

Gender Diaspora: Suffering of Women in Nadeem Aslam's Novels

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Abstract

This research attempts to establish through the episteme of feminism a correlation between the gender-based phenomenon of power and how it results in discrimination, displacement and oppression of women. The selected novels by Nadeem Aslam, *Season of the Rainbirds*, *Maps for Lost Lovers*, and *The Wasted Vigil* encompass themes of female exploitation, othering and patriarchal hegemony, analyzed through global gendered discriminative power dynamics. This study intends to analyze the concerns, which affect women through the trajectories of gendered power. It aims to delineate the conflicts faced by women in androcentric cultures at the micro and macro levels to determine how power affects the lives of women.

Keywords: androcentric, gender discrimination, trajectory of power, othering, oppression.

This essay will explore through the lens of feminism the phenomenon of power exercised through gendered use and how it results in the silencing, displacement, oppression, sex discrimination and inequality of women. Displacement in this paper's context is used as a symbol of physical, emotional and mental upheaval. It also relates the colonial legacy of authority to the postcolonial societies, which is used as power to oppress women.

Before exploring the dynamics of power invested in male dominated patriarchal societies it would be proper to define the term. According to Dahl (210) power is an important social phenomenon. Power can be defined in terms of a relation of authority with people. In the context of the selected texts the reference of power is the gendered concept of the power holder. The male in the postcolonial context is analogous to the white man with his related power apparatuses in Imperialism/Colonialism. Because the colonial ruler was the white male and the native had to submit to the commands of the colonialist, his own suppressed manhood resulted in aggression. Fanon states that we should see colonialism as straightforward oppression, domination and violence only, to which the male especially were subjected. (92) Consequently the postcolonial male has assumed the position of perpetrator and subjugator.

The social victims of power in the third world postcolonial societies are women. They are subjected to cultural/ patriarchal hegemony, social oppression and persecution in many ways. Mohanty in *Feminism without Borders* (2003, P.17) writes about postcolonial third world feminism and the formulation of feminist concerns. According to Mohanty, they are not just gender based, but cultural, geographical and historical based. The significance of the effects of colonialism which symbolize authority and

power in the south Asian context, and the consequent setting up of postcolonial societies created through political strife, war, ideological conflicts, partition and migration, have resulted in women being social, physical and mental subjects of the trajectories of power. The infliction of suffering through discrimination against women is much visible as a gendered act in Aslam's novels *Season of the Rainbirds*, *Maps for Lost Lovers* and *The Wasted Vigil*.

The use of gendered power in the South Asian region has resulted from politico-religious reasons too. The execution of force and power by extremist, mostly male and the condition of strife inside Afghanistan has resulted in displacement, symbolic of exclusion and alienation in *The Wasted Vigil*. Women are the main victims of the phenomenon of power. Post colonial feminist theorist have given new dimensions to this phenomenon as they examine and explore the reasons and causes that lead to the positioning of women as subjects of power, hegemonized and exploited, displaced and marginalized.

The purpose of this paper is to see through the episteme of feminism that how feminist concerns emerge from women being subjected to the gendered use of power in the novels *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993) and *The Wasted Vigil* (2008). Also to explore how women are positioned as marginalized and persecuted entities through gender discrimination in the particular context of displacement and diaspora in *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004). Seen through global perspective, the adjustment of women in the new social forms that are constructed after the above displacements is subject to questions of integration and assimilation as Brah has pointed out in *Cartographies of Diaspora*

(49) They become doubly displaced and diasporic, being denied recognition and self-actualization as individuals in these new social forms that they adopt as portrayed in the novels under discussion. The predicament of women as subjects of power in the postcolonial patriarchal societies disturbs Aslam. He perceives gendered significations of power through persecution and patriarchal hegemony in the societies, as portrayed in the texts under discussion. This creates physical, psychological and social dilemmas for women, and in the case of diasporic women results in isolation and marginalization.

The choice of the selected novels presents an interesting case study of the gendered use of power. The *Maps for Lost Lovers* represents British multicultural society and its female diasporic characters with a feminist perspective of their displacement, exclusion and suffering. *Season of the Rainbirds* situated in Pakistan portrays physical and social marginalization and persecution of women, through feudal hegemonies, which is a reconstruction of colonial gendered power. In this context feudal and patriarchal hegemonies have given rise to many forms of ethnic ostracization, cultural persecution and social discrimination. Use of force and power over women is aimed at their silencing creating socially and emotionally exploited, displaced, diasporic identities within the community. Barlas (2002. p.12) points out that patriarchy is a “politics of sexual differentiation”. Elizabeth Massih faces not only gender discrimination; she is also socially exposed to marginalization and ethnic segregation under the powerful influence of cultural bias, hence becoming a displaced entity as a “chodhi.” (P.39) Historical and cultural practices impact upon women's lives, according to their geographical and socio cultural, ethnic norms. Elizabeth Massih belonging from the outskirts of the

