Refracting Post-9/11 Terror: Trauma and Empathy in Nadeem Aslam's Postcolonial Fiction

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On 8 May 2019, an explosion, claimed by a terrorist organization belonging to the Pakistani Taliban, killed nine people outside the shrine of Data Darbar in Lahore, Punjab. The holy place, which was built in the eleventh century, holds the remains of a much-worshipped Muslim saint, Abul Hassan Ali Hajveri (1009-1077), a mystic and a preacher who is considered the father of Sufism in the Islamic world. The act was only one of the most recent intimidations in a long-standing campaign of terror in the area. In July 2010, two suicide bombers had killed fifty and injured approximately two hundred visitors to the Sufi shrine. Sufis represent the mystical side of Islam and, like other minorities, tend to be targeted by extremists because of the perceived unorthodoxy in their practice of Islamic principles. As these attacks showcase, the reductive cultural logic of the "us and them" binary – which was championed by the political rhetoric of the George W. Bush administration following the attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 9/11 – can be seen in the intolerance and disorder which has made post-9/11 violence in Pakistan seem so prevalent. As we confront fears of resurgent global terrorism, like the recent attacks in France, Austria and Pakistan, hesitations, ambivalence and complexities still present a challenge to the simple equation of Islam with terror. This basic association, as Sankaran Krishna argues, is based on feelings of "religious fundamentalism," a passe-partout term denoting "the refusal of Americans to listen to the outrage of Muslims everywhere about what is happening to civilians in places like Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan" (151). As we approach the twentieth anniversary of 9/11, literary writing has interrogated the rhetoric of stark binaries, engaging with the complex reality of a world where no pure binaries seem to remain.

If 9/11 has marked a turning point in human history, several Anglophone novels have offered readers a nuanced critique of global suspicion and anti-Muslim prejudice. In this respect, my article explores Nadeem Aslam's most recent fiction that makes the post-9/11 experience its central concern. Among postcolonial authors engaging with terror after 9/11, the British Pakistani author's narratives seek to depict the wide communal nature of war, offering a meditation on the

theme of loss between the individual and the collective. My working hypothesis is that Aslam's latest novels, *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) and *The Golden Legend* (2017), hinge around a mechanism of duality which calls into question the stereotypical post-9/11 discourses, thus challenging essentialist definitions of identity and, specifically, the Western vision of (male) Pakistani people as terrorists. In Aslam's novels, the reader may witness a proliferation of violence percolating through the borders of public and private spheres. Using Gayatri Spivak's words, the parallel between individual and collective interests invites the reader "to imagine our opponent as a human being" (93), thus providing an ethical response to the "us and them" binary which, as Judith Butler explains, places emphasis on an "invidious distinction between civilization (our own) and barbarism (now coded as 'Islam' itself)" (*Precarious Lives* 2). In accordance with Spivak's stance on terrorism, that it has brought on what she defines as "an interruption of the epistemological" (83), Aslam's novels fit Clara Cilano's description of contemporary Pakistani fiction as performing an epistemological breach in its effort "to construct an ethical moment, a repositioning in which the primary other of the US's 'War on Terror,' the Muslim male, becomes a self" ("Manipulative Fictions" 202). The manipulative force that animates Aslam's novels analysed here is reflected in certain narrative solutions, such as shifting focalization, narrative destabilizations and temporal disarray, that can disorientate readers, allowing them to experience a web of prejudices, secrets and perspectives. More importantly, this ethical repositioning is able to redirect the reader's initial assumptions, highlighting historical and cultural elements of continuity between past and present.

In Aslam's fiction, cultural crossroads abound owing to his diasporic background. Born to Pakistani parents in 1966, Aslam migrated with his family to the United Kingdom in the early 1980s, in the wake of President Zia-ul-Haq's persecution of communist sympathizers. Aslam's first novel, *Season of Rainbirds* (1993), winner of the Author's Club First Novel Award, is a semi-autobiographical account of human tragedies set in rural Pakistan during Zia-ul-Haq's era. With the publication of *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), the British Pakistani novelist shifts his literary focus to the tribulations of Pakistani immigrants to the United Kingdom, while his third novel, *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), depicts life in Afghanistan after 9/11 as Russian and American governmental intrusions push the Asian country towards the Taliban regime. *The Blind Man's Garden* extends the exploration of Islamophobia and, similarly, the critique of Islamic fundamentalism already featured in *The Wasted Vigil*, chronicling the brutality of terror along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In his latest novel, *The Golden Legend*, Aslam returns to his homeland, describing the frightening condition of religious intolerance, political corruption, social disorder and illiteracy that affect present-day

Pakistan. Published seventy years after the birth of his native country, *The Golden Legend* investigates, as the author himself noted in an interview to *Literary Hub* (2017), "the politics of the East and the West and the task of trying to imagine a global politics in our present time" (Zakaria). By teasing apart families, identities and cultural divisions, Aslam's prose can be said to portray the contradictions of modern Pakistan as it confronts the rise of quotidian and repeated violence.

