

Research Article

## Amid the Horrors of War: Nature, Woman, and House in *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam

Nahid Bee

Assistant Professor, Department of English, S.R.D.A.K. P.G. College, Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, India;  
nahidbi0811@gmail.com

Accepted version published on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2025

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17294314>

**Abstract:** Nadeem Aslam is a Pakistani-born British author. He was born on July 11, 1966, in Gujranwala, Pakistan, and fled to Yorkshire, England, at the age of fourteen. He was a student of Biochemistry, but dropped out in the middle to pursue his ultimate interest in a writing career. The art and craft of the novel he learnt with great endeavour. To accomplish himself in the field of writing and secure a place among the renowned authors, he painstakingly copied the complete texts of *Lolita*, *Moby Dick*, *Beloved*, and *As I Lay Dying* to learn minutely the punctuation marks, paragraph setting, and chapter design. He shared this with Amina Yaqin in an interview. The present novel under consideration, *The Wasted Vigil*, portrays war-ridden Afghanistan. The narrative of destruction is prevalent in Afghanistan's landscape. Amid the horrors of war, there are some soothing and sensuous images of Nature's splendid beauty. Similarly, fundamentalism is challenged by the female characters who are considered fragile by the orthodox. Again, the presence of Marcus' house resonates throughout the novel's pages, providing an opportunity for various ideologies and nations to coexist peacefully under its roof without discrimination. The paper aims to contemplate on Nature, Woman, and House and document their presence and importance in the narrative.

**Keywords:** war; nature; woman; house; horrors; fundamentalism

---

**Introduction:**

Nadeem Aslam is a renowned international author. He has authored *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993), *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013), and *The Golden Legends* (2017). He received the Betty Trask Award (1994), Author's Club First Novel Award (1993), Encore Award, Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize (2005), Windham-Campbell Literary Prize (2014), and has been a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature since 2012. The Times rightly writes, "Nadeem Aslam is a master of words and arresting images" (TWV). In the present novel, he explores the themes of violence against women, atrocities of war, identity crisis, the deplorable condition of refugee camps, the naked dance of cruelty in the name of religion, love, loss, and global politics in Afghanistan.

**Review of Previous Literature:**

Sobia Kiran, in her paper "Deterritorialization in the Wasted Vigil" by Nadeem Aslam (2017), explored the minutiae of the war in Afghanistan's backdrop. She investigated the reasons behind the devastation of Afghanistan, focusing on the Russian interests, American politics, Taliban's terror, and political power over the citizens. She interpreted the depth of the women's cruelty and suffering. She also dealt with the previous beauty covering the land, inviting the poets to recite poetry on orange blossoms, the craze of college-going girls in poetry, who would cover the poet's car with lipstick marks. She finally concluded that the hidden greed of Russia, America, and other political powers in Afghanistan's resources was responsible for its devastation.

Eoin Flannery (2013), in his article "Internationalising 9/11: Hope and Redemption in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (2009)" critiques the broader narrative presented by two international authors, one Pakistani-born British author, Nadeem Aslam, and the other, Colum McCann, an Irish author. He delves deep into the moments of hope and redemption and presents the perspectives of displacement, trauma, and the prevalence of terror. Flannery observes the unique style of Aslam in his indirect presentation of 9/11 and various other events of terror and violence, and the relevance of present incidents with historic past giving way to a cycle of bloodshed that never comes to an end.

Jency James (2024), in the article "Exploration of Environmental Consciousness in *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam", captures the glimpses of Nature in her seminal work. She presents various examples from the texts and emphasises the environmental issues scattered throughout the narrative, as well as the horrors of war. The author notices the animated image of Nature that provides hope and consoles the wounded heart. The images also draw the reader's attention to the irreparable loss of Mother Nature, as well as the widespread devastation left by war.

**Nature:**

The novel also delves deep into the presentation of graphic and sensual imagery of Nature's beauty, along with the devastating effects of war on its face. Amid the cruelties inflicted by Soviet soldiers, the American army, and fundamentalists, the narrative finely weaves the thread of hope and sympathy through the characters.

