The Violence of Silence: Examining Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*

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At the epicentre of every war lies the devastation wrought by violence in its most brutal form. Violence, according to Arendt (1970), is instrumental by nature and appears in its pure state in times of war, when it is instrumentalised to its optimum capacity and only seeks to destroy. Delving deeper, beyond the visible spectacle involving perpetrators and combatants, what can be excavated are the many layers of violence that are rendered invisible by the deafening noise of war. The scale of violence caused is not limited to the belligerents: it percolates the everyday life of individuals living in its midst as well as in its periphery. Entrenched within this space of the everyday is a persistent silence that is either imposed by violence or co-opted as a marker of resistance. Con-

ventional studies explore the phenomenon of violence through the lens of direct or indirect effects of systems of power and power relations, where language (such as interviews with victims) and statistical data play a key role in determining the impact of violence. An examination of violence from the perspective of silence, while unravelling the effects of power, additionally entails looking for gaps and crevices where language and data may be lacking or altogether absent. This requires a shift in the focus from what is said to what is unsaid or inadequately expressed, from what is visible to what lies beneath the surface, and an investigation into the factors that impose or mask these silences. It entails listening closely and paying attention to "silent subtexts, to what is being left out, not said, or intentionally repressed" (Mazzei 2007, 9). Academic studies on silence range from analyses of its function as a mode of communication to its role in the oppression of marginalised communities. Adam Jaworski (1997) for instance treats silence as a "*metaphor for communication*" (3, emphasis in original) that allows for a descriptive analysis of silence in different contexts, from a pause in a conversation to aesthetic silence depicted in works of art. Robin Patric Clair (1998) examines the concept of silence from a feminist perspective, arguing that the power to silence is embedded within the notion of privilege, and that there exists an institutional silence when it comes to violence against women and other marginalised groups. Drawing from Foucault, Aidan Russell (2019) speaks of the "regimes of silence" that

characterise political states and social structures. An examination of "how pressures and structures constitute a political regime of constraint, or arise from social expectations, sensitivities, conventions or divisions" (Russell 2019, 7) allows one to unravel the threads that connect silence and systems of power, whether it is the powerful who impose silence, or the powerless who "refrain from speaking" (Russell 2019, 7).

Silence thus indicates the inherent presence of violence in its passive, systemic, or physical form. A point of consensus that runs through various academic explorations into silence is that it is not just an absence of speech or a failure of language: silence, in Max Picard's (1988) words, is an "autonomous phenomenon" and "therefore not identical with the suspension of language." It is "an independent whole" and is as creative as language (Picard 1988, 15). With a focus on Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*, this paper aims to explore the concept of violence and its relation to silence in the context of the US-led invasion into Afghanistan following the 9/11 terror attacks. The novel juxtaposes the troubled yet silent lives of ordinary individuals against the cacophony of the US military's War on Terror on the one hand and the dissonant, open resistance of Islamist forces on the other. Living on the edges of war and simultaneously in its midst, the characters experience silence in myriad, often interconnected yet distinct ways: as a consequence of or response to American hegemony, patriarchal he-

gemony, religious oppression, as well as conscientious silence rooted in a refusal or an inability to express.

Aslam's novel is set in late 2001 and early 2002, when the US-led forces invaded Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 terror attacks on American soil. The story revolves around the lives of Rohan, an elderly visually-impaired man, his daughter-in-law Naheed who loses her husband Jeo in the war, Jeo's foster brother and Naheed's lover Mikal who is wrongly arrested and tortured by the US military, Naheed's mother Tara, Mikal's brother Basie and his wife Yasmin. The family lives in the fictional town of Heer straddling the porous, volatile border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The novel deals with several issues that plague Afghanistan and the border region: the takeover of secular schools and public spaces by radical Islamists, the torture inflicted on civilians by the invading Western forces, the geopolitics of war, the instrumentalisation of religion for political goals, and the myriad ways in which war affects ordinary lives. It also explores issues involving moral dilemma, particularly, the violent consequences of well-intentioned or seemingly innocent human actions, the urge to break social and religious boundaries in favour of individual freedom, and the silent suffering as well as resistance by women chained by those boundaries.