Starting from this premise, what I want to contend here is that a logic of duality animates the negotiations between opposite poles, between "self" and "other," "us" and "them." By embracing human vulnerability and by establishing empathic connections, Aslam's novels manifest an idea of otherness that resists stereotypes and sameness, thus rebutting the totalizing claims of the rhetoric of terror. In *The Blind Man's Garden* and *The Golden Legend*, terror is not understood as ahistorical or, to borrow Elleke Boehmer's words, as a savage "irruption of the primitive" ("Postcolonial Writing" 147) into modernity. Rather, my essay shares Boehmer's conceptualization of terror as a manifestation of "an anti-colonial modernity … by the colonized to *seize hold*[1] of technical mastery and control in a situation, that of colonialism, where modernity is routinely introduced in violent forms" (147; emphasis in the original). If terror then charts the prolongation of colonialism in modernity, it does so by disrupting chronological linearity and, in certain respects, postcolonial writing does epitomize this exploration of temporal strata in an effort to go beyond terror or, as Boehmer explains, by providing "an understanding of what is at stake subjectively and sequentially for the different parties involved when terrorism takes place" (149). I would then argue that Aslam's novels can be said to challenge the dominant US-centric perspective that conflates Islam and immigration with terrorism. Considering the formal features of the narratives, such as shifting focalization, narrative gaps, the intricate plotlines where Islamic culture and Islamophobia overlap and the temporal structure as it straddles past and present, I wish to illustrate how these novels favor a capacity to empathize with the "other." Moreover, I will contend that Aslam's fusion of various temporal strata, through which the postcolonial novel "undoes or unfolds the compression of time" (Boehmer, *Postcolonial Poetics* 73), promotes a critical understanding of the long conflictual history of Pakistan. By incorporating a disarrayed temporality to narrate the uneasy relationships between East and West, Aslam's fiction brings the encounter between "self" and "other" to the foreground, in an echo of Emmanuel Levinas' investigation of the "face to face" (79-80) encounter. Whereas temporal disjunctions problematize empathic responses, emphasizing a continuity among colonialism, neo-imperialism and fundamentalism, they also animate a dialogic

structure between self and other, a dual perspective through which the borders between grievability and ungrievability, victim and victimizer, are eventually blurred and refracted.

(Un)Grievable Lives: Frames of Trauma and Empathy

The Blind Man's Garden and *The Golden Legend* fit the literary debate around 9/11 and its aftermath by questioning the mechanism of trauma studies and thus providing a vision of Pakistan that, to use Spivak's words, "disrupts confidence in consciousness-raising" (87). In both novels, Aslam interrogates the traumatic consequences of 9/11 and its devastating impact on the local Muslim community. Images of violence, vulnerability and loss impinge on both novels, conveying a vision of contemporary Pakistan as a place where trauma is persistent. Not only do Aslam's novels thematize wounds and grief, they also elicit feelings of empathy and solidarity by soliciting the reader's response through empathizing strategies which can be said to favor a better understanding of terrorism and its sources or, in Robert Eaglestone's words, "to get to grips with what is outside their [the Western] world-view" (367). *The Blind Man's Garden* and *The Golden Legend* therefore intervene in the debate concerning literary representations of terror and grief in the post-9/11 novel by using traumatic pain as a basis for transcultural solidarity.

According to Richard Gray, early cultural responses to the catastrophic events of 9/11 have been concerned with pervasive domestication, showing a certain blindness to the global meaning of such a major watershed. In an essay provocatively titled "Open Doors, Closed Minds" (2009), Gray denounces the tendency in such novels as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) to assimilate "the unfamiliar into familiar structures" (Gray 134), thereby lamenting the excessive use of trauma studies as a key for interpreting the significance of the event. While the perspective of trauma theory can provide a means for getting to grips with the immediate shocking effects of 9/11, what Gray proposes is the need to go beyond the logic of trauma. In response to Gray's article, Michael Rothberg (2009) calls for a type of fiction that reflects "the prosthetic reach of that [the American] empire into other worlds" (153), which might reduce the alleged "failure of imagination" of domestic trauma narratives. The limitations that both Gray and Rothberg recognize in the literary representations of 9/11 have gradually been challenged by the growing corpus of what is defined as the "post-9/11 novel" and, in certain respects, Aslam's fiction represents a response to the need to engage with "a vivid interest in the human impact of the War on Terror on diasporic communities and in the larger implications of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq" (Banita 56). Rather than isolating narrative strands about "self" and "other,' Aslam's novels struggle to reconcile this collision, revealing a shared

sense of grief and trauma and thus aligning themselves with the tenets of narrative ethics through the promotion of empathic connections.

To do so, Aslam resorts to an omniscient extradiegetic narrator to maintain the coherence of the various storylines, while the use of an internal shifting focalization invites the reader to share the characters' experiences from inside, thus amplifying the contradictions between fanaticism and solidarity, vulnerability and empathy. In *The Blind Man's Garden*, wounds appear on the very first page and, as the external narrator observes, they "are said to emit light under certain conditions – touch them and the brightness will stay on the hands" (*The Blind Man's Garden* 5). This novel opens with an elegiac lamentation: the first chapter, significantly titled "Footnotes to Defeat," introduces the reader to a story of grief and redemption. Set in October 2001, in the small rural Pakistani town of Heer, close to the Afghan border, while "buildings, orchards and hills of Afghanistan … are being torn apart by bombs and fire-shells" (6), the story features two foster-brothers, Jeo and Mikal, who volunteer to move to Afghanistan to look after the wounded civilians of the "War on Terror." Jeo, who is a medical student, is animated by a deep feeling of care for the most vulnerable. Empathic fusion is a distinctive feature of this character and, owing to his helping profession, Jeo does evoke the category of the "empath" that, as Susanne Keen explains, "cannot help receiving and feeling the sensations of those around" (10).

