Mapping the unstable: the Af-Pak border and its tropes in Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013)

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Nadeem Aslam's fourth novel *The Blind Man's Garden* was published in 2013. Contrary to his biggest success *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), which took more than a decade to write, *The Blind Man's Garden* was published only five years after another novel set in Afghanistan, *The Wasted Vigil* – a testimony, perhaps, of a continued need to explore this troubled region in the aftermath of 9/11. Nadeem Aslam is also known for handwriting his novels and living in extreme isolation while working – in an interview, he admitted to having tape-shut his eyes in his own house while writing this novel in order to grasp the blind character's sensations (Faber & Faber, 00:02:20).

It is perhaps this meticulous approach, translated into Nadeem Aslam's minute syntax and frames of reference, which led writer and philosopher Pankaj Mishra to call the novel an "anatomy of chaos." (23). In this anatomy of chaos, the border is the throbbing heart of the narrative; it is a physical border, but it also runs through the characters' aspirations and beliefs, and reflects the highly segregated reality of the post-9/11 world in an already divided part of the planet. Aslam, a political refugee himself since his family fled the Zia regime in Pakistan in 1980, constantly interrogates the relation between place and violence.

In *The Blind Man's Garden*, the main characters, stepbrothers Jeo and Mikal, are thrown into the heart of chaos in the months following 9/11, in the perilous areas surrounding Pakistan's North-West border with Afghanistan. After they are held captive by the Taliban, Mikal has to go on alone and soon enters a new dimension of

the borderland: the unforgiving "War on Terror".[1] While he is a prisoner again, this time of American forces, Mikal's stepfather Rohan and Jeo's widow Naheed await Mikal's return. Rohan progressively loses his eyesight, while a threat looms over his former school: the presence of a fundamentalist group called "Ardent Spirit". The novel reaches a climax with the attack of Ardent Spirit on the Christian school where Mikal's other brother teaches. When Mikal is about to be freed by the Americans, he kills two soldiers by mistake and has to remain hidden in the confines of the Af-Pak borderland during the rest of the novel, facing a number of ethical dilemmas.

In her article "Capitalism and Critique: 'Af-Pak' Fiction in the Wake of 9/11," Priyamvada Gopal contends that Pakistani writers like Nadeem Aslam or Kamila Shamsie, prolific though they were before 9/11, gained renewed interest in the wake of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. She explains how some critics have been sceptical of such interest, perceiving the growing attention paid to novels in English set in the Af-Pak region as a mere – and rather voyeuristic – fashion (21-22). *The Blind Man's Garden* can indeed be construed as a post-9/11 novel, not only because it might belong to this subgenre, but also in a strictly chronological sense. The novel examines what happened on the Af-Pak border in the months that followed the attacks on the World Trade Center. However, the post-9/11 setting of the novel does not restrict it to a time-specific subgenre: the writer's philosophical agenda emerges beyond the political context, as he constantly shifts the perspective from one character to the next. Upon releasing the novel, Aslam defined his aim as follows: "(…) to see how these wounded people are learning to cope, beginning to hold on to their humanity, despite the wounds" (Faber & Faber, 00:05:55). Following this agenda, the war narrative ultimately discloses the powers of resilience lying within our common humanity.

[1] The phrase is used here to refer to the campaign launched by the U.S. government against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Iraq in the wake of 9/11. It was initially used by President George W. Bush on September 16, and is known for being contentious. It remains problematic as there was no single identifiable enemy, no government *per se* to be "at war" with, and because the phrase has often been said to be used as a justification of acts of extreme violence and torture by U.S. forces in the area. Nadeem Aslam's novel begins in October 2001, exactly at the time when this "war" was declared, and it displays the complex antagonisms which then appeared in discourse, whether it was discourse produced by Afghan and Pakistani civilians, by the Taliban, or by U.S. soldiers. (see *infra*). (http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html)

Context

As in most of Nadeem Aslam's narratives, the geography of the novel blends a number of fictional and real places.

Most of the narrative takes place between two areas. The first one is the fictional town of Heer, where the main characters live. The second zone, which, as we understand, is several hours away from Heer, is the North West border of Pakistan, notably the well-known city of Peshawar. This zone is contiguous with Afghanistan, and is formed of what have been called the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The FATA zone was named as such after the 1947 partition, and it was dismantled in May 2018 by the government to be merged with the neighbouring province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Up to this date, there were specific laws enforced on the area, which were inherited from British rule. Such harsh laws aimed at subduing the Pashtun tribes who live there and whose traditions are different from the rest of Pakistan (Crisis Group; Barker, *The Guardian*).