There is a persistent silence pervading the novel, manifesting in each character's life as well as in the narrative

in different ways. Aslam employs silence as a metaphor by means of extensive use of imageries: a woman with an "ancient" face and "calm but not passive" eyes who visits Rohan's garden a couple of times a year to examine every fallen leaf in search for god (Aslam 2014, 27), the bird pardoner who acts as a catalyst for people's path to redemption, and a heavily shackled mendicant, whose chains embody the wishes and needs of those who harbour hopes against all odds. The mendicant adds a link to his chains each time an individual has a need, and wanders the land praying until the link vanishes "miraculously" in fulfilment of the need (Aslam 2014, 65). The bird pardoner ensnares birds and releases them when paid by one who wants his sins pardoned, because it is believed that the "freed bird says a prayer on behalf of the one who has bought its freedom. And God never ignores the prayers of the weak" (Aslam 2014, 7). The three imageries point at the inherent presence of violence: in a land impacted by endless war, the ordinary civilians who have been silenced and neglected by political, social, and economic systems search for ways to alleviate their sufferings and find solace in the divine through the mendicant's prayers or the promise of the birds' prayers. The silent woman looks through the fallen leaves in search of god, in hopes that god has not forsaken the land and its people. The chains, the bird cages and the fallen leaves are all silent by virtue of their inanimate states, yet they amplify voices that have suffered endless violence.

Rohan's blindness in itself is a condition that silences his visual experience of the world. The blindness is imposed upon him partly by old age and accelerated by an act of violence by a warlord's men who force shards of ruby stone into his eyes. The sensory loss compels him to depend on his other senses, primarily his sense of touch, to understand the world anew. He begins to associate the memories in his mind's eye to his tactile experiences, such as the touch of a warm surface with the colour red, or the twinkling stars with droplets of rain. The omnipotent narrator of the novel notes that Rohan's blindness "almost coincided with the death of the two boys [Jeo and Mikal]" (Aslam 2014, 206), symbolising not just a physical loss but something much deeper, the loss of a support system. Rohan's blindness leaves the family vulnerable to exploitation of the powerful who are looking to usurp his house or marry Naheed. Their neighbour Sharif offers to pay for Rohan's surgery in return for Naheed's hand in marriage. The family resists the offer, but the loss of the male members of the family, Jeo, Basie and Mikal, makes it increasingly difficult for Naheed and Tara to live in a patriarchal system dominated by the likes of Sharif and Major Kyra, the former Pakistani ISI agent who is eyeing Rohan's house. While there is no direct violence involved, Sharif's lascivious advances and Kyra's threatening figure inflict a form of passive violence on the family such that Naheed, Tara and Rohan are forced to contemplate submission.

In addition to the violence inflicted by external factors, Rohan constantly suffers from an internal torture in the form of guilt over his past actions, particularly the way he treated his apostate wife Sofia in her dying moments. Though he never speaks of it, the reader is privy to his silent ruminations that reveal his conflicted existence in relation to his religiosity. Ridden with fear that Sofia would be damned for eternity, Rohan had tried "desperately" to make her repent by withholding her medicine. Sofia had wilfully rejected Islam in what was a "gradual" process and died an apostate despite Rohan's efforts to change her beliefs. After her death, Rohan resorted to constant prayers and journeys in search of "anything that might absolve her of her sins" (Aslam 2004, 42), to the extent that he neglected his children. However, his insistence on saving her soul does not constitute prolonged denial: his gradual realization that he had forced his religion on her, in contravention of the Islamic decree against compulsion (El Fadl 2007, 159), evokes in him a sense of guilt at his own cruelty. His silence or inability to express his guilt emerges from a site of self-loathing and shame, but also a deep, perpetual mourning for Sofia. To borrow from Jay Winter (2010) Rohan's memory of his actions towards Sofia constitutes a "hidden deposit" that is "concealed at some moments and revealed at others." It is a "liturgical silence" that encompasses the whole realm of "loss, mourning, sacrifice and redemption," and allows the mourner to grieve in their own time (Winter 2010, 4).