In many respects, Jeo appears as the perfect antithesis of the stereotypical image of the Muslim male as a criminal, epitomizing instead the vulnerable side of the Pakistani population. However, the young boy's voluntaristic spirit clashes with the hard reality of the conflict: Jeo is captured by a Taliban militant force and eventually killed. His sacrifice generates a set of "footnotes" to grief: Jeo leaves his newly wed wife Naheed pregnant, while his widowed father, Rohan, is unable to come to terms with his only son's death. Rohan, the eponymous blind man of Aslam's novel, gradually turns blind, thus experiencing serious physical and mental consequences. And yet, despite these grievous losses, the reader is also reminded that embracing wounds is a common human condition and that, maybe, "healing had existed before wounds and bodies were created to be its recipient" (*The Blind Man's Garden* 31). This insistence on wounds and grievances raises crucial questions about whose life is grievable, thus appealing also to readers' empathy and to their sense of responsibility towards the "other." Whereas Jeo's family mourns his death, they also experience violence and humiliation within the very context of the Pakistani community. If the divide between East and West is "too great, too final" (441), divisions still mark the Pakistani territory, with the Taliban introducing an authoritarian and patriarchal regime that seems to replicate Western neo-imperialism. While pain and loss prevail, intolerance and barbarity turn the country into a land

of exploitation or, as Mikal states, "a land of savage attacks" (214) where bribes, corruption, pollution and dishonesty force people to emigrate. By changing the narrative perspective and by using varying focalization, Aslam incites the reader to engage with the vulnerability of the Pakistani community, thus resorting to a narrative strategy that allows for the emergence of a dual perspective.

Indeed, varying focalization and narrative gaps contribute to what Dominik LaCapra calls "empathic unsettlement," which he sees as an invitation to the readers to put themselves "in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place" (78). Naheed, for instance, not only grieves Jeo's loss, but also Mikal's disappearance, the two having been secret lovers before her marriage to Jeo. Naheed's intense sorrow is then complicated by her romantic relationship with Mikal and their infatuation is intertwined with her husband's death. Her mourning is also challenged by the strict rules of Islam which do not allow her to visit the graveyard where Jeo's corpse is buried. In spite of the prohibition, Naheed visits Jeo's tomb with her mother Tara and Jeo's sister Yasmin. Here, the women discover that the Taliban have set new rules which intensify the sense of cultural alienation in the country. This is suggested, for instance, in the ferocious words addressed to Naheed: "'It's because of people like you … that Islam has been brought so low. Filthy, disgusting, repulsive infidels are attacking Muslim countries with impunity'" (*The Blind Man's Garden* 106). A congregation of women gathered outside the graveyard rebukes Naheed for not wearing her veil. The very same hostile words are repeated in a later scene when Yasmin and Tara return to the graveyard: while some tombs are engulfed in flames, a group of men belonging to a militant organization, significantly called "Arden Spirit," block Tara and Yasmin and, as Tara comments, "[w]hat strange times are these … when Muslims must fear other Muslims" (293). What Aslam is possibly hinting at here is that an intense feeling of cultural displacement arises within the Muslim community, before pervading the binary logic of "us and them." Grievability, therefore, manifests itself in contradictory forms, disclosing a porous boundary between "self" and "other." The intersection of subjective practices and public rules of mourning produces distances even within the Pakistani community, leading to unpredictable effects. In Naheed's case, the contrast between private and public impinges on her personality, recalling the tragic figure of Antigone that, as Butler argues, symbolizes the boundary between public grieving and respect for the law (*Frames of War* 39). In Butler's terms, "the boundary is a function of the relation, a brokering of difference, a negotiation in which I am bound to you in my separateness" (44), thus suggesting a connection between self and other. Like Antigone, Naheed crosses this boundary, breaks the law and must eventually atone for the sin of

having seen Jeo's corpse because, as the narrator claims, according to Islamic teachings, a wife "becomes a stranger to her husband and must not lay eyes on him" (*The Blind Man's Garden* 107).