Besides questions of governance, the area is also well-known for being what Barack Obama called "the most dangerous place in the world" (CNN, Sophia Saifi and Bard Wilkinson). From a geological standpoint, this borderland is a mountainous land, which made it ideal as a guerrilla zone involving the Taliban, the tribal warlords and U.S. forces in the months following 9/11. On a number of occasions, the characters of Aslam's novel get lost in these vast mountain chains. This complex geography also means that it was privileged for the American "seizure, incarceration and torture of terrorist suspects at 'black sites'" (Gregory, 240), one of which is described at length in the narrative.

According to geographer Derek Gregory in his article "The Everywhere War," borderlands such as the Af-Pak area are "shadowlands, spaces that enter European and American imaginaries in phantasmatic form, barely known but vividly imagined – we jibe against the limits of cartographic and so of geopolitical reason" (239). By setting a fiction in English in such a zone, Nadeem Aslam addresses this loophole between the Western imagination and an Eastern reality, and leads his readers to question their understanding of borders, both physical and imagined, in the post-9/11 world.

In *The Blind Man's Garden*, mapping the Af-Pak borderland is a continuous process, perceived through the characters' displacement along, across and beyond the border, but also through a number of metonymic networks. The unstable

borderland constantly mirrors the troubled post-9/11 global geography, while evocations of utmost violence in the war zone also provide an ethical approach to border-crossing.

For Thomas Nail, the instability of the border is part of its very definition: "The border is not simply a static membrane or space through which flows of people move" (Nail, 6). In his *Theory of the Border*, the philosopher explains that the border moves itself – through geological processes or catastrophes – but it is also moved by others, for example when economic reforms or territorial conflicts occur. While Nail's theory relies essentially on physical borders, in *The Blind Man's Garden* motion is inherent to both physical borders and images of the border, thus de-stabilizing any attempt at mapping the complex post-9/11 world geography.

First, the motif of invasion is prevalent in the novel, whether it is ideological or territorial; it is often an obstacle to the attempts at mapping carried out by the characters. In the novel, the border can also be construed alongside the concept of the prism – an image used by Aslam himself –, allowing the story to reflect a poetic light on parts of the world rendered dim by political discourse and mainstream media. While the physical border is threatened by war and violence, the symbolic border points to Aslam's poetics of confluence, inviting the reader to acknowledge the border as a place of spatial and historical continuity rather than an impermeable limitation.

I – Borders and invasion: impossible mappings

The borderland is constantly subject to invasion in *The Blind Man's Garden*. The characters are indeed confronted with the US-led "War on Terror," an invasion of the area triggered by the fight against al-Qaeda after the 9/11 attacks. Yet other, metaphorical forms of invasion pervade the narrative, showing how border-crossing and appropriation are not only a geographical stake.

But what form can invasion take when the border itself is ill-defined? In the wake of 9/11, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman pointed to "a symbolic end to the era of space," observing an annihilation of borders and the fact that "no one can any longer cut themselves off from the rest of the world" (81-82). In *The Blind Man's Garden*, both the experience of territory and the symbols of territory emphasize this problematic relation to delineation. The guerrilla-like fighting of the "War on Terror" and the globalization of conflict transpire in the characters' perception of the wartime borderland, and reflect how discourse itself might be the site of invasion.

1. A typology of borders

Throughout the plot and the characters' journeys, two main borders appear: the Af-Pak border – a physical border – and the mental or ideological border between the East and the West.

