Post-9/11 Melancholic Identities: Memory, Mourning and National Consciousness

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ABSTRACT
This paper discusses the ways in which Nadeem Aslam’s novels – Maps for Lost Lovers and The Wasted Vigil – highlight the need for a reconceptualisation of immigrant identity, in post-9/11 world, by linking traumatic experiences of an individual to the collective memory of a community or nation. Taking cue from Sigmund Freud, Judith Butler, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s concepts of mourning and melancholia, an interface between transnational movement and mourning will be investigated in order to emphasise how private grief becomes a metaphor for public grief. With reference to Aslam’s novels (that are set against the background of post-9/11 rhetoric of war on terrorism), I discuss how an endless process of diasporic nostalgia and mourning interacts with immigrants’ efforts to deal with different ‘others’ in their adopted homelands.

Keywords
Mourning; Melancholia; Trauma; Transnational Movement; National Consciousness.

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Introduction

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that Nadeem Aslam’s novels – Maps for Lost Lovers(2004) and The Wasted Vigil (2008) – highlight the need for a reconceptualisation of immigrant identity, by linking traumatic experiences of an individual to the collective memory of a community or nation. Drawing on Freud, Butler, Abraham and Torok’s concepts of mourning and melancholia, an interface between transnational movement and mourning will be investigated in order to emphasise how private grief becomes a metaphor for public grief. With reference to Aslam’s work, (that are set against the background of post9/11 rhetoric of war on terrorism) I show how an endless process of diasporic nostalgia and mourning interacts with immigrants’ efforts to deal with different others. Maps for Lost Lovers is a story of the British Pakistani community and families at the crossroads of liberalism and orthodoxy. At the heart of the novel, Chanda and Jugnu, on their return from Pakistan to Dasht-e-Tanhai – an unspecified fictional town in the north England – are missing. The police suspect that this is a case of honour killing and arrest Chanda’s brothers. In the midst of this gloominess, we encounter Kaukab, her husband Shamas, and their three estranged and westernised children – Mah-Jabin, Ujala and Charagh – awaiting the killers’ trial. Torn between her religious orthodoxy and her husband’s and children’s liberalism and in order to prove herself a loving mother and a caring wife, Kaukab makes a great effort to distance herself from a “dirty country, an un-sacred country full of people with disgusting habits and practices,” but her dilemma is that she could never prevent her children from assimilating into “[t]he decadent and corrupt West” (63). Shamas falls in love with a newly divorced woman, Suraya, who tries to seduce Shamas into a quick marriage so that she may take divorce and go back to her former husband.

In Maps for Lost Lovers, Kaukab’s inability to come to terms with the place in which she is living turns her in to a melancholic who, according to Freud, “vilifies [her] self and expects to be cast out and punished” (Gay 1995, 584). In “Mourning and Melancholia”, highlighting the symptoms of what he calls psychogenic melancholia, Freud argues: “Where there is a disposition to obsessional neurosis is the conflict due to ambivalence gives a pathological cast to mourning and forces it to express itself in the form of selfreproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved object” (Gay 1995, 587-588). In the case of Kaukab, this loved object is her Sohni Dharti, her homeland. Kaukab’s lamentations with regards to immigration to the UK involve such self-reproaches: “If I tell you something everyday it’s because I relive it every day. Every day – wishing I could rewrite the past – I relive the day I came to this country where I have known nothing but pain” (101). Probing deeper into Freud’s perspective, it becomes clear that, for him, melancholia involves a “pathological tendency to denytherality of this loss” (Ruti 2005, 637-660) and, consequently, the melancholic’s inability to mourn or grieve prevents him/her from future progress. This contrasts with Ranjana Khanna’s concept of melancholia that “acts toward the future” because “the hope for a better persists” in the melancholic (2006). Butler’s critique of Freud’s concept of melancholia is also based on the fact that Freud tends to suggest that successful mourning is the sign of substitutability. She argues that rather than associating successful mourning with substitutability or with the act of forgetting the loved object, as Freud suggests, mourning must be taken as an “experience of transformation” because “one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever”(2004, 21).