Aslam juxtaposes the silencing power of death with the violence wrought upon the body that dies: not only is there a graphic description of Jeo's violent death, it is accompanied by a deafening silence that obliterates his ability to scream but makes him aware of the grating sound of the spear against the inside of his skull. After Jeo's body arrives, Naheed, breaking convention, locks herself up with Jeo's violence-ridden corpse and slowly examines each wound. The body, silenced by death, finds its voice in the vivid and graphic description of the violence it suffered. The reader is not privy to Naheed's thoughts as she runs her fingers through the wounds, and in this sense, there is a stoic silence on her part. Judith Butler (2004) argues that in mourning there is a "transformative effect of loss" when "something about who we are is revealed... that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us" (21-22). Jeo's death has a transformative effect on Naheed in multiple ways: it bestows on her the status of a widow, therefore hurtling her into a social condition that comes with its prejudices and pressures silencing her more than ever, but at the same time it is emancipatory as it liberates her from the binds of marriage and rekindles the possibility of reuniting with Mikal. Moreover, she refuses to follow the norms of normative behaviour expected of a new widow by locking herself up and spending time alone with her dead husband's body. Aslam here juxtaposes Naheed's stoic silence with the noise of women knocking on her door, reinforcing

the boundary between individual desire and societal demands. Her silence has a transcendental quality and acts as a form of resistance against the social norm of performative display of sorrow.

It is in the inner recesses of the house that silence becomes "concealed and revealed" (Winter 2010) as Tara and Naheed engage in private conversations that often escalate into arguments. Tara and Naheed share a complex mother-daughter relationship, at times tender but often conflicted. Tara has had a difficult past where as a new widow she suffered physical violence at the hands of men and then systemic violence when she was falsely incarcerated for adultery, while Naheed has lived a fairly protected life albeit without exercising agency. There is a generational shift in the way the two women perceive their situation: while Tara's personal experience of violence as a new widow and persistent trauma induce in her a fear that Naheed too would become a "plaything" for men (Aslam 2014, 104), Naheed views herself as an independent woman whose time has come to reclaim her life. We later see Naheed breaking social and cultural boundaries by fulfilling her wish to unite with Mikal, albeit secretly. Reticent by nature, she silently and sometimes aloud resists the pressures of patriarchal power. She fights back Sharif's advances, leaves her home in a solitary search for Mikal, dares to have Mikal's baby out of wedlock, and pursues her dream of becoming a teacher. In contrast, the patriarchal environment around

Tara and her own experiences have conditioned her to view women's existence as being solely dependent on men, and the fact that Naheed is carrying Jeo's child worries Tara for she believes it would ruin her prospects to remarry. What Tara attempts to do here is impose an essentialist silence where the "right to speak" is a privilege claimed by some by virtue of their experience (Winter 2010). Therefore, silencing Naheed and permanently silencing her unborn child by an act of violence is entrenched in Tara's own sufferings as a widow with a young child. Naheed suspects Tara of trying to kill her foetus, but eventually she herself opts for abortion. In doing so, Naheed reclaims her body and agency, cuts off the remnant of her life with Jeo, and frees Tara from the guilt of wanting to commit foeticide. The inner recess of the house serves as a safe space for the two women to speak their minds, their conversations rarely crossing its threshold. It is here that Naheed breaks her silence on her love for Mikal and confronts her mother for betraying her. It is here that Tara accuses her daughter of being selfish and potentially exposing her to public ridicule by conspiring to elope with Mikal. It is here that the two women stand in "pained silence" (Aslam 2014, 107) over hurting each other, their repressed anger and frustration finding expression but not resolved by the truth of their confessions.