In the first part of the novel, as Jeo and Mikal enter the war zone they have been sent to by the Taliban, believing they will help the wounded on the front line, the two brothers carry with them a book of maps. In one striking passage imbued with magical realism, Jeo sees the book of maps invaded itself by American bombs:

> From the book he carefully tears out several maps, and in this light Afghanistan's mountains and hills and restlessly branching corridors of rock appear as though the pages are crumpled up, and there is a momentary wish in him to smooth them down. Laser-guided bombs are falling onto the pages in his hands, missiles summoned from the Arabian Sea, from American warships that are as long as the Empire State Building is tall. (14)

Jeo's book seems to come alive, giving way to a three-dimensional reading of the war zone. With its pages "crumpled up," the object is almost likened to a pop-up children's book, an unavoidable threshold to the troubled area – and, for the reader, an eerily realistic threshold to the story. Thus, the border between the maps and the territorial reality of war is blurred, and the uncontrollable power of the landscape over men's wars is mirrored by the polysyndeton structure ("mountains **and** hills **and** restlessly branching corridors of rock"), while the United States' invasion of the area is made equally threatening by the comparison of warships with the Empire State Building. In this chaotic rendering of territorial stakes, the bombs and missiles pervade the page as well as the imagination: the comparison with the building calls to mind the cause of American invasion, that is the attacks on the World Trade Center. Through the book of maps, the two borders – the Af-Pak border and the East-West divide – appear simultaneously, interrogating the post-9/11 mindscape and placing Jeo and Mikal at the crossroads of these divides.

The impossible mapping of the borderland is actually a power struggle in the novel. Later, as the brothers are held captive, their book of maps is taken from them and causes them to be suspected of spying for the Americans. The mastery of territory becomes so fundamental that the Taliban ask Mikal to interpret the stars for them; indeed, the latter uses navigational astronomy throughout the narrative. The

men ask if Mikal knows "the language of the stars" (62), showing the failure of other forms of languages when it comes to mapping the borderland.

Without any mapping, gaining control over the borderland seems doomed to fail. Yet the novel progressively displays how the battles, unsuccessful though they are, can have the upper hand on the landscape of the borderland, to the point of shaping it anew. When Rohan goes looking for his sons in the borderland, he crosses a deserted, almost moon-like landscape:

> Through hillsides, across bridges, through a dust storm a mile long, and through streams in which float – by the dozen – the shaved-off beards of fleeing al-Qaeda militants, the journey to the destination in Afghanistan takes seventeen hours. In deep twilight they cross a broad flat valley with a river and river flats in it, every bit of it scorched black where a Daisy Cutter bomb had been dropped, reducing everything to ash, pumice, lava, the sides of hills torn up into segments (…). It looks like the site of a cosmic incursion such as a meteorite, not the work of men. (142)

In his border-crossing journey, Rohan enters a chaos that precludes any neat delineation of borders. The tension of the passage grows more and more intense, from the metonymical threat of the shaved-off beards to the anatomical description of the bombed landscape. Interestingly, this post-apocalyptic landscape is seen at a highly liminal moment of day (the "deep twilight"), a moment of change and uncertainty. It goes as far as blurring the boundaries between the human and the non-human, as the effects of men's wars are compared to those of a meteorite. Following his philosophical intention, the writer leads his reader to observe such chasms in several dimensions, and thus to explore the wounds inflicted by war – not only on minds and bodies, but also on landscapes.

2. Symbolical invasions

While the physical borders seem impossible to map, and therefore to appropriate, the narrative regularly displays other forms of invasion. Nadeem Aslam's writing is run through with symbolism. In the first part of the novel, invasion metaphors remain linked to impacts of the war on the landscape, for instance when the American soldiers' footprints are personified (162); yet the complexity of invasion reaches a climax towards the end of the narrative, when Mikal discovers that the American soldier he holds captive in spite of himself has a striking tattoo on his back:

> There is a large tattoo on the skin: […]
> The word covers the entire space between the shoulder blades, and they stand looking at it, the American continuing to struggle. It says 'Infidel.'

> But it is not in English, which would have meant that he had had it done for himself or for others like him in his own country. It is in the Urdu and Pashto script so it is meant for people *here*. (400-401)[2]

The man's subversive tattoo – a visual token which Aslam borrowed from a picture seen in a magazine (Jaggi) – is an instance of the complex border-crossing at work in the narrative: the invader's body is itself invaded skin-deep by the invaded's language, in an act of provocation filled with symbolic power. The body stands as an interface, as the paradigmatic border between men, used to differentiate the inside and the outside, sameness and otherness. This body invaded by the tattoo epitomizes the many embedded meanings of the border in the post-9/11 Af-Pak borderland.