This hardly seems to be true in Kaukab’s case. She is the one who remains unchanged throughout the novel. She
Kaukab is cocooned in her limited world of home where her blame their mother for destroying their lives. As Mah-Jabin reproaches her mother for “the so-called traditions that you have dragged into this country with you like shit on your shoes” (114), the more Kaukab goes mad with pain. Mah-Jabin accuses her mother for having being failed to save her daughter’s life by not telling her that the life of women in Pakistani society is “hard because [they] have to run the house during the day and listen to [their] husband’s demands in bed at night”. She even impeaches her mother’s wisdom for not only living her own life in despair but also forcing her daughter into the same life and “expecting a different result” (113). Kaukab receives another blow on her ego when Mah-Jabin says: “How fucking wise you are, Mother, such wisdom! Victory awaits all the beleaguered Pakistani women but what a price, Mother, two decades of your life wasted . . . What a waste when instead of conning for all these years you could just walk away” (114). At this stage, Kaukab’s ego – which constitute her self-esteem as well as her tolerance towards the decadent West through love for her religion and country – begins to shake and we hear her melancholiccry: “Get away from me, you little bitch!” (114). Likewise, Charag, referring to circumcision, scolds his mother for “the first act of violence done to [him] in the name of religion or social system . . . wonder[ing] if anyone has the right to do it” (320). Kaukab’s ego is hurt again and she winces: “Why must you mock my sentiments and our religion like this?” (320). Ujala, too, reproaches his mother for poisoning him with holy salt on the advice of a cleric, mocking her religion that has given her and millions like her such false ideas. As a result of this humiliation at the hands of her own children, the crypt crumbles and Kaukab’s ego becomes one with the love object: she realises that it was the biggest mistake of her life to come to this country – “a country where children are allowed to talk to their parents this way, a country where sin is commonplace” (324). Hence, Kaukab’s ego “begins the public display of an interminable process of mourning” (Abraham and Torok 1994, 136). Her grief does not remain her private grief; it manifests itself as public grief which has affected not only her own life but her husband’s as well as her children’s lives.

This is how the grief of one generation transfers to the next generation. As Waterman observes with regards to Maps for Lost Lovers:

The parents’ memories do not correspond at all to their children’s lived experience, meaning that the parents’ cultural map, created out of traumatic past and clung to out of a sense of familiarity and security, has done a great deal of harm to their children, which explains the parents ‘abject, suicidal loss of hope at the end of the novel.(2010, 2:30).

It can be argued that Aslam intends to show that Kaukab’s “narcissistic pre-occupation of melancholia” ultimately “moved into a consideration of vulnerability of others” (Butler 2004,30), in this case her children and her husband who, as a reaction to her melancholic longings for her love
objects, have become more British than Pakistani, more Western than Muslim. Kaukab’s children feel ‘othered’ in their own home. As a result of Kaukab’s self-inflicted pain, intercultural conflicts take the shape of intra-cultural conflicts and her children refuse to entail any responsibility towards their roots. Realising his traumatic position in Dasht-e-Tanhai, Shamas understands that:

[f]aced with a loss of roots, and the subsequent weakening in the grammar of ‘authenticity’, we move into a vaster landscape. Our sense of belonging, our language and the myths we carry in us remain, but no longer as ‘origins’ or signs of ‘authenticity’ capable of guaranteeing the sense of our lives. They now linger on as traces, voices, memories and murmurs that are mixed in with other histories, episodes, encounters (Chambers 1994, 18-19).

Unlike Shamas, Kaukab’s traumatic sense of grief deprives her children of what Chambers calls a ‘grammar of authenticity’ since they belong neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’. Nevertheless, completely disillusioned with their mother’s sense of belonging and melancholic nostalgia, their state of un-belonging and confusion has made them think that the only way to “make cultural mobility and integration less traumatic” is to move “away from the absolutes and certitudes of fixed cultural identity and towards an identity which does not retreat from flexibility and negotiation” (Waterman 2010, 2:32). For example, Charagh’s marriage to English girl Stella and Mah-Jabin’s audacious step divorce from her Pakistani husband to live her own life in America. A similar phenomenon can be explained in The Wasted Vigil with reference to Casa and James who are willing to sacrifice their lives for their homelands and people. Set in Usha, a small town in northern Afghanistan, The Wasted Vigil is a story of a land and people ruled by terror the Taliban. The story revolves around three main characters: Marcus, Lara and David. Marcus – a Muslim convert and an English doctor widowed by the Taliban – after losing his wife Qatrina and his daughter Zameen, lives with the hope that one day he will find his lost grandson, Bihzad who he has never seen. Lara is a Russian woman who comes to Marcus’ home, in search of her lost brother, Benedikt – a former Red Army soldier – after discovering some connection between Benedikt and Zameen. David – disillusioned with his job as a spy – is an American former CIA operative, who has also been in love with Marcus’ daughter. He looks after Lara, with Marcus. By creating harrowing images of a war-ravaged landscape, Aslam portrays Afghanistan as a symbol of the utter brutality of the Taliban. It is a land where horrible things happen such as book burning, amputation, decapitation and death by stoning. In the midst of this gloominess, a glimmer of hope appears in the novel when Duniya and Casa begin to nurture feelings for each other. However, this glimmering hope soon fades when love comes in conflict with faith and Casa realises that he should not forget about his duty to his religion. Therefore, in case of Casa and Duniya, as with Marcus and Qatrina or David and Zameen, love is engulfed by war and duty to religion dominates when Casa’s hostility towards the Americans ultimately plunges him into the depths of zealotry and he blows himself up along with David because he was trained in al Qaeda camps to hate the West–the infidels.