The complex intertwining of silence and violence is even more apparent in the journey that Mikal embarks

on, first as a volunteer to help Afghans injured in the battlefield, then as a prisoner of the Taliban and the Americans, and finally as a fugitive wanted for the double murder of American soldiers. He becomes a victim of circumstances almost in a Kafaesque sense, getting thrown into situations beyond his control or understanding, and reduced to a silent spectator to the events of his own life. His well-intentioned journey to join the battlefield turns nightmarish when he and Jeo are secretly sold to the Taliban on Major Kyra's orders. The Americans along with villagers attack the Taliban fort and both Jeo are Mikal are mistakenly assumed to be Talibs. While the furious villagers kill Jeo, Mikal becomes an object of barter for different warlords, until he finally escapes but is captured by the Americans in a raid. Violence becomes an instrument to silence all possibility of resistance or retaliation when a warlord chops off Mikal's index fingers to prevent him from triggering a gun. But it is in American custody that the full scale of the silencing power of violence comes to fore. The Americans, suspecting Mikal to be a member of the Al Qaeda, subject him to relentless torture, dehumanising him in the process. Mikal and other prisoners are kept in cages like trapped animals, fully stripped of their agency and identity. Aslam describes at length the torture techniques used by the US military, throwing the spotlight on the larger issue of American hegemony and imperialism that instrumentalises violence to silence entire populations. The war on terror was waged on the logic that "there are

no innocent people in a guilty nation," (Aslam 2014, 6) therefore incriminating entire populations in the 9/11 attacks. Sarah O'Brien (2021) notes that "Aslam's blunt phrasing in referring to 'guilty nations' speaks to the truth of what happened following 9/11 as innocence was disallowed conceptually in countries - Afghanistan and Iraq - where the full horror of war became a reality" (98). In giving space and voice to the prisoners, Aslam humanises the marginalised victims of Western neocolonialism who are otherwise silenced in the dominant narrative of war. Inside the torture cells where all prisoners are presumed "guilty" merely on the basis of their identity, violence is used by the military to break their silence, to force them into confessions that may or may not be true but would nevertheless serve the imperial goal of hunting down the "guilty". The response to such violence elicited in the prisoner is thus one that only seeks to end the pain of bodily torture. Mikal is bombarded with questions and subjected to mind games and psychological torture to provoke such a response. The words spoken by the white man are alien to Mikal, their sounds arranged into signs by an interpreter. To Mikal, it seems as if a "disembodied voice in the air" is making the sounds (Aslam 2014, 181).

There is a clear cultural disconnect here between the speaker and the interpreter and the receiver, the only response from the latter being a steadfast silence emerging from both incomprehension as well as a refusal to

connect. In creating such language barriers, O'Brien (2021) notes, Aslam alienates the Western reader and constructs the white man's language as that of a "strange and threatening Other" (103). While the Americans perceive Mikal's silence as an indication of his training as a terrorist, it is in fact rooted in Mikal's fear for the safety of Rohan's family. The silence employed by Mikal is both a refusal to speak as well as a verbal resistance to giving his abusers what they demand. There is a power play at work here: the more Mikal pushes back through silence, the more violent and louder the military policemen become. Arendt (1970) argues that power and violence are opposites: violence comes into play when power is in jeopardy, and this is what the frustration of the Americans makes evident. When physical violence fails to break him, the Americans resort to humiliate him: while he is shackled, a white man enters the cell and mocks him and his country with a grotesque laughter, shaming him for belonging to a "disgusting repulsive" country full of violence and corruption. The white man, like a "malevolent god," deliberately indulges in a racist diatribe while laughing uncontrollably, his "eyes full of hatred and accusation and hilarity and mirth at this citizen of a shameless beggar country full of liars, hypocrites, beaters of women and children...." (Aslam 2014, 191). The white man's rant is non-stop, without a period. Aslam employs this narrative strategy to not only lay bare the Oriental narrative lying at the root of the American exceptionalism, invasion and its civilising mission,

but also as a lament for the depths Aslam's homeland has plunged into. Mikal's only response to the mocking laughter is to whisper "what about you," coaxing him to admit the West's role in ruining his country. The laughter fills the room "roaring like a giant" and suddenly stops, plunging the cell into darkness and silence. This silence is so sharp that it fills Mikal with a pain he has not felt before: the psychological humiliation manifests itself in physical pain that is "screaming at him in a real voice, using human words" (Aslam 2014, 192). While the grotesqueness of the laugh and the white man's words humiliate as well as goad Mikal into a counter argument, it is the silence that brings home the agony inflicted by the man's psychological violence.