Invasion is also symbolised particularly powerfully when Naheed's mother, Tara, is asked by a young Talib to sew an American flag so that it can be burned publicly:

> Perhaps the blue in the flag means that the Americans own all the blue in the world – water, sky, blood seen through veins, the Blue Mosque in Tabriz, dusk, the feather with which she marks her place in her Koran, her seamstress's chalk, the spot on the lower back of newborn babies, postmarks, the glass eyes of foreign dolls. Muhammad swore by the redness of the evening sky, and Adam means both 'alive' and 'red'. Do the Americans own these and all other reds? Roses, meats, certain old leaves, certain new leaves, love, the feathers under the bulbul's tail, dresses and veils of brides, dates marking festivals on calendars, garnets and rubies, happiness, blushes, daring, war, the Red Fort in Delhi, […] the binding of her Koran – these and all the other shades of red, crimson, vermilion, scarlet, maroon, raspberry, obsidian, russet, plum, magenta, geranium, the tearful eyes of the woman from three doors down, who had told Tara she did not want her to sew her daughter's dowry clothes after discovering that Tara was possessed with the djinn, fearing Tara would stitch her bad luck into the garments, the red flag of the revolution dreamt by Mikal and Basie's parents, the Alhambra in Spain, the paths in Rohan's garden, carpets woven in Shiraz, shiny cars that the rich import into Pakistan only to find that there are no good roads to drive them on. The setting sun. The rising sun.
>
> She works without pause, the large flag materialising slowly in the interior as the hours go by, half the size of the room. (126-127)

The internal focalisation, rendered through the uninterrupted enumeration, reflects the character's own re-mapping of borders: through her enumeration of all the

[2] I have decided not to type the word in the quotation so as not to betray the exact script displayed on the page. The word as it appears on the page is most likely the Pashto script کافر, which seems slightly closer to the Arabic کافر (*kafir*) than to the Urdu script for the word: کُفر (sources: *thePashto.com*, http://thepashto.com/word.php?english=&pashto=%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B1&roman= , *Oxford Urdu Living Dictionary*, https://ur.oxforddictionaries.com/translate/urdu-english/%DA%A9%D9%81%D8%B1). Languages of the South Asian subcontinent such as Pashto and Urdu have known a number of encounters with Arabic as well as Persian. In this specific instance in the novel, the similarity with Arabic partakes both of a lexical and a scriptural proximity of Urdu and Pashto with Arabic. The main scripts used in Urdu and Pashto-speaking regions, *Naskh* and *Nastliq*, bear close resemblance to one another, and in borderland regions like Peshawar, the choice of one or the other can indicate preference for either Urdu or Pashto. For more on the subject, see *The Indo-Aryan Languages* (Cardona & Jain, 2003, *infra*., p. 52) and *Language in South Asia* (Kachru *et al.*, 2008, *infra*, p. 128).

shades of colours included in her frame of reference, she delineates the borders of her own world, a world alienated from her by the United States' invasion of her region. The sewing metaphor is but another extension of border-making and border-crossing. Blending examples which are both internal and external to the narrative, and references which are universal (the setting and rising sun) but also geographically specific (the Red Fort, the Alhambra), the passage culminates in a micro-invasion at the level of Tara's flat, where the flag has taken up the space. As is often the case, Nadeem Aslam's poetic prose relies on hypotyposis, creating a coherent yet complex spatial imaginary within the space of a single sentence. The vivid descriptions he includes in the plot actually form part of an aesthetics which relies on perspective, and which can be explored through the concept of the prism.

II – The border and prismatic perception

Nadeem Aslam has often described how his writing is perceived as hopeful in Pakistan while being considered beautiful but grim in the West. In an essay he wrote for the online 2010 *Granta* issue on Pakistan, he explained:

> Pakistanis are as complex as any other people on the planet. I think of a beam of light emerging on the other side split into seven colours. What you see depends on which side of the prism you are standing on: on one side the light is uniform, of a single colour. On the other, it's violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange and red. I am on the coloured side. (Aslam)

Standing on the "coloured side" implies that Nadeem Aslam's writing of Pakistan – and Afghanistan – provides a different perspective on areas otherwise painted in black and white by newspaper reports and globally broadcast images of warfare. Through the prism of the narrative, the writer's enterprise consists in re-poeticizing places undermined by terror, but also by political and media discourse in the context of the "War on Terror"; the novelist aims at re-habilitating their mythologies and their landscapes and endowing them with a variety of colours in his writing.

