

Bare Life as People's History: Subaltern Lives in Nadeem Aslam's The Wasted Vigil and The Blind Man's Garden

Jahangir Khan*¹

Abstract

This article examines how Nadeem Aslam's novels *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) retrieve a subaltern "people's history" of the Pak-Afghan frontier. Synthesizing Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical framework of "bare life" and "sovereign exception" with the foundational critiques of Subaltern Studies, this paper argues that the borderlands operate as a zone of inclusive exclusion where the legal order is suspended to reduce peripheral subjects to zoe, or bare life. Rather than naively claiming to restore a transparent postcolonial voice, Aslam's non-linear narrative form exposes the structural mechanisms of "archival silence" and "bordertexturing", highlighting the representational "unreachability" of the subaltern caught within mutually hostile yet structurally hegemonic discourses. Drawing on Ranajit Guha's critique of the "prose of counter-insurgency," we demonstrate how these elite narratives employ a "code of pacification" to overwrite local, domestic realities.

Article History

Received 02 September 2026
Accepted 24 September 2026
Published 29 September 2026
Corresponding Author*
OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Nadeem Aslam, Subaltern Studies, Bare Life, Prose of Counter-Insurgency, Archival Silence, Bordertexturing,

Introduction

Indoctrinated at school by his Soviet state that he was serving the cause of a great proletarian revolution by fighting against the the US imperialist intervention and imperialist proxies called Afghan Mujahideen, an unknown young Soviet soldier abducts and rapes an young Afghan woman at some unknown prisoner compound in Afghnaistan. The woman, forced by the war between the Mujahideen and the state armies, flees for her life to Pakistan. On her perilous journey she gives birth to a baby boy. There is no bed, doctor, or hospital to assist her in her labour. The young woman, with her baby clinging to her breast, crosses the border into Pakistan. Her little boy, shifting as a refugee from one camp into another, grows into an Islamist militant, trained both mentally and physically by the CIA which propagates that the Soviets are the worst of all infidels, and it was thus his religious duty to fight against the infidels. Trained by the CIA to know nothing but war and fighting, this little boy ultimately turns into a suicide bomber after the US-led NATO forces replace Taliban and occupy Afghanistan. He and his mother are just two among millions whose stories have disappeared

¹ Phd Scholar, NUML, Islamabad. ibniqazi@gmail.com

unheard and unmourned in the dust. During the long period of war and violence spreading from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1969 to the US withdrawal from the country in 2021, millions of subaltern have experienced the wars chiseled into their bodies and carved into their memories. The exact magnitude and intensity of this subaltern suffering may never be known. Narratives of the Afghan war, that dominate and shape popular imaginaries of the war, are elitist, statist and security-centred, unavoidably excluding the subaltern victim's voice which may never be fully known or recovered. Against this archival silence this article explores how Aslam's fiction provides a way to imagine and empathise with the sufferings of the unknown millions.

Official historiographies of the Afghan wars have generally ignored recording these subaltern sufferings and voices. It is a phenomenon that stands as a profound example of what Kevin Olson (2024) defines as "archival silence", a systematic institutional exclusion of marginalized, peripheral subjects from hegemonic historical records (p. 92). No combatant history has room for it. The young woman abducted, raped and forced beyond the border is not a fighter, not a martyr, not a statistic. She is simply present, a subaltern victim of war, leaving a mark that outlives her whether or not anyone ever reads about her. Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) are full of such moments, ordinary people caught in wars authored by others, whose suffering and small acts of endurance official discourse has no vocabulary to register. Aslam's two Pak-Afghan border novels retrieve a subaltern people's history of the Afghan wars, performing a critical historiographical operation that, as Manan Ahmed (2011) argues, seeks to "decontextualise the only context that appears relevant—the imperial one" (p. 60). By paying attention to characters embodying localized production of history and memory, these narratives assert that the human cost of the Afghan wars has a centrality and historical validity of its own. Giorgio Agamben's (1998) concept of bare life supplies the analytical mechanism for this claim. These discourses are mutually hostile, yet they share a common capacity to reduce subaltern victims to lives that can be exposed to violence without that violence counting, in the discourse's own terms, as a wrong requiring redress. Aslam's fragmented, non-linear narrative form is the literary technique through which a history that official chronologies do not represent becomes narratable.

This article situates itself within Subaltern Studies' foundational critique of elite historiography, extending that critique to a set of discourses that do not normally appear together in a single frame. This critical approach aligns with the contemporary "border turn" in literary studies, utilizing what Astrid M. Fellner (2023) terms "bordertexturing" to dismantle hegemonic, state-centric structures and expose alternative systems of knowledge (p. 30). By thinking "through or from the border, rather than thinking about it," the analysis reads the frontier not as a static edge, but as an active, polyphonic site of representational struggle (Fellner, 2023, p. 30). The article then turns to Agamben's (2005) sovereign exception to explain how each of these competing geopolitical discourses, despite claiming to oppose the others, produces the same structural silence. From there it moves through both novels in turn, and closes by asking how narrative fragmentation itself performs the recovery of a history that the official perspectives of the neo-imperialist state and the fundamentalist Mujahideens cannot accommodate in their discourses.