Despite the wounds manifesting in the country, media portrayals of the disastrous consequences of the "War on Terror" chime with Butler's understanding of the narrative framing strategies used in times of war. As the American philosopher argues, the public recognition of trauma under war circumstances can be a source of differentiation among victims, because media representations are "cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence" (*Frames of War* 1). In *The Blind Man's Garden*, this is illustrated, for instance, in the Taliban propaganda that encourages local people to join the jihad. Vans drive through the roads of Heer, with loudspeakers announcing that "[h]undred of thousands of poor defenceless Afghanistanis have been murdered by the Americans in cold blood. No one tells you about it" (*The Blind Man's Garden* 113) and that "hundreds of thousands of American soldiers have been killed by the brave Muslim fighters. No one tells you about those either" (114). This is how the war in Afghanistan is framed by the Pakistani Taliban: the repetition of "no one tells you about" entails a specific figuration of the war as a struggle between good (the brave Muslims) and evil (the American invaders), thus evoking Butler's words on frames of war as being "modes of military conduct" (*Frames of War* 29). A paradoxical emotional atmosphere does emerge here, with the cultural construction of the Taliban propaganda manipulating the empathic responses of Pakistani people: the grievability of human life is predicated upon frames that act as "operations of power" (1) because they are instrumental in delimiting what can be recognized as "life." While the framing structure that Butler describes is imbued with the Western rhetoric of the "us and them" binary, by expanding her analysis, one can infer the global-scale effect of framing, even from the perspective of the Taliban. The Taliban propaganda seems to amplify the ambivalent attitudes of a country where every day there is news that a woman is "killed with bullet or razor or rope, drowned or strangled with her own veil, buried alive or burned alive, poisoned or suffocated" (*The Blind Man's Garden* 128), even in the name of Allah. Again, this continuous interface between perspectives shows that violence and terror are not simply the products of 9/11; rather, they are phenomena with a long and complex history.

In a similar vein to *The Blind Man's Garden*, wounds and grievability reverberate throughout Aslam's latest novel. *The Golden Legend* is not a tale harking back to a mythical golden age, as the title might suggest; rather, it is an accurate portrait of present-day Pakistan caught in the throes of religious conflicts, terrorist operations and social tensions. This novel opens with the death of a central character:

Massud, a Pakistani architect, is accidentally killed during a terrorist attack by an American spy while he is engaged, with his wife Nargis, in the translocation of precious books from an old to a new library in the fictional city of Zamana. Divided in eight sections, *The Golden Legend* uses a third-person extradiegetic narrator to knit together a wide range of materializations of grief which ultimately arouse empathic responses. The reader is prompted to empathize with various manifestations of collective trauma as the novel traces the exposure to wounds and vulnerability in many characters.

In Nargis' case, for instance, individual and collective vulnerability converge. In the aftermath of Massud's death, Nargis' mourning is complicated by the global scale of violence: a soldier-spy from a Pakistani military governmental agency wants Nargis to publicly pardon her husband's killer. Behind this apparent act of compassion lie the geopolitical interests between Pakistan and the United States. To cover up the incident, the American government claims that the murderer is a diplomat, offering money and American citizenship to the victims of the terroristic act. This means, as the external narrator notes, that under Sharia Law in modern Pakistan "a killer could pay the relatives of his victim 'blood money' and walk away a free man" (*The Golden Legend* 228). After her husband's death, however, not only is Nargis forced to work through the bruises on her body caused by the Pakistani spy's assault, but she also undertakes the delicate task of stitching back together the pages of a book, *That They Might Know Each Other*, that was mutilated in the attack. The precious manuscript is a legacy of her husband since it was written by Massud's father and, as the title indicates, it explores how "disparate events in the history of the world had influenced each other" (17), revealing points of convergence among cultures and religions. Likewise, the tragic destiny of Pakistan looms large in the lives of the other characters of the novel: in their subplots Aslam creates, as is usual in his fiction, a choric perspective that expands and connects the various forms of trauma and vulnerability.

In Helen's storyline, for instance, the reader is invited to envisage the possibility of linking "self" and "other," thus favoring emotional contagion. The young woman is the daughter of two Christian servants who used to work in Nargis and Massud's household. While Helen's mother, Grace, has been murdered, her father, Lily, is persecuted for his religious faith by radical Muslims. Helen, whom Nargis and Massud bring up as their own child, is a victim of the climate of religious intolerance dominating Pakistan: gradually, the reader discovers that her mother's murderer has been released "as a reward for having memorised the entire Koran" (10). The suffering the country witnesses is hence problematized by the tensions that emerge among various cultural perspectives. Thus, while the novel is replete with evocations of Muslims being tormented, Aslam also recognizes

the pain of the "other," like the Christians persecuted by Muslims, thereby suggesting that cross-cultural empathy in traumatic contexts is more complex that it might appear.