The prism metaphor can be extended to the treatment of the border and its tropes in *The Blind Man's Garden*. Indeed, setting the narrative in the borderland enhances the subjective dimension of any attempt at mapping and representing: perception differs whether one stands on one side of the border or on the other. The Af-Pak borderland and the ideological East/West border are put to the test of Nadeem Aslam's prismatic writing, and are revealed to be highly subjective constructs. In the

process of this revelation, the reader is invited to question their own standpoint in the face of post-9/11 divisions.

1. Re-mapping the world from the borderland

Throughout the novel, the Af-Pak characters constantly re-assess their understanding of space. As the internal focalizer changes regularly, so does the mapping of borders. The language conveyed by the characters operates an unstable mapping, which is always already challenged by the next assertion.

Early in the novel, the character of Jeo observes his town of Heer before leaving as a volunteer on the front lines of the borderland: "He scans the high view before him to see which other areas of Heer are without electricity tonight. His city within his fraught and poor nation, here in the Third World" (27). Jeo's definition of Pakistan as "fraught" and "poor" is further underlined by its lack of light – here again, it appears difficult to interpret space. Yet the final phrase is definitive: Pakistan is declared to be a Third World country, even though the phrase itself is an unstable label, usually bestowed by richer countries. Jeo's observation is another manifestation of border-crossing, whereby he seems to observe Pakistan from an outsider's perspective.

The narrative voice shifts to a much more patriotic representation of Pakistan whenever it voices the claims of Ardent Spirit, the fundamentalist group which finally attacks the Christian School in the town of Heer. On one occasion, their vengeful mapping of the world is embedded in the perspective of Father Mede, the white British principal of the school, who hears them speaking from their van:

> 'We'll reduce America to the size of India, India to the size of Israel, Israel to nothing,' the loudspeaker said as it lingered near the public monument at the end of the road, a giant fibreglass replica of the mountain under which Pakistan's nuclear bomb was tested. […] Its insides are hollow and it is lit up from within at night: in the pale evenings from the balcony of his room above the school, Father Mede watches it come on – one moment it is dead and grey but then suddenly, like a fever rising from its very core, a glow spreads on the slopes and it swells and brightens until its radiance rivals the moon, and the beggar children who shelter in there can be seen moving in silhouette on the brilliant sides. (226)

The Ardent Spirit group re-maps the world through words shouted in a loudspeaker, but the pseudo-patriotic speech is rendered ironically fake and inefficient as the members stand next to a fake mountain. The replica's artificial lighting points to the sham that is the detention of nuclear weapons by Pakistan, but it also sheds light on the contradictions of a nation: as the white man looks at the replica, the glow merely

shows poor children taking shelter inside the mountain, hinting back to Jeo's definition of Pakistan as "his fraught and poor nation". Well-armed though it may be, Pakistan is pervaded by paradoxical limitations, and the apparently majestic mountain is similar to a large nesting doll from which less glorious versions of the country are extracted. Here again, the evocation of the children acts as a prismatic device, revealing a contrasted perception of the place through the prism of the narrative voice.

2. Mapping otherness

The attempts at delineating borders also appear in the encounters between self and other. The narrative creates a divide between the American and Af-Pak characters, a divide made manifest by the treatment of prisoners by American services, to which Mikal has been sold by a warlord. While they attempt to question Mikal, the problematic status of the Af-Pak borderland is once again hinted at:

> 'We know you can speak. You spoke in your sleep. Sometimes in the language of an Afghan, sometimes in the language of a Pakistani. Are you a Pakistani, an Afghan, or an Afghan born and raised in Pakistan?' (201)

The Americans' failed mapping of their prisoner's identity illustrates the intricacy of the borderland. The duality of the borderland is further reflected in the character's mind through his hybrid use of language, which is both an unconscious habit in his sleep and a deliberate act: Mikal chooses to answer the question in Pashto, in order not to be identified by the American Military Policemen. The use of the substantive forms by the American instead of the adjectives ("the language of an Afghan," "the language of a Pakistani") bears witness to the border standing between the men and their prisoners, as a distance is maintained even in words.[3]

The perception of Afghan and Pakistani men as potential "terrorists" is not only expressed in words, but also in pictures, by American children whose drawings Mikal can see on the walls of the prison:

> 'Why are there pictures in the corridor?' Mikal says. Their bright colours had pained his eyes. […]
>
> 'They are from children in America.'
>
> Drawings of butterflies, flowers, guns shooting at men with beards and helicopters dropping bombs on small figures in turbans.
>
> 'They are letters to the soldiers from schoolchildren. The words say, *Go Get the Bad Men* and *I Hope You Kill Them All* and *Come Home Safely*. I saw one

[3] For a disambiguation on the languages of the Af-Pak borderland, see note 2.

