is that had I lived at the time of Muhammad, and he came to me with his heavenly message, I would have walked away... (2012, p. 52)*

Jugnu is so negative about Islam that he spreads only venom whenever he talks about Islam. He denies his status of being a Muslim. It is important to mention him since it is his point of view which is followed in the novel. In the above passage, he is the internal focalizer. He is the major character and thinks negatively about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. His views, indeed, reflect the views of the charlatan and self-loathing native informer, Nadeem Aslam, who is trying to be a “secular reformer” (Dabashi, 2011, p. 89).

Jugnu and Chanda are the lost lovers. Chanda is the girl who is divorced by her two husbands. She then shifts to England in order to help her parents at their grocery shop. There an illegal immigrant marries her. He is not sincere since he marries her and disappears after getting legal status in England. Jugnu wants to marry her “but since she had not been divorced by her previous husband, Islam forbade another marriage for several years-the number differing from sect to sect, four, five, six (Aslam, 2012, p. 77). Chanda’s husband disappears in England and cannot be traced. It does not take so many years in an age of closely connected world in which people interact frequently especially in the same country. Chanda is of the view that, “There is no alternative. He [Jugnu] says he will marry me but I am not divorced and my husband cannot be located” (Aslam, 2012, p. 88). Thus Chanda and Jugnu live a sinful life of having intercourse without wedlock. Aslam (2012) justifies their sinful life: For the people in the West, an offence that did no harm to another human or to the wider society was no offence at all, but to her-to all Muslims-there was always another party involved-Allah; He was getting hurt by Chanda and Jugnu’s actions. (pp. 60-61)

The passage portrays a comparison between Islamic and Western societies. Islamic society is ruled by the values of Islam, religion of the Muslims. Western society is mentioned for the sake of comparison though it also accommodates millions of Muslims. However, the above passage refers to the Eurocentric cultural values of the West. Aslam (2012) as a native informer criticizes his native culture; he targets Islam for inflicting restrictions on men and women for enjoying their romantic relationship. He attempts to justify the Eurocentric practice of romantic love which is based on sexual relationship without wedlock. He not only talks about individuals but also about the whole society, “to another human or to the wider society”. He is inspired with Western cultural values and abhors his native culture:

*he [native informer] is the Muslim he abhors, the object of his own hatred. He takes particular pleasure in the admiration of racist*

*Americans and Europeans ... It is exceedingly saddening to watch a person self-flagellate so pitilessly. (Dabashi, 2011, p. 86)*

The native informers devalue their own cultural values in order to win appreciation of the West. They valorize Western and American cultures and justify their racialization in the name of globalization and hybridity. They elevate their cultures by showing their own culture as backward and primitive. They are “self-loathing Muslims” (Dabashi, 2011, p. 111) who are given the task of dehumanizing Muslims. There are many examples in the novel which misrepresent Islam. However, this article due to limited space quotes just few examples. In the novel, Kaukab is a major character. She is daughter of a cleric and is born and brought up in a mosque all her life (Aslam, 2012, p. 58). She has a religious bent of mind and loves her religion Islam. Her point of view is questioned time and again by her husband Shamas and her children: Mother, are you aware that Muslim women cannot marry a non-Muslim? Their testimony in a court of law is worth half that of a man. Non-Muslims living in Muslim countries have inferior status under Islamic Law: they may not testify against a Muslim. Non-believers are to be killed: of the seventeen great sins in Islam, unbelief is the greatest, worse than murder, theft, adultery. (p. 457)

Muslim women are depicted as miserable creatures in the novel. Ujala, son of Shamas and Kaukab, considers Islamic law responsible for the miserable life of women in Pakistan. In Islam, a woman has to marry a Muslim man. Ujala in the above passage criticizes this practice. He is of the view that a woman should be given freedom of developing sexual relationship with a man of her own choice. He wants to propagate Eurocentric cultural values. He does not mention the evil consequences of such liberal practice in the West, “The high rate of divorce and sexual disease are common consequences of the reckless drive to equate the sexes and ‘free’ sexual relationships” (Ahmad, 2001, p. 195).

Aslam (2012) shows non-Muslims pitiable in Muslim countries. However, it is not non-Muslims who suffer, rather it is Muslims who are agonized for being Muslims since every Muslim is considered an essentialist terrorist who has to prove himself innocent (good Muslims). He maligns Muslims for killing non-Muslims. However, it is not the fact; non-Muslims move freely in Pakistan. The most prominent example is of Raymond Davis who killed a Pakistani and was given safe exit to travel to America.