For the reader of *The Golden Legend*, the complex entanglement of private and public spheres and the juxtaposition of religious divergences lead to instances of what Keen calls "character identification." Among the narrative solutions that allow for character identification, Keen discusses the naming of characters. Allegorical naming, as Keen claims, "may set readers' empathy in motion" (Keen 67-68) and, in Helen's case, this empathic connection can be easily demonstrated. Her name inevitably alludes to the legend of Helen of Troy, reminding readers of the myth of the abducted Spartan girl and of her sorrowful beauty. Violence, evil, love and pain similarly characterize Helen in Aslam's novel. As a young Christian woman in a fundamentalist Pakistan, Helen has to face intolerance and prejudice, such as in the episode when a Muslim boy contends that Christians have "black blood" (*The Golden Legend* 23) or when she survives a terrorist attack in the office of a magazine, an incident that brings to the reader's mind the "Charlie Hebdo" shootings in Paris in January 2015. Moreover, her parents' names also suggest empathic connections that can favor character identification. Her mother's name, Grace, comes from the Latin word *gratia* and it carries the meaning of compassion and salvation granted by God to mankind. Grace is depicted as a beautiful creature, despite her job as a servant. Her brutal assassination turns her into a martyr to the Christian cause, disclosing a paradoxical feeling of resilience in her daughter and husband. Helen's father, Lily, whose name derives from a flower, is similarly a symbol for rebirth. This allegorical coexistence of purity, passion and sorrow in the names of these characters exemplifies the empathic power of Aslam's novel: the collision of allegory, mythology and religion sheds some light on the emotional load of the story, orienting the reader's distribution of empathy in the struggles between Christians and Muslims, "self" and "other."

A further materialization of religious persecution can be found in Nargis' subplot. Doubts about her religious background are cast from the beginning of the novel. In chapter six, for instance, the reader learns that the woman's personality does contain "another self—a ghost" (54). This spectral apparition is fully illuminated only at a later moment: born to Christian parents in the city of Lyallpur and baptized Margaret, Nargis pretends to be a Muslim when she replaces a schoolmate named Nargis in a school competition in Zamana. Years later, when Margaret moves to Zamana to attend university, she decides to disguise herself as a Muslim, "freeing her from the daily aggressions of Muslims" (169). We are in the early 1970s and the climate of religious fundamentalism seems to recall the very same harsh conditions of post-9/11. The narrative strands focalized around

Nargis' consciousness present a country contaminated by threats and intimidation that emerge, for instance, in the vertical lines on the body of Seraphina, Nargis' sister, who is harassed by local policemen. This recurrent motif of physical violence on the body, as a privileged site where pain lingers, is manifest evidence of the reality of trauma. The emphasis on physicality conveys the psychological effects of pain, inviting the reader to share the characters' intimate feelings. Also, the situation of religious tension illustrates the complexity of Pakistan itself, showing the contradictions of the country. As Nargis herself muses, the etymological meaning of the toponym Pakistan is "Land of the Pure" (150) and yet, owing to the various manifestations of intolerance, it dawns on her that "there was no absolute purity anywhere in the planet" (150) and that religion itself represents a means for consoling those who have been humiliated by life.

As these excerpts illustrate, by juxtaposing religious and social clashes, *The Golden Legend* performs the capacity to see the "other" as an individual with feelings, by means of what Keen calls "perspective taking" (179), a strategy that enhances empathy. This experience of overlapping differences can also be noted in the secret romance between Lily and Aysha, and in the idyll that Helen lives with her lover, Moscow. The clandestine liaison between Lily and the daughter of the mosque's cleric is illustrated through a poetic language, with "faint whispers still palpable within the atmosphere" (73). This lyrical evocation creates a hiatus in the atmosphere of war and terror, fostering, in Boehmer's words, a "transformative potential" (*Postcolonial Poetics* 34) that contributes to the development of emotional contagion. Besides, the novel touches on a similar impulse of wounds and endurance in the story of Helen's lover, Moscow, a Kashmiri guerrilla fighter escaped from a training camp. While his real name is Imran, he was nicknamed Moscow by his parents because of their communist political sympathy or, as Moscow himself explains, since they always "sided with the weak" (*The Golden Legend* 94). This emphasis on weakness inevitably recalls the climate of vulnerability that animates *The Golden Legend*. In Moscow's storyline, Aslam underscores the socio-political upheavals in Kashmir, thus complicating the already problematic historical scenario the novel revolves around. Ultimately, what his romance with Helen offers is a further embodiment of religious and cultural criss-crosses. The survivor of a rigid training camp, Moscow, who shows his compassionate feelings by donating blood to the dying Massud, meets Helen, the victim of religious abuse and intolerance. This intimate union, therefore, activates empathic responses by disclosing romantic moments on the island where Nargis, Helen and Moscow escape, the place embodying a shelter in a country troubled by violence.

Temporal Disjunctions, Dispossession, and Duality

As I have attempted to demonstrate in the previous pages, Aslam's latest novels delve deep into the multi-faceted ramifications of global terror, challenging the domesticated imagination of the American novel, as denounced by Gray and Rothberg. The cross-cultural empathic responses aroused in Aslam's narratives pose crucial questions about whose life is (un)grievable, in an echo of Butler's contention that under conditions of war life becomes exacerbated and is no longer recognised as "life." As a consequence, life, Butler claims, "cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all" (*Frames of War* 38), while grieving, instead, entails "a transformation in our sense of international ties that would crucially rearticulate the possibility of democratic political culture here and elsewhere" (*Precarious Lives* 40). In this section, I will explore the collision of distant temporalities, viewing them as exemplary of a postcolonial rearticulating of loss, but also as a way for understanding the present. In this respect, the temporal disjunctions in Aslam's fiction tie in with Boehmer's contention that postcolonial writing engaging with terror "is interested in mapping or scoring a progressive structure, a chronology or a syntagmatic axis" (*Postcolonial Poetics* 65), thereby going beyond the acts of terror and addressing also the experiences of those who survive, by guiding them "*through* the spiral of history" (66; emphasis in the original). Readers are hence not only presented with images of conflict between East and West; they are also invited to consider what it means to be human in such an oppressive atmosphere through the evocation of multiple historical wounds which ultimately blur the boundary between victim and perpetrator, thus facilitating affect and empathy. More specifically, I will argue that a logic of duality animates Aslam's two novels, revealing a feeling of universal empathy towards humanity in response to the exposure to loss and vulnerability which the narratives convey.