Set against the background of post-9/11 rhetoric of war on terrorism, the novel highlights the struggle of a young Afghan mujahid Casa against the US army that, in turn, is countering the terrorist activities of mujahidin in Afghanistan. James, US official is on this mission in Afghanistan. When analysed in terms of Abraham and Torok’s poetics of the crypt, Casa’s struggle of “love and hate” – that “results from some traumatic affliction and from the utter impossibility of mourning” – implies that his “aggression is not in fact primary; it merely extends the genuine aggression the object actually suffered earlier in the form of . . . disgrace, or removal” (1994, 136). It is not only Casa’s religion that has been disgraced by the American infidels but there has also been a constant effort on their part to expel him and other mujahidin from their own country. Casa’s melancholic state of mind is evident during his conversation with Duniya:

For reasons she doesn’t understand he brings his hands forward and displays the palms. He thinks she can see something in his lifelines? But what he says next makes it clear that he is some one traumatized by the United States invasion:

‘I hate America’.

There is a deliberation before each of his words, which seem carefully chosen as a result. She has the feeling that he is searching for the stable and most direct bridge between his inner self and the world (318).

However, Casa’s ego becomes a public display when his loved objects are degraded by James who expresses his anger against Islam and his country Afghanistan – a place, James believes, that nurtures “the children of the devil” like him. “They have no choice but to spread destruction in the world” (413). James, while addressing David, says: “We have a new kind of enemy, David. They are allowed to read the Koran at Guantanamo Bay, as their religious and human right. But have you read it? They don’t need jihadi literature – they’ve got the Koran. Almost every other page is a call to arms, a call to slaughter us infidels” (292-293). As a result of this insult to his religion, Casa directs his aggression at the external world – the US army in Afghanistan – and he does not hesitate even to kill his own saviour, David. Afterall, he cannot “let someone obliterate Islam” (319).

Similar melancholic feelings reside in James when he tortures Casa or other Jihadists in Afghanistan. Being an American soldier, he has a duty to his nation and the people who lost their lives in the 9/11 attacks, “a national tragedy” (Jackson 2005, 32). When fulfilling the duty given to him by his State to expel the Taliban and to prevent their return, James feels justified in being cruel to mujahidin. Responding to criticism that the US army treated mujahidin and Taliban with cruelty, he argues: “why must the United States be the only one asked to uphold the highest standards? No one in the world is innocent but these Muslims say they are . . . So until everyone admits that they are capable of cruelty – and not define their cruelty as just – there will be problems” (295). If analysed objectively, none of these three characters – James, Casa and Bihzad – feel guilty for their atrocities against
innocent people. It is also in this context that Abraham and Torok’s concept of melancholia is important: it provides a justification for not feeling guilty or ashamed of the worst things a melancholic subject may do—a concept that is not explained by Freud. As Abraham and Torok argue: “the more suffering and degradation the object undergoes (meaning: the more hepines for the subject he lost), the prouder the subject can be” (1994, 136). Taking on his mission to protect and defend his homeland from the terrorist attacks of Al Qaeda suicide bombers, James feels proud in devastating the Afghan population because by attacking the World Trade Center, Al-Qaeda degraded his nation. Likewise, Casa and Bihzad are proud to have been jihadis because Allah has ordered them to fight against infidels who are abusing their religion. Lara says more or less the same thing about Stepan’s pride in fighting for his country, irrespective of the massacres of innocent civilians that are his responsibility: “When it came to what he called his nation, his tribe, he too suffered from a kind of blindness: he saw what he wanted to. ‘You think your principles are higher than reality’. He’d say to me” (391).

Butler’s model of melancholia helps us to understand how our individual memories are framed by national consciousness and the grief which is generally considered to be private in fact “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order” (2004, 22). Aslam’s novels show that in diasporic environments, in particular, there is no clear line dividing public and private grief or individual and collective memory. Therefore, Casas’s and James’ melancholia is an expression of their respective nation’s sorrow. Both are antagonistic towards each other. Casa being a jihadi is targeting the Americans who are responsible for killing of jihadists and James targeting Afghans because they are responsible for the deaths of innocent civilians in the 9/11 attacks. Each of them is suffering because of their respective nations’ sorrow. What Aslam is trying to show is that their “suffering[s] can yield an experience of humility . . . of impressionability and dependence, and these can be come resources, if we do not ‘resolve’ them too quickly; they can move us beyond and against the vocation of the paranoid victim who regenerates infinitely the justifications for war” (Butler 2004, 149-150).

Accentuating the relationship posited here between individual and nation, Gilroy asserts that “[t]hat memory of the country at war against foes who are simply, tidily, and uncomplicatedly evil has recently acquired the status of an ethnic myth. It explains not only how the nation remade itself uncomplicatedly evil has recently acquired the status of an ethnic myth. It explains not only how the nation remade itself but can also be understood as a ‐‐ government and your country’s army is doing” (417). This is how “readers are encouraged to consider in what ways memory, melancholia and mourning might be put at the service of a more inclusive conception of national and global communities” (Moore 2009, 17).
References