> that said, *We are praying for you, and said the Rosary for you today in class*.' (209-210)

The children's naïve drawings and use of words delineate the contours of the Eastern world from a limited prism. They form a topsy-turvy imagination by attributing religious discourse to the American children, while their country fights against a fundamentalist group, thus suggesting that the "War on Terror" might have roots in religious discourse as much as said "terror" does. Interestingly, the presence of bright colours is not proof of a comprehensive view, of a prism reflecting a variety of lights; rather, it turns the drawings into sheer caricature. Furthermore, the use of capital letters as if referring to a set phrase points to a disturbing internalisation of clichés by the schoolchildren. Nadeem Aslam thus resorts to caricature to reveal the problematic patterns of discourse emanating from post-9/11 East/West relations. In his 2013 interview on *The Blind Man's Garden*, he explained that he wanted to explore how the previous ten years had led to "[…] an incomplete understanding of the West, and an incomplete understanding of the East" (Faber & Faber, 00:00:23). The blinding drawings invite the reader of English to question their own ethical positioning and to re-evaluate the manifold manifestations of a border between self and other.

3. Sensory re-mapping

The five senses are another element leading to mapping in the novel. Early on in the novel, as Jeo and Mikal enter the war zone in the Af-Pak borderland, their senses are assaulted by the experience of warfare. As the men who hold them hostage take them deeper into the war zone, they are surrounded by a desolate landscape and believe that they are lost in the borderland. But suddenly their hearing is affected as well:

> And as they stand there surrounded by the strange earth and the strange sky, Jeo hears what he has never heard before, the awful crump of tank shells, explosions and gunfire in the far distance. 'Do you hear it?' 'Yes,' Mikal replies. 'It's a battle, isn't it?' 'Yes.' 'It's the world,' one of the other men says. 'The world sounds like this all the time, we just don't hear it. Then sometimes in some places we do.' (56-57)

The experience of perception through a prism is once again prevalent in this passage. The change of perspective is twofold: first, upon crossing the border, Mikal and Jeo enter the unknown, a zone with a "strange earth" and "strange sky". Their perception of landscape changes as both images and sounds now seem unfamiliar to

them. Yet another border-crossing occurs when one of the men in the truck re-directs their perspective from "a battle" to "the world". The sensory call upon their hearing seems to trigger a pivotal re-definition of space, a re-mapping of the world in its entirety. The Af-Pak borderland is turned into an epitome of world conflict at large, and the characters' experience comes to represent the world's deafness to the sounds of the war zone. Through this passage, the novel itself clearly stands as a prism through which the reader can access a highly realistic, more comprehensive understanding of the war zone.

Another important sensory re-mapping is that of the novel's eponymous "blind man". After he happens to be on the site of a terrorist attack, Mikal's stepfather Rohan starts losing his eyesight, the eye operation he needs being too expensive. Rohan's experience of progressive blindness symbolizes the difficulty of mapping the violence-ridden world. His sensory re-mapping of the world through other senses is facilitated by Naheed, who describes colours to him or paints flower petals so he can see their colours. In the midst of divisive borders, the border which separates Rohan from the world around him acts as an incentive to assess and map the world differently. The character's anxiety mirrors the anxiety of war and global upheavals, notably when we are told: "His hands rest on the table as if to steady the world, or to make it stay there" (176-177). While the descriptions of Rohan's sensory journey undoubtedly form part of Nadeem Aslam's enterprise of re-poeticizing Pakistan, by depicting its colours and smells to the reader, the final reference to Rohan hints at another role that space plays in the novel:

> Within the garden she has tied a cord from place to place. They refer to it as the 'rope walk' and it connects all the different plants and locations Rohan likes to visit. Rohan makes his way through the garden by holding onto it, feeling his way along the red line zigzagging through the trees. (466)

Rohan's walk is described as a highly tentative stroll, and the balance found by the characters at the end of the novel seems to be just as precarious as tightrope walking. But what it enhances most is the creation of a connection through the cord put in place. After the characters have been constantly wounded both physically and mentally throughout the narrative, the metaphorical mending process described here shows that the borderland, a place made of divisions and severed ties, can also be a site of continuity, showing the confluence of trajectories.