The Blind Man's Garden may be said to resist easy empathy by foregrounding how pain and grief also affect other characters, even the American soldiers fighting along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Thus, the reader is asked to face this ethical dilemma and determine which and whose life is grievable. In the novel, the third chapter, interestingly titled "Equal Sons," stages a dialogue between two distant and apparently opposite worlds. Whereas a certain interaction between poles percolates throughout the novel, such as in the depiction of Jeo and Mikal's close friendship or in the juxtaposition of contrasting viewpoints on the "War on Terror," this long narrative sequence offers an unusual perspective on what it means to be at war, even from the Western side, alerting readers to the paradoxical effects of terror. In this chapter, which is focalized around Mikal's tormented consciousness, as he secretly tries to cross the Afghan border, an

ontological abyss permeates his thoughts, reducing his moral certainties: "it is difficult to be sure," Mikal says, because "the innocent and the guilty both weep in the interrogation rooms, leaving wet spots on the material of the jumpsuits as they wipe large tears on their shoulders" (*The Blind Man's Garden* 376). Here, the man's struggle is against his own convictions and the disorientation played out by his mental confusion is metaphorically amplified by the vastness of the Afghan landscape, with its "open wild desert" (369) and by the lack of time perception since he navigates by the constellations (377). Thus, Aslam's intent is not only to invite readers to empathize with the wounded and the most fragile in the East; rather, he tries to highlight how the rhetoric of war and terror might exert influence on Westerners as well. This shared feeling of pain and frailty is indicative of the precarity of human life that Butler, in conversation with Athena Athanasiou, calls "dispossession." Whereas dispossession entails "a limit to the autonomous and impermeable self-sufficiency of the liberal subject through its injurious yet enabling fundamental dependency and relationality" (2), Aslam's fiction exhibits a universal condition of vulnerability that generates relationality, thus questioning the stereotype of male Pakistanis as mere terrorists and the myth of American soldiers as brave heroes.

Dispossession is at the heart of Mikal's encounter with the West. Mikal, who has killed two American soldiers in order to escape from prison, travels a long journey through the Pakistani border with Afghanistan. Among the various people and things Mikal tries to protect in the aftermath of Jeo's assassination, there is a snow leopard cub and, even more paradoxically, a silent and unnamed American soldier whom he accidentally finds in the desert. Although the white man has the word "infidel" tattooed on his back in Arabic, as a symbol for his strong aversion to Muslims, Mikal, whose hands have been maimed during a fight with the Americans, tries to save the American soldier from the Taliban troops that swoop on the area. As already alluded to before, Aslam places great emphasis on physical pain as a clear sign of trauma and of its disturbing effects. And yet, for Mikal, the soldier's eyes "are a doorway to another world" (*The Blind Man's Garden* 419), an entrance leading to alterity. This vis-à-vis encounter recalls the Levinasian face of the other, as the "ultimate situation" (Levinas 81) where the self feels responsible for the other. For the French philosopher, the face-to-face dimension, a philosophical stance that has marked the beginning of the "ethical turn" in literary studies, discloses a moment of ethical engagement with the vulnerable side of the other, an exposure that demands solidarity since this space "is, perhaps, the very presence of God" (291). Mikal, whose name bears an etymological connection to

God, from the Hebrew "who is like God," embodies this ethically charged critique of radicalism and fanaticism, making, instead, an ethical move towards the "other" and, thus, challenging the idea of the male Muslim as a criminal. In another passage, Aslam thematizes Mikal's attentiveness to the soldier's fragility such as in the scene when he removes the soldier's blindfold, giving him water, "taking care not to wet the cast" (419). While the American soldier blinks at this expression of care, Mikal is struck by the red sweating skin of the soldier, assuming that this is what happens to white people in the heat. This state of alertness to the other evokes a sense of commonality, revealing an ethical orientation that informs *The Blind Man's Garden*. "History is the third parent" (5), the narrator comments, thus pointing to the idea of promoting a feeling of inter-dependence against a historical background of conflicts and differences.

This is also suggested by the end of the novel when Mikal and the American soldier are caught under heavy fire near a mosque, while an American commando tries to set the soldier free. In this apocalyptic scene, the linguistic confusion, marked by "the blur of English and Pashto shouts and the screams of the wounded" (451), strengthens the impending catastrophe. Later, the ghost of Mikal resurfaces in the very last pages when the reader discovers that Naheed has given birth to their secret son. Here, the temporal ellipsis creates suspense, linking past, present and future. Mikal, "who is by now more a feeling than a person" (461), embodies this coexistence of various temporal layers, while the vegetation in Rohan's garden shows its "germinating seeds" (461) again. As in the narrative strands analyzed before, this juxtaposition is aimed at showing how mankind finds its common point in the materialization of pain. And yet, loss eventually yields gain, a principle encapsulated in an extract taken from a book Naheed is reading: "[d]efeated love is still love" (152).[2] What Aslam's fiction seems to convey with this intertextual link is that witnessing and surviving terror can unsettle hegemonic ideas about "them" and "us," thereby disclosing the potential power of care and relationality.