Ujala criticizes Islam for its severe punishments. He tells his mother in a very sarcastic manner, “A religion that has given dignity to

millions around the world? Amputations, stoning to death, flogging-not barbaric?" (Aslam, 2012, p. 458). Ujala misrepresents Islamic punishments and considers them barbaric. He belittles their importance in giving protection to people of a Muslim society. Islam prescribes punishment for crimes in order to make the society peaceful. Punishment depends on the nature of a crime:

*Islamic punishment rests on two assumptions: first, rules are laid down for the maximum limits of the punishment for a particular crime which is designed to discourage its repetition. For instance, the punishment of cutting a thief's hand freezes crime. Because this is practiced in Saudi Arabia it is still possible to see shopkeepers leaving their shops unattended during prayer-time without any fear of theft. It would be a foolish person indeed who would try to steal from them. This state of affairs can be compared to other societies with highly developed and sophisticated police forces where theft, burglary and rape are common because there is no fear of the law or indeed of the punishment it provides. (Ahmad, 2002, p. 145)*

Islam also gives space to compassion and forgiveness. For instance, if a man commits murder, he can be forgiven by the closest relatives of the murdered person. Forgiveness in such case gives a new life to the murderer who in most cases leads a pious life. In Western society, most often the murderer is hanged. Thus for a Muslim, "the electric chair is as barbaric as some Muslim punishments are for the West" (Ahmad, 2002, p. 146).

Islamic Law is speedier in ensuring justice as compared to the Western Law. In Western Law, the victim suffers since the case can be delayed for many months, even many years. However, Islamic Law gives justice to the victim immediately, "under Islamic law a decision is made immediately after witnesses have given their evidence. There is no hanging about, no postponements. Justice is accessible, swift and visible." (Ahmad, 2002, p. 146). Islamic Law emphasizes safety of the society.

However, British colonization has penetrated its values into our society. British judiciary system is just one example which is still exercised in our country. It was after a long time after independence of Pakistan that, "Waseem Sajjad, the Chairman of the Senate of Pakistan, in spite of a law degree from Oxford, supported the Shariat (from shariah) Bill, that is, the introduction of Islamic law in Pakistan" (Ahmad, 2002, p. 146). Unfortunately, the native informers distort them and misrepresent them in order to please their Western masters. They misrepresent Islam to show Western society as superior by disparaging their own religion, Islam. They create "dependency complex" (Fanon,



1986, p. 98) among Muslims in order to depend on Western culture. It is the most effective way of colonizing people because ““Not all peoples can be colonized; only those who experience this need [for dependency)” (Fanon, 1986, pp. 98-99).

Islam insists upon relationship of husband and wife based on love and understanding; it does not give the right of exploiting either partner. If their relationship does not proceed happily and leads to the stage of divorce, then they can part their ways in a way that does not harm the other i.e. wife or husband. When a husband divorces his wife thrice in one time, then they cannot reunite. Their reconciliation is possible only after the wife marries another man willingly but not with the plan of getting divorce so that she can reunite with her former husband. Aslam (2012) portrays this kind of divorce in the novel:

*Do you remember .... A girl named Suraya? ... I found a man for her in Pakistan. But now unfortunately she has been divorced. The husband got drunk and divorced her, and although he now regrets doing it, she cannot remarry him without first marrying and getting divorce from someone else. That's Allah's law and who are we to question it? Poor Suraya is back in England, and I am looking for a man who will marry her for a short period. (p. 59)*

Kaukab and a matchmaker discuss the divorce of Suraya. Suraya is divorced by her drunk husband, in a fit of anger. Her husband is now repentant and wants reunion. Suraya is “now looking for someone to marry temporarily” (p. 85). This kind of practice is against Islam. There are five categories, according to Muslim Jurists, of dissolving marriage in Islam:

- 1) The husband pronounces the formula of divorce once and is either reconciled with his wife during the following three months, or, at the end of that period, the wife is divorced.
- 2) The husband pronounces the formula of divorce once every month and, unless he stops and reconciles himself with the wife during three months, after the third pronouncement, the wife shall be divorced- according to most authorities irrevocable- unless she marries another man who divorces or dies.
- 3) The third form of divorce is ... that a husband may pronounce the formula of divorce thrice in one sitting and the divorce becomes effective instantaneously and irrevocably.
- 4) The fourth form of dissolution of marriage is initiated by the wife, who under certain circumstances .... Can move a court for divorce.



- 5) Fifthly, a woman can also sue for divorce in case a husband deserts her. (Ahmad, 1982, pp. 191-193)

Islam gives a secure position to a woman in all aspects of life. It is evident from the above detail about divorce. She has been given the right of divorce. The act of triple divorce in one sitting was introduced during the period of Umar I as a penalty in order to secure status of women. It shows there is space for change in the case of divorce. This is the reason that Chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology, Dr. Qibla Ayaz said that “the authority supports the decision of giving triple *talaq* (divorce) in one sitting as punishable” (The Daily News).