III – Towards a poetics of confluence

In his 2013 interview with Faber & Faber on *The Blind Man's Garden*, Nadeem Aslam explained that in the novel "[…] people are always reaching out" towards others (Faber & Faber, 00:03:58). More recently, Nadeem Aslam wrote *The Golden Legend* (2017), a novel revolving around a rare philosophical book torn apart in the context of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, entitled *That They Might Know Each Other*. The book is stitched back in golden thread by the characters. The writer acknowledged that for this novel, he was partly indebted to a study called *Confluences: Forgotten Histories from East and West*, authored by Ranjit Hoskote and Ilija Trojanow. The latter book sheds light on the many ways in which countries and cultures that are seemingly remote from one another can actually be traced back to common histories, through traditions, encounters or stories. The authors explain that the usual perspective on history is mistaken in its bounded, essentialist discourse:

> Our history, regulated by concepts of singularity and pure origin, is as much a cartographer's invention as the […] river. By taking a certain tableau of it to represent a culture's form and essence, it mistakes a snapshot of the river for its whole course. (4)

Although such considerations are explicitly evoked in *The Golden Legend*, this understanding of confluence can already be traced back to *The Blind Man's Garden*, published four years earlier. This poetics of confluence, perceptible in the novel's themes, structure and images, is particularly relevant to the treatment of the border. Indeed, the border stands as the uttermost site of confluence, giving way to encounters that seem to forge history as much as individual stories.

1. Historical confluence

The novel contains many references to history, notably to the parallels that can be established between the moment when the narration is set and other events from the past. The narrative starts with this enigmatic aphorism: "History is the third parent" (5). To a certain extent, the characters indeed seem to be influenced and educated by history. Nadeem Aslam's prose frequently uses historical reference as a means to emphasize sameness and continuity. On one occasion, the blind man, Rohan, who is a learned elderly professor, remarks upon the links between contemporary geopolitics and historical facts:

> 'Spain was once a Muslim land,' Rohan says, cupping the flowers in his hands. 'In October 1501, the Catholic monarchs ordered the destruction of all Islamic books and manuscripts. Thousands of Korans and other texts were burned in a public bonfire.'
>
> She lets him talk as she looks around for Mikal. Nothing but a kingfisher stitching together the two banks of the river with the bright threads of its flight. (228)

Here again, the witnesses of the war at the Af-Pak border are made to enlarge their perspective to global, imagined borders. In the post-9/11 world of antagonisms, Rohan reminds Naheed that once, part of the West also believed in Islam, and by so doing he deconstructs the strict mental boundaries erected by the ongoing "War on Terror". Naheed notices a kingfisher appearing after the old man's speech. The coloured bird is often known as a symbol of peace: its Greek name *halcyon* is drawn from the myth of Alcyone and Ceyx, finding peace together as birds after being condemned for their love. It is also said that its bright colours appeared upon leaving Noah's ark after the Flood (Larousse, Brill's New Pauly). Here, its act of "stitching" the riverbanks mirrors Rohan's comment on the confluence of religions in history, and operates a cathartic form of border-crossing at the end of a story full of suffering: the reader observes this free crossing in spite of the character's entrapment in his blindness and in the pangs of war. The "bright threads" might also be read as another means of giving colours to the Af-Pak borderland in the midst of the conflict.

Later in the novel, Mikal meets a man who welcomes him for the night, and asks him his way back to Peshawar. The two characters are in an ancient cave in the mountain, filled with hieroglyphs several centuries old. The man draws the map in a palimpsest-like gesture which makes the narrative cross a historical border: "[…] he draws Mikal the route to Peshawar, his marks moving over and through the Buddhist writings, between them and incorporating them" (249). The walls of the cave are thus used as a re-mapping device, allowing the character to trace his future journey in light of historical continuity. Here again, Nadeem Aslam's writing resorts to symbols of historical legacy to convey the prevalence of continuity over division.