In a similar vein, in *The Golden Legend* temporal disjunctions are activated by the metatextual incursions of the extracts from *That They Might Know Each Other*. To recognize solidarity and empathy, Aslam employs metanarrative references mediated by the pages from Massud's father's manuscript where, as the narrator claims, the world can be seen as a place where "one continent poured itself into another" (*The Golden Legend* 165). In other words, the manuscript metaphorically connects Massud to his wife but, more generally, it overlaps with distant times and spaces. Whereas its title is taken from a verse in the Koran, the book features a "meditation on how pilgrimage,

wars, trades and curiosity had led to contact between cultures" (30). From the Saracen invasions in Southern Italy during the Middle Ages to the account of Thomas Jefferson's purchase of a copy of the Koran in 1765, this technique of narrative embedding distorts the chronological linearity of the novel, interspersing the portrayal of the delicate condition of present-day Pakistan with scenes of past traumas and solidarity. In the manuscript, the reference to Cervantes's Ricote, for instance, is a further illustration of the interface of distant temporalities. The shopkeeper featured in *Don Quixote* (1615), who is a friend of Sancho Panza, is a Morisco, one of the descendants of the Muslims who had remained in Spain after 1492. His intertextual presence reminds the reader of the religious climate of intolerance that characterized Spain in the early seventeenth century when the Moriscos were forced to convert to Christianity or to leave Spain. Ricote's episode recalls Nargis' disguise as a Muslim: Ricote, who is an exile "returned to his homeland in the guise of a pilgrim" (*The Golden Legend* 291), epitomizes the coexistence of dualities, indirectly suggesting that modern Pakistan presents the very same socio-cultural divergences that have always marked the history of mankind.

Ricote's episode offers an example of a narrative *mise-en-abîme* which is similarly replicated in the story of a Pakistani man, Bishop Solomon, who represents a further exemplification of the multifaceted complexity of the South-Asian country. Bishop Salomon, Nargis' uncle, was born in Pakistan, but is of Roman Catholic faith. His name, which carries the etymological meaning of "peace," from the Hebrew *shalom*, also evokes the legendary wisdom of King Solomon. However, despite the symbolic power of his name, the old man commits suicide during a trial, an extreme act aimed at denouncing the persecution of Christians in Pakistan.[3] Likewise, in the novel, other historical frictions are registered, from the Ghadar Party, the Indian revolutionary organization in which Massud's grandfather took part in the United States in the early 1910s, to the Kashmiri conflict, which has turned the wild valley into a land "full of widows and orphans" (158). This confrontation with ethnic and religious minorities, like Kashmiris and Christians, discloses the complexity of Pakistan, thus complicating the monolithic image of Pakistani people as perpetrators. Here, the logic of dispossession hints then at extreme forms of exclusion, by providing instances of human susceptibility to wounds and victimhood. Take, for instance, the scene where a terrorist blast kills the pilgrims to a festival at the Charagar mausoleum—a Sufi shrine in the fictional city of Zamana where the novel is set. For the reader, this "blaze of light" (258) might conjure up the 2010 Data

Darbar terrorist attack and foretell – as I alluded to earlier in this essay – what will happen in the same holy place nine years later.

Repetitions, digressions and elisions characterize the manipulative nature of Aslam's narratives, suggesting a common sense of grief that chimes with Butler's concept of the shared condition of precariousness. To this end, the manipulation of temporal linearity achieves an empathizing function in that it creates a chronological turbulence that disorients readers, while the ensuing conflict between the level of the story and the level of discourse seems to favor the reader's distribution of empathy towards a specific character. In Nargis' case, for instance, the withdrawal of her religious conversion from the level of discourse creates an ellipsis. This gap suggests a sort of cognitive crisis in those characters who suffer intense pain and loss, highlighting the belated force of traumatic situations. Thus, the flashbacks on Nargis' youth, on her unknown past and on her family generate temporal distance, enabling readers to assemble the various fragments and direct empathy towards the woman. Interestingly, the feeling that emerges here recalls what Eric Leake defines as "difficult empathy" in that it incorporates "the best and worst of people" (Leake 184). Thus, the reader cannot but notice Nargis' fractured selfhood as she herself realizes while meditating on her lies to Massud: "[*w*]*ould she carry her deceit into her relationship with him*?" (*The Golden Legend* 222; emphasis in the original). As a matter of fact, Massud dies unaware of his wife's real identity. And yet, Nargis's awareness that, had Massud known about her identity, he "would be sympathetic" (223), is a possible illustration of Aslam's willingness to favor empathy and reconcile all tensions.