Despite the dizziness induced by sleep-depriving torture, Mikal counters the military men's questions with some of his own and calls their bluff, for instance, when the Americans tell him that Jeo was in their custody and had confessed to being a terror operative, Mikal responds to all follow-up questions with "Ask Jeo" (Aslam 2014, 186). At one point, the Americans trick Mikal into believing that Jeo is being tortured in the next room by making him hear screams of agony. There is a juxtaposition of noise and Mikal's silence, and though Mikal tells himself not to believe the Americans, the screaming becomes intolerable and eventually provokes Mikal into lunging at his interrogator, and then when he hears him say Naheed's name, it awakens the "animal part" in

him (Aslam 2014, 193). Arendt (1970) argues that rage and violence are "'natural' *human* emotions," and under conditions of torture, their absence becomes the "the clearest sign of dehumanization," (63, 64, emphasis in original). The violence inflicted by the Americans fails to dehumanise Mikal completely, for not only does he fight back, but even when he falsely claims to have connections with Bin Laden to make the screaming noise stop, he still withholds information about his identity. His false confession is also a kind of silence where words are used to mask the truth.

The torture he suffers in American custody nevertheless creates a deep suspicion in his mind: the endless lies he has been told to break his silence have blurred the distinction between truth and falsehood. Mikal's life was constantly under threat in US custody, the physical violence being part of the process to decimate him. He is unable to trust the Americans anymore, and when he is finally freed and dropped off, he believes that they intend to execute him. When his back is turned, he senses a "whiff of sulphur that is the unmistakable clue that a bullet has been fired" (Aslam 2014, 218), and the extreme fear for his life creates a momentary lapse in his mind propelling him to commit violence against the US soldiers, whom he shoots dead with their own gun. The gunshot (fired by someone from the mosque at the Americans) signifies violence, and Mikal's immediate response is to defend himself by inflicting violence on the

enemy. It may also be conjectured that Mikal, having suffered extreme torture, harbours a subconscious yearning to exact revenge, and the whiff of the bullet is enough to trigger his instincts. At a later period, he dreams that Jeo or Basie "asks him if he is certain that he hadn't wanted to shoot the two Americans by the lake – wondering if he had killed them intentionally" (Aslam 2014, 270). Violence thus transforms an innocent man into a murderer. It is at this moment that Mikal becomes a fugitive: to the Americans he is a deadly terrorist, to the civilians he meets he is either a hero who killed the enemy or a battle-hardened militant. Mikal however is seemingly filled with guilt over his vulnerability in the moment. There is an overbearing narrative silence regarding Mikal's thoughts on his action – there is neither an internal monologue nor an explanation by the omnipotent narrator - but the reader does get a glimpse into his mind in bits of conversations and passing remarks. At the gun factory operated by his rescuer Akbar, for instance, we are told that Mikal has no desire to ever touch a gun again, yet he is compelled by circumstances to work with weapons. He confesses to Naheed too, expressing regret over his action. His chance at redemption presents itself when he comes across an injured American soldier during an errand. Once more, the reader is not privy to his thoughts on the soldier or his motive behind rescuing him: one is left to guess that Mikal plans to use him as a leverage to strike a deal with the Americans in exchange for pardon, or at a more personal level, redeem himself

by saving an American's life. In an inversion of power relation, now it is the American who fears for his life and is rendered silent, while Mikal is in charge. Unlike the Americans however, Mikal does not inflict violence on him, instead he shields him from the other people's wrath and rescues him from the custody of a warlord. He shelters the American inside a mosque and uses Naheed's necklace to reconnect a broken microphone in order to summon the American forces to rescue them: the minaret that was silent is now employed for "summoning unbelievers, to arrive and desecrate His house" (Aslam 2014, 405). To the people gathering outside, this is an ultimate act of treason, of blasphemy. Yet, for Mikal, his redemption can only come if he can save a life to atone for the two he has taken. While the American soldier is rescued by the US special forces, they leave Mikal behind. Mikal's final redemptive act is his sacrifice as he falls into eternal silence amid the chaos and confusion of violence.