towns' poor dwelling represents how the socially isolated and disdained live on the peripheries of society, their existence marginalized, displaced and diasporic in their own home place. Mujeeb Ali assuming his position of hegemonic patriarchal power pushes past her into the house uninvited (p.103) "his colossus form" overshadowing her slender form, examining her openly from head to toe. His derisive "Are you the maid", exposes his scorn for her as a low class servant, and the vestiges of power he holds are evident from his, and "Of course you aren't." His intimidating, "Don't you have a stole?" explicates not only the cultural demand of covering one's head before a stranger, but also signifies the demand for show of respect to a man holding a position of power in the society. (p.104) Elizabeth being dragged and mauled in the streets by men for her affair with DC Azhar represents the power of socio-cultural and religio-political forces in an endocentric society.

Zebun an ex prostitute socially stigmatized is a marginalized female character that suffers ostracism due to social taboos and cultural censure engineered by men in *Season of the Rainbirds*. She has a life which contrasts to Mohanty's feminist vision of a world where women with men are free to choose whom they love, whom they set up house with, a creative life where pleasure rather than just duty and drudgery are the choices. Where women, she says, are free to exercise their right of free and imaginative exploration of mind. (2003, p.3)

The worst affected by the disturbing phenomenon of power as portrayed by Nadeem Aslam are women. *The Wasted Vigil* minutely explores through the lens of feminism, excesses of power against women in Afghanistan, as a gendered act causing

displacement on physical and emotional levels. Women there are not only petty subjects of a retrogressive hegemonic regime; they are abject targets of extremist religio-political macho forces. They are physically and emotionally subjected to excesses of power, conceived by fundamentalist as unholy symbols of evil. "During the Taliban era if a woman went to the market and showed an inch of flesh, she would have been flogged or raped" Amnesty International (2003). Social and emotional displacement has resulted in psychological displacement too, as in the case of Qatrina:

She had to wear the burka while they were killing her. Afterwards while she lay on the ground, a man had gathered the hem of the burka and tied it into a knot and dragged her away as he would a bundle, and he grinned at his own ingenuity the while, as did the spectators. Blood was draining steadily out of the embroidered eye grille. (*WV*.p.135)

The displacement consciousness is more than active in the case of women. Firstly as cultural aliens, marginalized and unadjusted. Secondly when their own community socially rejects their claims for recognition as identities and ostracizes them for any act considered aberrant against their own cultural or religious norms as in the case of Qatrina, Dunya and Zameen in *The Wasted Vigil*. Cultural and religious forces sometimes create macho/gendered hegemony, making women displaced identities like the women in *Maps*, *Seasons* and *Wasted Vigil*.

Mohanty argued that:

[B]eing a woman has political consequences in the world we live in; that there can be unjust and unfair effects on women depending on our

economic and social marginality or/privilege. It would require recognizing that sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism underlie and fuel social and political institutions of rule and thus often lead to hatred of women and supposedly justified violence against women (*Feminism 3*).

These problems continue to plague south Asian women in the multicultural west also, where their being positioned as part of the diaspora community creates further complexities as citizens of a secular, multicultural, progressive society of which they are denied participation by their retrogressive males. In the context of the *Maps* honor killings depicted in the text can be quoted as examples.

The gendered perspective of feminism shows how female oppression a tradition from the patriarchal colonial times and feudal hegemonies continue to be practiced in the present postcolonial era, leading to the fragmentation of women on different levels. According to Mohanty in *Feminism without Borders* (61), the colonizers created radically and sexually sequestered class systems, which aided their ruling process. They patronized hegemonic masculinities, which replicated the state rule, transforming existing patriarchies and caste /class based hierarchies. These hegemonic hierarchies not only continue to work in postcolonial societies, but also in societies which profess claims of multiculturalists' liberation and assimilation in the contemporary hegemonies of the west. The status of diaspora women especially as a result of forced displacement engendered by male execution of power, poses singular problems of assimilation. Third world women's problems become complex, as most of them belong from semi educated poor working class backgrounds. Mohanty contends in *Third World Women and the*

Politics of Feminism (18) that “Colonization without exception implies a relationship of structural domination and a suppression which is often violent.” Women in postcolonial societies have historically been subjects of power and authority, of the colonized male. "Suffering negation of identity" as individuals they continue to be denied a voice. It has to be understood that because colonized men were rendered voiceless and powerless in the public sphere, they exercised their suppressed malehood on the women at home intensifying patriarchal hegemony in the colonized lands. As Loomba puts it in *Colonialism/Post colonialism* (168) “they seized upon the home and the woman as emblems of their culture and nationality. The outside world could be all westernized but the domestic sphere retained its cultural purity.”