As in *The Blind Man's Garden*, the final scene of Aslam's latest novel features a ghost, Lily's spectral presence walking through the roads of Zamana. The city where *The Golden Legend* is set presumably evokes Lahore, with images of thriving life "in the city's four crowds" (14): the medieval center, the area around the mosque, the district close to the Charagar mausoleum, and the neighborhood around the Mughal Fort. Notably, the neighborhood where Massud and Nargis live, Badami Bagh, was once an orchard of almond trees where the leaders of the Indian Mutiny had found shelter by hiding themselves in the orchard's groves. In the aftermath of Partition, the area became a ghetto, with the houses of the Christian servants working for Zamana's Muslim wealthy families growing on all sides. Thus, the place is redolent of postcolonial history, evoking forms of continuity between present-day terrorism and colonial resistance. Postcolonial history similarly permeates the island where Nargis, Helen and Moscow temporarily escape. The island has the shape of a tear and, according to a legend, was created when "a winged horse-like

creature was dislodged and fell to earth, landing in the river" (147). The horse was taking Muhammed to Allah in heaven and this mythological quality, rooted in a distant past, is evident in the rich green foliage that attracts a number of migratory birds. When the Pakistani police discover the hiding place on the island, Nargis is caught and forced to forgive the American spy that killed Massud, while Helen and Moscow disappear during the riots. Helen's father, Lily, who is temporarily expelled at the level of discourse, reappears in the final pages, lending an elegiac quality to the novel.

Lily, who is killed by the police for being suspected of having organized the terroristic attack against the Charagar mausoleum, ultimately remerges at the level of the story, feeling "simultaneously awake and asleep" while at times "'yesterday' and 'last year' were the same to him" (304). Here, temporal barriers ultimately collapse: Lily's ghost wanders from his childhood recollections to the moment when he was shot by the policemen. In line with the regenerative force of his name, Lily is turned into a ghost, thus inhabiting another sphere of the self and generating a split between "self" and "other." His dual function, as an actor and an observer of the world, recalls Achille Mbembe's discussion of the realm of the ghost as a moment where life "unfolds in the manner of a spectacle where past and future are reversed. Everything takes place in an indefinite present. Before and after are abolished, memory is destabilised, and multiplication reigns" (6). Ghostly apparitions, therefore, dwell in a condition of indefinite temporality where beauty and violence, ordinary and extraordinary, "self" and "other" cohabit. This coexistence of dichotomic elements finds in the spectral presence an instance of dispossession that Butler and Athanasiou see as an ethical way to assert one's presence even "in the wake of the endless finitude of the human" (17). This attentiveness to the limits of the human, evoked by absences, gaps, ghosts and dualities, becomes the occasion of the capacity to blur the border between opposite poles.

Coda

Aslam's novels are very much concerned with the modalities of relationality and empathy against a backdrop of trauma and vulnerability. In other words, although *The Blind Man's Garden* and *The Golden Legend* address the consequences of the "War on Terror," the ambivalent approach to fundamentalism and violence they display challenges the idea of Pakistan as a homogeneous place where only hate, radicalism and intolerance thrive. On the contrary, among precariousness, vulnerability and grievability, Aslam's fiction unveils the potentialities that lie in the encounter between "self" and "other." Furthermore, as my essay has attempted to demonstrate, what these novels do is not only convey but also perform solidarity and empathy

by soliciting the reader's responses in relation to the specific evocations of grief and loss. These empathic manifestations reveal the ethical power of postcolonial writing engaged with terror, allowing, as Boehmer comments, for the emergence of a poetics that moves "forward into the future, beyond empire, beyond its borders, beyond its wars" (*Postcolonial Poetics* 80). In Aslam's novels analyzed here, terrorism is not featured as a specific act; rather, it is represented as a historical account of powerful elites dominating powerless people, thus echoing Boehmer's understanding of postcolonial writing as concerned with the restoration of temporal depth. Aslam's post-9/11 fiction thereby shows that, "by looking at *processes*" ("Postcolonial Writing" 149; emphasis in the original), postcolonial writing can undo temporal linearity, revealing the continuities and intersections that lie at the core of the rhetoric of terrorism, while also favoring empathic awareness of the world's global disorder.

Notes

1. Boehmer distinguishes two different and coexistent instances of postcolonial writing. On the one hand, she associates postcolonial literature with crossings and migrant spaces, understanding it as "a synonym for 'transnational'" (*Postcolonial Poetics* 69). On the other, Boehmer views postcolonial writing as interested in the local, conveying "resistance to empire and its post-imperial or neo-colonial aftermath" (69). Against this backdrop, Boehmer sees both inflections of postcolonial writing concerned with the logic of terror as a way to "insist on the 'now' of their political demands" (72). Here, Boehmer draws from Dipesh Chakrabarty's contention that erstwhile colonized people need to "seize hold of modernity" (*Provincializing Europe* 8) through anti-colonial resistance.

2. As Aslam himself states in the "Acknowledgments" (463), the quote is taken from Salman Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1996).

3. Bishop Salomon's tragic act recalls what John Joseph, a Pakistani Roman Catholic bishop, did in 1998. Joseph shot himself in protest against the execution of a Christian man charged with blasphemy.

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