---

Nature is vividly present in every chapter and makes its presence registered in the lives of the characters. The protagonist, Marcus Caldwell, lives in a house near the lake. Large trees surround the house. When Casa gets shelter in Marcus' house, he needs water for ablutions for the prayer and goes to the lake. The animated image of water is presented as: "At the lake he performs his ablutions, the water so still it is as though it has been smoothed by hand (Aslam 211). The smoothness and stillness of water present a contrasting picture of Casa's restless soul, his fear of being caught here in Usha by Nabi Khan and his followers. The novel is set against the backdrop of post 9/11. Though 9/11 is not directly linked in the novel, its symbolic presence resonates throughout the narrative and intensifies the traumatic situations prevalent in Afghanistan. When David tries to convince Dunia, a twenty-two-year-old Afghan female teacher, about the role of the American army to get Afghan civilians rid of the Taliban's cruel regime, she, without hesitation or trepidation, puts forth her views that unveil her consciousness about world politics as well as expose the threads of 9/11 responsible for the devastation of Afghanistan. She argues that:

"The Taliban regime had been in place for years, and no one was particularly bothered about getting rid of it. You are not here because you wanted to destroy the Taliban for us; you are here because you wanted retribution for what happened to you in 2001. I am glad they are gone, but let us not confuse the facts."

(Aslam 374-375).

Once beautiful Afghanistan is now reduced to a terrible landscape full of dead bodies here and there; the death toll of humans is on such a large scale that the vultures, which are meant to consume animal corpses, have developed a taste for human flesh. The atmosphere is permeated with the telltale signs of war's horror. The excerpt echoes the horror of war as follows:

"Even the air of this country has a story to tell about warfare. It is possible here to lift a piece of bread from a plate and, following it 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" (Aslam 59).

Nature is not dumb or neutral in the narrative, but its presence is as alive as that of other characters in the novel. It responds with ultimate honesty to all the phenomena. It is a living entity that witnesses the severe outcomes of the war. The description of the streets in Usha witnesses the terror of war prevailing in the surrounding area. "To visit certain streets was to realise that only the sky remained unchanged there"(Aslam 225).

However, before the arrival of Soviet and American armies in the region, the landscape was filled with the flourishing beauty of Nature. In a nostalgic mood, Marcus Caldwell reminisces about Afghanistan's past, when he married Qatrina and made his home there permanently. He finds himself in the distant past, which was full of prosperity and the beauty of Nature. Nature is profuse in abundance to the people of

the city, and the blossoming occasions were celebrated with great enthusiasm. In Marcus' words:

"The city centre down there is full of citrus trees, this valley being famous for its orange blossom, verse makers from across Afghanistan gathering in Jalalabad in mid-April every year for a Poets' Conference to recite poems dedicated to the blossom"(Aslam 58).

Aslam depicts not only the scars or devastation of war on Nature, but he has also presented Nature as the companion of humanity that knows and shares human feelings accurately. Again and again, we trace Nature sharing human emotions, reflecting the joys and sorrows of the characters. Trees, flowers, birds, lake water, and clouds reflect the intense inner feelings of the characters. David's sorrow is measured as "A sorrow the size of the sky"(Aslam 332). On the same page, the fearful heart of Casa is revealed through the Nature imagery of clouds. He is afraid of being noticed by the painted pictures on the wall. The line reads, "Casa enters the three a.m. darkness of the house, the sky outside full of charred clouds"(Aslam 332).

Mohammed Hanif's review of TWV that appeared in the Independent also confirms this: "[t]he book is beautiful and brutal; butterflies, moths, flowers, gems, paintings, poetry and stone Buddhas keep erupting in the middle of this desolate landscape" (n.p.). Amid the transitory existence of creatures on the earth, the birds' song offers consolation to the hearts of the listeners, particularly the mothers of the dead Soviet soldiers, who are dead and whose bodies are "bitten by dogs and rats"(Aslam 420). Here, Aslam juxtaposes the permanent value of Nature's music as, "A few birds are sitting in the branches overhead. The song is much more powerful than the fragile body of the singer"(Aslam 420). The animated characteristic is noticeable when Marcus, after a long search, finds water at the base of the hill. Mark the reaction of water in his hands: "The water quivers in the curved palm of his hand, as frightened as a small captured lizard"(Aslam 432).

Aslam has coloured the pages of the novel with vivid and sensuous imagery of nature's beauty. Marcus's love for Nature echoes when he observes, "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." (Aslam 58). Though the war has adversely affected the land indenting the very core of the land still the blood-stained surfaces are made to sing the poetry and beauty is drained through Aslam's poetic smooth words." The poetry of these lands is aware of this. 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..." (Aslam 307). Thus, we notice that Aslam has intensively used the graphic imagery of nature, which shares human sensibilities and sometimes appears to lend a shoulder to console the human heart that is extremely restless from the war's brutalities. Nature offers some comfort and provides a ray of hope, allowing us to recreate the possibilities of life amid the ruins.