2. Ethical confluence

The notion of confluence, however, is not a naïve concept that would limit itself to an idealistic reconciliation of religions and cultures. Rather, its aim is to encompass the necessity and inevitability of cultural encounters in history. Ranjit Hoskote and Ilija Trojanow explain it thus:

> Confluence is not without conflict; rather, cultural transformation has been effected just as much by peaceful encounter as by the tumults of war, invasion, slavery, inquisition and exiles. Periods of deep confluence were not utopias of serenity and understanding among diverse groups brought together into a single polity. (11-12)

The Blind Man's Garden thus ends with a confluence in the trajectories of antagonistic characters. In the third part of the novel, the reader is introduced to an American soldier, who has come to the Af-Pak borderland to avenge his dead brother supposedly killed by a "terrorist." The reader progressively understands that the man he is looking for is Mikal, and that his dead brother is one of the Military Policemen Mikal killed in order to escape, earlier in the novel. At the end of the narrative, Mikal and this vengeful soldier cross paths, and Mikal puts him in chains upon finding him asleep, lest he should kill him. Both characters ignore one another's identity, and the dramatic irony that unfolds gives way to a form of ethical confluence. Indeed, Mikal regularly wonders why he goes through the struggle of hiding this man instead of killing him, and of crossing the border back to Pakistan with him. Yet Mikal's curiosity about this stranger's life has the upper hand, especially as they cannot speak to one another:

> The white man's eyes are a doorway to another world, to a mind shaped by different rules, a different way of life. What kind of a man is he? Is he well spoken, a union of strength and delicacy? Is he in love with someone or is he oblivious? Does he, like Mikal, have a brother? (419)

This "doorway" is perhaps another border to be crossed, although the two men's destinies will be separated without them having exchanged a word. The use of multiple questions here seems to be addressed to the reader as much as it is a self-exploration process for the character. Because they remain fundamentally universal, Mikal's concerns broach the sameness of human relations beyond borders.

Yet it is worth remembering that the novel is not naively didactic, and one of the final passages, when Mikal is in conversation with a Pashtun man about his American hostage, proves the difficulty of putting confluence to the test of solid mental boundaries:

> 'We can't know what the Westerners want,' the old man says. 'To know what they want you have to eat what they eat, wear what they wear, breathe the air they breathe. You have to be born where they are born.'
>
> 'I am not sure. You mentioned books. We can learn things from books.'
>
> 'No one from here can know what the Westerners know,' the man says. 'The Westerners are unknowable to us. The divide is too great, too final. It's like asking what the dead or the unborn know.' (441)

The man's cryptic reference compares foreignness to death, creating a curious intermingling of time and space. While his peremptory assertion that "the divide is too great" is left to the reader as the last reflection, one cannot but read Mikal's reference to books as a meta-fictional device. The reader is addressed as if to invite them to contemplate their own mental boundaries. The man's tautological reasoning is confronted by the possibility of learning, and eventually, of crossing borders through the very act of reading, with the page standing as a possible site of confluence.

Conclusion

In Nadeem Aslam's 2009 novel *The Wasted Vigil*, one of the characters reflects: "How keen everyone is to make this world their home forgetting its impermanence. It's like trying to see and name constellations in a fireworks display" (354). This assertion could apply to the impossible mapping at work in *The Blind Man's Garden*. While the border is acknowledged from a geological standpoint, its political relevance is constantly questioned and confronted with the continuity of human experience. The "fireworks," here, are the fires of war in the post-9/11 world; and while the characters try to survive in the midst of a conflict bigger than themselves, the delineation of a stable geographical and political separation seems doomed to fail.

Through this impossible mapping process, the novel directs our gaze towards questions of sameness and difference, permanence and transience, and the universality of suffering on both sides of a conflict-stricken border. Despite the violence that may ensue, the border remains fundamentally a site of encounter, and interrogates the narratives we build for ourselves and for others.

Nadeem Aslam has regularly repeated that, to him, "a novelist doesn't tell you what to think, a novelist tells you what to think about" (Gough). By placing his narrative in the Af-Pak border during the War on Terror, the writer abides by this agenda: he guides the readers of English towards a place they need to explore – towards borders they need to cross.

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