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (112) Fanon suggests that women like the colonized men become split subjects in patriarchal societies. Like colonized subjects who are watched upon by the colonizer, they are conscious of being watched by men. But what is important to understand is that “the ideology and practices of male domination are historically, geographically and culturally variable” according to Loomba (24.) Thus it is not just colonialism but the difference in the historical and cultural practices that impact upon women's lives, according to their geographical and socio cultural norms. The women of south Asian origin have a totally different narrative of the dynamics of power through colonial and then postcolonial hegemony. As it is pointed out by Mohanty (64) “[t]he homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological and anthropological universals---but on the historically specific material reality of groups of women.” Their mental makeup and emotional state is subjected to the pressures from

their own society too, which this paper has tried to trace out. The female characters in the selected novels are representative of the south Asian hegemonized voiceless women. The trauma of homelessness, the awkwardness of social and cultural imperatives and impositions, taboos and economic constraints become doubly pertinent for diasporic women who live a life of double oppression; first as second-rate citizens and then as diasporic entities denied freedom from male oppression.

Pilcher and Whelehan in *Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (87) present a gendered perception of the status of women. They state that feminism and multiculturalism can be posited as oppositional in the context of androcentric cultures as women are victimized by the androcentric modes of culture. Even under the umbrella of multiculturalism they continue to negate the very ideals of equality, tolerant co-existence, respect and regard for ethnicity and minority. Okin in *The Return of Feminist Liberalism* (3) attributes these problems to unequal structures of society and practices of the family life, as well as the parallel nonexistent empowerment of women in relation to men in the public and private spheres. All possible efforts are made to silence female expressiveness either by their native community, or being always positioned as an outsider, even in the very household they are married into.

The third world woman exists as the non visible other half of the subject “Other” in the colonial discourse. Viewed as the most non-affective part of the colonial world she had no role to play in a society fraught with religious, ideological, socio political imperatives exercised by patriarchal pressures. Her journey to the consciousness of the self is thwarted by imperatives of culture, religion and tradition whether she lives in

her native land or as a diasporic inhabitant of the west. This view of female oppression and patriarchal hegemony symbolizing power is presented in the texts under discussion. Women are the most obvious victims of the whole scenario. Chanda, Suraya, Mahjabin and Kaukab in the *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Asghari, Zebun, Elizabeth Massih and Suraya in the *Seasons of the Rainbirds* and Qatrina, Zameen, Dunya and Laura in *The Wasted Vigil*, all are troubled through the dynamics of power wielded through the assuming of power by the male member in the society. Masculinity in the androcentric culture means that a man has to show his egoism in his relationship with woman; he must be domineering, hostile, overpowering and brutal. Cruelty on women through exercise of power is an exact reflection of this type of manliness. Mahjabin's husband in the *Maps for Lost Lovers* is an example of a person who prefers to resort to exercise of power through physical and mental torture in his relationship with his wife. These types leave a significantly negative impression on women's lives and establish a link between the way violence in the public sphere comes to be transferred into the private sphere as explicated by Talbot (110).

In the *Maps* the diasporic immigrants are torn between the East and West, struggling to retain their sanity, to retain some normalcy in their strained lives as the marginalized other. The pressure keeps on mounting on the female displaced characters, as they are forced to be recipients of all those frustrations that their men have to face as immigrants from a colonized society. Thus we see that Chanda's murder was a result more of cultural imperatives rather than religious ones, the brothers notwithstanding the insult and embarrassment loaded upon them by their sister's act of living in sin with

Jugnu had to resort to the culturally right thing to do. They had tried to find out ways to escape the social censure. When both her marriages in Pakistan had failed she had come back to England. Chanda had been asked by her brothers and father to consider wearing an all-enveloping burqa. Her brothers' professed awkwardness and felt insulted as people looked at her on street corners; the look in those people's eyes reducing them to shame. To retrieve their honor in their cultural context, killing was a must! Thus they took upon themselves to wield the power of male ego in the form of murder. (P.176)

The diasporic men replicate the colonial white in their stance and appearance. But contrarily enforce embargos on their females, oppressing them to the point of murdering them like Chanda, who is a victim of honor killing exercised by patriarchal and family force. This is their way of showing power, their way of telling the women not to amalgamate in western ways creating an ambivalent maladjusted existence for them forever. Hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (34) observes that there are divisions created among women based on race, religion, culture, nationality, region, sexual orientation and language. Spivak (56) in her profound argument in *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers* states that the route to the attainment of self-realization and development by these women is intertwined with re-negotiation and understanding of those diverse forces which might be cultural or economic and play a pertinent role in shaping and limiting their experience in their peculiar contexts.

Immigration by people to the land of the colonizer, for greener pastures has made them displaced identities. Previously ethnic and national differences formed the basis of communities, in Britain, which according to Karla (11) "have shifted to religious

and cultural differences". The gendered view of the scenario is that Muslim women are the worst victims of this dictum as they are enjoined to stay away from liberalism and individualism, in their native land and also as displaced and diasporic beings. It is important to trace how as Karla observes that one of the most pertinent changes that has occurred in the Muslim diaspora is a shift from National to religious identification, which gives a clue to the pressures Muslim diasporic women face.

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