A central theme that Aslam explores in the novel is that of Islamist radicalisation in the backdrop of prolonged wars in the region. In a subversion of the dominant narrative prevalent in most 9/11 literature and discourse that portrays Islam as being inherently violent and which demonises Muslims, Aslam in his previous novel *The Wasted Vigil* has traced the historical, social and political conditions that gave rise to violent puritanism, particularly turning attention to Western interference in the

region, but also probing the Muslim community's own failure in addressing the issue. In *The Blind Man's Garden*, he takes this endeavour further, examining the impact of such developments on the life of marginalised communities (O'Brien 2021). In this sense, Aslam breaks the silence on the roles played by transnational powers in the decline of Afghanistan and the peripheral regions. Rohan's school Ardent Spirit, established to impart Islamic as well as worldly education to children, is taken over by extremists with connections to Pakistan's ISI and soon becomes a hub for training young men for jihad. Aslam here explores the gradual corrosion and eventual obliteration of secular education by the more vocal puritanical forces. In *The Wasted Vigil*, Aslam traces this corrosion to the days of the Cold War, when the CIA had covertly distributed jihadist literature in the refugee camps bordering Pakistan and some regions of the USSR. Rohan is deeply disturbed by the radicalisation of his school, reflected in the way the school's name board has undergone a transformation from "*Education is the basis of law and order*" to "*Islamic*" education and finally to "I*slam is the purpose of life and death*" (Aslam 2014, 30-31, emphasis in original). Moreover, Rohan designed the school as an ode to the early Islamic civilization when cities like Baghdad, Mecca, Cairo, Delhi and others blossomed as centres of learning and scientific pursuits. The buildings in the school campus represent each of these centres of learning, but now they lie dormant, reduced to little more than silent reminders of the past.

The transformation signifies the silencing of scientific temper with the rise of religious extremism not only in Afghanistan but the world over. Rohan is branded a traitor to his religion for protesting this transformation and is totally shut out and silenced. The school now belongs to Major Kyra, who plans to mould the children into "warrior saints, brilliant in deceit against the West and its sympathisers here at home" (Aslam 2014, 31). There is also a corresponding restriction on women, limiting their access to public spaces and asserting male control over their bodies. When Rohan, Naheed, Yasmin and Tara pay a visit to Jeo's grave, they are stopped by four women in full-bodied burkhas, wearing "green bands with the flaming-swords motif of Ardent Spirit's flag" and brandishing canes. The women claim that Muslim women are prohibited from visiting the graveyard, calling the practice an "innovation" (Aslam 2014, 92). The women shame Naheed for showing her face, insult Rohan with cuss words and yet claim to speak on god's behalf, privileging themselves as "superior" in god's eyes (Aslam 2014, 94). Rohan and his family acquiesce even though they could have challenged the women with a debate on religion. Their silence may be read as representing the silence of the majority of moderate Muslims against the amplification of radical voices. The silencing power of the zealous women can be analysed in terms of the privilege they exercise within the marginalised group to which they belong, namely that encompassing Muslim women. Robin Patric Clair (1998) exam-

ines coercive practices of domination in marginalised communities in terms of privilege that occur between groups, within groups and the privileging of practices or structures. Clair defines within group privileging as the practicing of those acts that are "primarily confined to one group as described according to one subject position" (57). The radicalised women who stop Naheed and other women claim privilege by virtue of their subject position as self-appointed guardians of god's will. They are however themselves marginalised and subjected to symbolic and ideological violence by a patriarchy that silences their agency, limits their political and social access, and asserts ownership of their bodies. But within the domain encompassing Muslim women, this form of patriarchy rewards the obedient women with status and privilege, enshrining it within the discourse of a specific version of Islam. The obedient women are thus empowered to claim privilege over other women in their marginalised group, and silence them by exercising the right to inflict violence that they have been bestowed in the name of religion.