### Woman:

The other theme to be explored in the paper is the presence of women. The novel sincerely zooms into how the miseries of war have tormented the woman's existence. We have four notable women characters in the novel, namely Qatrina, Zameen, Lara, and Dunia. All these women characters play a vital role in stripping away the façade of foreign politics, revealing the hidden motives of power and control over the region. Fundamentalism is supposed to silence the voice of womanhood, but it is dealt a decisive blow through the character of Duniya, a twenty-two-year-old schoolteacher. The author has intentionally juxtaposed her with Casa, who is brainwashed by fundamentalists and has now taken shelter in Marcus' house. Casa is under the sympathetic care of Marcus and David, and still lacks the courage to reveal his feelings (likes & dislikes) to them. When he sees Dunia at Marcus's, he feels a mix of disturbance and attraction to her. He is puzzled to see that she is bold enough to let her hosts know her feelings so easily. In fact, she is the voice of the new generation arising from the ruins of the war in Afghanistan. When it is time for dinner at Marcus's, "....she told her hosts she would prefer it if they did not drink wine in her presence, saying the idea and smell of it made her nauseous"(Aslam 333). Casa still finds himself immersed in confusion, whether "it really is this easy for someone to let others know of his feelings and thoughts?"(Aslam 333). Her character is replete with liberalism and a forward-looking temperament. She has a futuristic approach and, as a suitable teacher's personality, is aware of world politics and reveals the true face of America in the presence of David, a CIA officer. She puts forth:

"The Taliban regime had been in place for years, and no one was particularly bothered about getting rid of it. You are not here because you wanted to destroy the Taliban for us; you are here because you wanted retribution for what happened to you in 2001. I am glad they are gone, but let us not confuse the facts" (Aslam 374-375).

Another important female character is Zameen. She is the daughter of Marcus and Qatrina. Her name is a symbolic connotation of the devastated land of Afghanistan. She has an extraordinary blood group, so the Soviet soldiers kidnap her to use her as a blood donation machine when required, as her blood matches that of Colonel Rostov, a Russian officer. Her honour is violated by Benedict, a Russian officer, and can be perceived as the violation of Afghanistan's land by the foreigners for their countries' opportunism. Zameen is also a symbol of hope and the epitome of a mother's unconditional affection for her child. She struggles hard and faces the obstacles, and somehow reaches a refugee camp with her child, who is sick. To save her child, "....she needed money to save him...Can you guess, sir, how she obtained the funds? I would rather not say it out loud" (Aslam 180). Zameen is offered a place to live in an apartment with her son, Bihzad, in Peshawar. She reflects her liberal soul and identifies with helping other women who have lost many family members. In her apartment, the celebration of individuality and plurality is visible. Her apartment becomes a haven for women to help themselves economically by doing embroidery work, which is prohibited in the camp. Her bold spirit was inclined to serve these helpless Afghan women. "Her fiercest loyalty had been to these women" (Aslam 179). One of the Afghan women relates to her about the demise of several members of her family, and hearing



it, she feels saddened. She retorts fiercely to David when he asks if this woman would be all right: "We have to be, don't we? Just as long as you Americans and Soviets can play your games over there- nothing else matters!" (Aslam 179).

A significant female character is Qatreena, Zameen's mother. She is a doctor by profession and has a modernistic approach in her views. She is a dedicated painter and paints ninety-nine names of Allah in her unique style. She builds her house, dedicating the five senses of human beings. She also runs a school for young children with her husband at the risk of her life from fundamentalists. To make the women economically independent, the couple established a perfume factory on their premises. Thus, she is an educated lady with liberal thoughts and a heart to help those in need.

Lara, who is the sister of Benedict, a Russian officer. She has come from Russia in search of her brother. She sets an example of her selfless love for her brother and faces the truth of her brother's brutal murder. The narrative thoroughly makes us aware of the powerful presence of these women characters, who are crucial to the advancement of the story and provide insight into the real-life experiences of war-ridden Afghanistan.