However, Aslam (2012) depicts the practice of divorce in Islam in a distorted manner. Suraya is divorced by her husband who was drunk. The matchmaker then looks for another man “who will marry her for a short period” (p. 59). Islam does not suggest a temporary marriage for restoring the previous husband and wife. Islam does not tolerate marriage “for a short period”. Islam gives enough time to think over the issue of divorce (read second form of divorce quoted above) and once it is decided to part ways consciously, then they cannot reunite. Aslam (2012) has misrepresented the practice of divorce in Islam either due to lack of knowledge about Islam or as a native informer he has fulfilled his duty of slandering Islam.

Aslam robs Muslims of their individuality and identity by misrepresenting Islam. In his novel, he criticizes Pakistani Muslims as “mosque-going, cousin-marrying, veil-wearing” (2012, p. 444). For him offering prayer in mosques, marriage within family and wearing veil are evil practices. The practice of marriage in Islam is portrayed in detail in the novel. Aslam (2012) being a native informer is inspired with Eurocentric way of romantic love which legalizes sexual relationship between partners before marriage, “Even in Pakistan everyone loved someone before marriage, but from a distance: s surreptitious glance answered by an eloquent smile. The West just gave a person the permission and opportunity to act on those feelings” (p. 445). The novel mainly depicts sexual relationship out of wedlock. Jugnu has illicit relationship with Chanda; Shamas develops this relationship with Suraya:

*She had found herself fantasizing for a few moments about how delicious it would be to taunt her husband, to torment him, torture him, by giving him all the details of her lovemaking with Shamas, telling him he was a better lover than him” (p. 334).*

Suraya gets pregnant due to her lovemaking with Shamas. She marries him temporarily and then gets divorce. She reunites with her previous

husband in Pakistan, “And now he hopes she has become pregnant by him during the summer, that her new husband-thinking he himself is the father-is leaving her in peace because of it” (p. 523).

Charag, son of Shamas and Kaukab, has a girlfriend, “Charag-the son whom she had sent away to university in London to get an education-had come to inform her that she had a girlfriend who was not only white but also pregnant” (2012, p. 47). Ujala, son of Shamas and Kaukab, is also hostile against Islam, “It [the Muslim women’s magazine] has turned her into a selfish monster. She is the reason why father will not openly condemn the idiocies of Islam...She has harmed every one of us. She will not allow reason to enter this house (p. 429). Kaukab is portrayed as an irrational character who believes in dogmas. Her point of view about Islam is shown very weak and defeated. In contrast to her, the point of view of Shamas, Jugnu, Charag and Ujala is depicted as rational. It is their point of view which justifies Jugnu and Chanda as lovers.

Aslam continues the systematic project of propagating Western culture which was given legitimate status in order to be accepted as true and natural. Edward Said (1978) reveals the ethnocentric nature of culture, “When we read Renan and Sacy, we readily observe the way cultural generalization had begun to acquire the armor of scientific statement and the ambience of corrective study” (p. 149). The Orient was devalued by valorizing Western cultural values. The native informers, especially the Muslims, are now very enthusiastic in degrading their own culture. The Muslims are now projected as savages for having primitive culture.

### **Conclusion**

Nadeem Aslam wears the garb of the Western culture and paints himself with its colors. He uproots himself from his native culture in order to be planted in the soil of the Western culture. He does so by devaluing his history, traditions and religion (Islam). He misrepresents Islam and its cultural values by depicting Muslims as the contemporary other. Western cultural values are compared with Islam by giving superior status to the West. He encourages the lustful urges of the men and women and justifies their sexual relationship out of wedlock. The practice of divorce among Muslims is mocked in *Maps for the Lost Lovers*. Islamic moral values such as modesty of men and women are also devalued in the novel. Aslam proves himself a loyal native informer but as a native informer he does not represent Muslims and their cultural values.

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Said, E. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books. These native informers are vital in making the case for that moral vengeance in terms of human rights and especially women's rights. (Brown Skin, White Mask, p. 21).

(Ahmad, 2001, p. 193) Islam Today by Akbar Ahmad. The topic, Arranged marriage (pp. 145-146, 154-155)

Islam Today by Akbar Ahmad. The topic, Polygamy (pp. 152)

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Kaukab is a cleric's daughter, born and brought up in a mosque all her life. (p. 58)

They are there to convince the public that invading and bombing and occupying the homelands of others is a good and moral thing (Brown skin, white mask, p. 20)