Major Kyra along with a handful of his radicalised students plan a hostage attack on a school run by Christian missionaries, where Basie and his wife Yasmin teach. The attack, though it may seem religiously motivated, is at its core political, aimed at sending a message to the Americans and to their own government. The jihad that they embark on is thus a response to the violence of

the Western invasion. Throughout the novel the reader comes across ordinary civilians readily sending their sons to the battlefield to defend their land and religion, and at one point, Rohan himself silently expresses this wish. The young men planning the school attack take on the political role of reviving their religion as the basis of law and order, and instilling patriotism in fellow Muslims. They are aware of the scant respect and attention they command within the larger community, and hence the school attack also serves as a means to get noticed. Convinced of their reasoning, they are faced with the "enormity of their struggle" against the forces that aim to eliminate them (Aslam 2014, 177). Acts of spectacular violence, such as bombing a Christian school are thus dismissed because "neither... [the] government nor anyone in the West will care about it" (Aslam 2014, 172). They decide on targeting children, one of the most vulnerable and agency-less groups among humankind, so as to instil mass fear in such a way that civilians themselves would demand the government to take notice. Their main target, apart from the absent priest Fr Mede, is Basie. The teachers and students victimised during the raid conceal Basie's identity even though he is present, thus shielding him from violence. In this shared space of victimhood, there is a shared silence as well. It is only in an act of violence, directed at Naheed, that this silence is broken as she calls out to Basie in desperation. The breaking of silence over his identity puts him in danger and he is mercilessly killed. Thus, in this moment

of crisis, violence is kept at bay by silence, but the moment the silence is broken, it paves the way for violence. Conversely, it is violence that imposes silence in the first place. Silence and violence are thus not only embedded in each other, they appear in reciprocity.

While there is an overbearing presence of fundamentalist as well as Western voices in the dominant discourses on 9/11, what Aslam endeavours in *The Blind Man's Garden* is to vocalise the marginalised communities and the voice of the moderate Muslims who, despite their majority, are either unheard or silent by choice or compulsion. In addition, there is no Western protagonist, the West being solely represented as a brutal force (O'Brien 2021). This is again a subversion of the dominant voice that has characterised post-9/11 literature. As O'Brien (2021) notes, the novel "gives narrative space to the stories of those people in 'guilty nations' whose innocence has been denied and indeed stolen by the violence inflicted in support of Western, and more specifically American, hegemony since 9/11" (98-99). An incident that reveals this hitherto silent voice in its full force is when villagers attack Ahmed the Moth, Major Kyra's brother who had radicalised Ardent Spirit, their rage bursting forth violently:

> A group of ordinary citizens had grabbed hold of him and a Taliban soldier on the street corner and forced them to the ground. Every ounce of rage—

> every rape, every disappearance, every public execution, every hand amputated during the past seven years of the Taliban regime, every twelve-year-old boy pressed into battle by them, every ten-year-old girl forcibly married to a mullah eight times her age, every man lashed, every woman beaten, every limb broken—was poured into the two men by fist, club, stick, foot and stone, and when they finished and dispersed nothing remained of the pair. It was as if they had been eaten (Aslam 2014, 47).

Similarly, civilians including women charge at the Taliban when the American forces raid the fort where Jeo and Mikal are held captive. Their violent response is a result of prolonged oppression that silenced them into submission. It is a manifestation of a visceral desire to not only reclaim their freedom and agency but to punish their oppressors. However, they are still bereft of agency as they need the assistance and encouragement of the American forces to rise up against the Taliban, and therefore are little more than "pawn[s]" to serve American interests in demolishing the militant group (O'Brien 2021, 109).

Silence and violence thus percolate the narrative space of Aslam's novel in myriad ways: not only in the intensely visible violence of the war, the silencing and eventual resistance of the population at the centre of the conflict, but in the invisible, inaudible voices that reside in the inner recesses of marginalised towns on the periphery.

Though the war in Afghanistan is central to the novel's plot, Afghan characters are conspicuously absent. O'Brien (2021) argues that their absence from the narrative in fact "foregrounds, rather than obscures, their marginalisation on the world stage," reflecting the way Afghanistan has been viewed as little more than "collateral damage" in America's quest for dominance (103). In a way, Aslam amplifies their silence and in the process, calls attention to the violence they have suffered at the hands of transnational powers, the Islamist forces and at the individual level as members of the marginalised communities in which they live.

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