#### **Marcus Caldwell's House:**

Marcus Caldwell's home exists in Usha, Afghanistan. The home is a living entity, not just a concrete structure of four walls and a roof. Home in diaspora literature has been a recurrent theme. The home typifies the idea of belonging, memory, identity, loss, and nostalgia. It refers to one's connection to one's homeland, where one finds one's roots deeply embedded in one's native home. This inspires one to grow, while also evoking a nostalgic longing to return to one's homeland. The idea of home is more closely tied to the character's psyche than to the physical presentation of the structure.

In postcolonial literature, home is often defined as fragmented, a space of alienation, a centre of hybridity, connected to memory, and a place where identity is lost. In this context, the present novel is a postcolonial novel, and the effects of postcolonialism are evident. Marcus' home remains a focal point of discussion from beginning to end. "The house was built by an old master calligrapher and painted in the last years of the nineteenth century...the six-roomed building...each of the first five rooms was dedicated to one of the five senses" (Aslam 12), like the paintings dedicated to the five senses, the home shelters the multiplicity of ideas, race, nationality, and age. Marcus himself is a British citizen who chooses to stay here permanently after marrying Qatrina. David is an American CIA agent who is sheltered under its roof. Lara is a Russian widow who arrives to search for her lost brother Benedict, a Russian soldier lost in Afghanistan, never to find out. Casa is another character who has a link with Taliban fighters after he is brainwashed. The last one in this chain is Dunia, a twenty-two-year-old teacher. All these characters represent pluralism and thrive in a liberal atmosphere at home. The care home provides to everyone is remarkable. Here, no one is discriminated against or underestimated. Even the garden attached to the house is used for patients when a larger space is required for a large number of them. Here, Casa gets treated with sympathy, love, and care without analysing his background. Lara, a

Russian, gets shelter and perfect hospitality here, even though Russian soldiers captured Marcus' daughter. The presence of Marcus' house is so resonant that Khan also notes, "Marcus's house, anthropomorphically depicted, serves to unite the seemingly disconnected cast of *The Wasted Vigil*, and is in keeping with Aslam's own transnational position as a writer" (Aslam 112). The interaction between characters contrasts with the oppressive atmosphere outside the house. It serves as a meeting point for diverse nationalities, regions, religions, genders, and languages. Unlike anywhere in Afghanistan, but here, Dunia easily expresses her opinion to the hosts, whether it concerns alcohol, international politics, or the personal gains of Americans. The unmistakable existence of the house is highlighted beautifully: "The house stands on the edge of a small lake, and though damaged in the wars, it still conveys the impression of being finely carved, the impression of being weightlessness" (Aslam 10). Flannery's opinion about the house holds significance, "Akin to the country itself, Marcus's house by the lake becomes an international crossroads, a global meeting point that is, variously, infused with mistrust, threat, and community" (n.p). Thus, the above analysis clarifies the role and importance of the house in the novel.

### Conclusion:

The discussion above presents the different dimensions of war. Nature, woman, and Marcus' house have their stories to say amid all the destruction. The effects of war have an echo that resonates distinctly in the atmosphere. Nature's wounds, as well as her power to lend a hand to empathise with human beings, are unmistakable. The study analyses the presence and relevance of Nature, Woman, and Marcus' House in the narrative. The present study contributes to a deeper understanding of the enduring significance of Nature, Woman, and Marcus' House in shaping the narrative and voicing the reality of the war on terror, as well as the power dynamics, political interests, and the plight of women as a soft target of war. It also attempts to shed light on the more profound truths of survival amidst the horrors of war, thus rekindling the ray of hope.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

### Works cited

Aslam, Nadeem. *The Wasted Vigil*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2009.

Flannery, Eoin. "Internationalising 9/11: Hope and Redemption in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (2009)". *English: Journal of the English Association*, vol.62, no. 238, Sept 2013, pp.294–315, doi:10.1093/English/eft010.

Hanif, Mohammed. "The Wasted Vigil, by Nadeem Aslam." *Independent*, 11 Sept. 2008, [www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-wasted-vigil-by-nadeem-aslam-5469154.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-wasted-vigil-by-nadeem-aslam-5469154.html).

James, Jency. "Exploration of Environmental Consciousness in *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam". *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, vol.11, no. 3, Mar. 2024.

Kara, Gulsevin Guleryuz. *Spatial Politics in Nadeem Aslam's The Wasted Vigil and The Blind Man's Garden*. M.A. thesis, *Middle East Technical University*, Sept. 2018.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s). Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.