It is important to understand what kind of claim this article makes. Aslam's fiction is not a transparent restoration of a voice history has denied ordinary Afghans and Pakistanis, standing in for testimony the record lacks. Gayatri Spivak's warning about speaking for a subaltern subject applies directly here. Even a sympathetic act of representation can reproduce, in a gentler register, the appropriation it means to resist by overlooking the "historical and ideological factors that obstruct the possibility of being heard for those who inhabit the periphery" (Morris, 2010, p. 11). As Spivak suggests, the subaltern is denied access to both mimetic and political forms of representation, meaning their speech is frequently lost to the "distanced decipherment by another" rather than being properly heard (as cited in Khan et al., 2023, p. 143). What this article argues is that the two novels investigated here foreground the untold stories of subalterns silenced by the elitist and fundamentalist discourses of the Afghan wars. This foregrounding is itself a historiographic achievement made possible only through works of fiction. More specifically, the article argues is that Aslam's fiction archives empathy and not authenticity or authority for the lost subalterns' voices silenced by state's and militants perspectives on the Afghan wars.

A rich and highly polished corpus of scholarships already exists, exploring Aslam's fiction through a variety of critical vantage positions. Most of this existing on Aslam's fiction explores two novels as narratives of trauma and geopolitical entanglement. Attentive largely to the human cost of the Cold War and the War on Terror, most of these critics have generally ignored how the novels resist elitist historiographic exclusion of the subalterns voices and sufferings. Work within postcolonial trauma studies and the study of post-9/11 Anglophone fiction has established that Aslam's fiction resists any single ideological reading of the Afghan wars, distributing sympathy and culpability across an international cast instead of assigning it to one side. This body of work is indispensable background. It has generally treated the novels' polyphony as a formal virtue in its own right, without asking what kind of history that polyphony makes possible. By analyzing this polyphonic structure contrapuntally, however, we can see how Aslam's novels do not simply build liberal empathy with a static, pre-constituted "other," but actively "question the discursive frameworks within which difference between the self and the other is conceptualized in the first place" (O'Gorman, 2015, p. 6).

Subaltern Studies offers the missing frame. Originating as a Eurocentric military taxonomy, the term "subaltern" underwent a profound semantic metamorphosis from Gramsci's analysis of class struggle to Ranajit Guha's revisionist historiography of the South Asian peasantry (Dutta, 2021, p. 71). Guha's (1983) foundational argument is that the colonial archive registers the peasant or the ordinary subject only in the moment of insurgency, and even then only as an object of the state's counter-insurgent gaze. The rebel appears, but the rebel's own consciousness remains, in Guha's phrase, external to the very discourse meant to record it (p. 47). Gayatri Spivak's subsequent caution sharpens the stakes of any claim that fiction can recover what historiography cannot. Sympathetic attempts to represent the subaltern risk speaking over that subject instead of for them. Spivak's caution is taken seriously here, not set aside. The claim is not that Aslam's novels simply "give voice" to the borderland's ordinary people. It is that they expose, through form, the specific mechanism by which several competing official discourses fail to register that voice in the first place. This is a more modest

claim than restoration, and a more defensible one, recognizing that the subaltern is structurally defined by an institutional "unapproachability, un-accessibility, [and] unreachability" that prevents their direct, unmediated retrieval within hegemonic historical discourse (Dutta, 2021, p. 73).

However it is important to note that the subaltern studies account of Indian historiography has largely been ignored in understanding and retrieving the voices and sufferings of the subaltern victims of the wars in Afghanistan, especially in the regions along the Pak-Afghan border where most of the war has been traditionally concentrated itself and where, as a natural consequence, most of the death and destruction of the war have taken place. Subaltern Studies does not by itself supply an account of how the silencing operates at the level of law and sovereignty, only at the level of narrative convention. That is where Agamben's biopolitical vocabulary becomes analytically necessary. By mapping the "border turn in literary studies" and its critical shift "from centre to periphery, from text to margin" (Fellner, 2023, p. 20), we can analyze how the legal-political exception on the borderlands is mapped directly onto the geographical margins of the nation-state. This spatial and conceptual framework allows us to examine the border not as a static edge, but as an active, polyphonic site of representational struggle (Fellner, 2023, p. 23). It functions here as the mechanism for the historiographic claim, not a replacement for it.

The lives of the Afghan subalterns traumatised by the wars represent a long tragic saga of a condition that Agamben calls bare life. It is a life that can be killed without the killing counted as homicide, because that life has been placed, by an act of sovereign decision, outside the ordinary protections of law. In *State of Exception*, Agamben (2005) elaborates the mechanism by which this placement occurs, demonstrating that it happens not through the law's absolute absence but through the law's own suspension of itself, producing a paradoxical "legal form of what cannot have legal form" (p. 1). Under this sovereign ban, the subject is not merely cast outside the law but is "abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable" (Agamben, 1998, p. 28). Subaltern victims of the Afghan wars cannot invoke any court against the sovereign that governs him, and the War-on-Terror detainee held beyond the reach of ordinary judicial process, occupy structurally the same position, even though one inheritance is colonial-administrative and the other is contemporary and military. Both are, in Agamben's terms, situated on this volatile threshold, exposed to violence without that violence registering as an injury the sovereign order need answer for.

This article mobilises Agamben's concepts as analytical tools to support the overarching argument. The article claims that Aslam's choice of Afghan subaltern victims of war serves as a site of bare life in the concrete form. Against the silence imposed about subaltern suffering by the hegemony of the US and Mujahideen/Taliban discourses about the Cold War and the War on Terror, Aslam's fiction creates fictional borderscapes that imagine the war through the bare life experience of the Afghan subalterns. Official discourses, which have shaped popular imaginaries of the wars in Afghanistan, have traditionally operated as what Ranajit Guha (1983) defines as a "code of pacification"—an ideological system of representation that sanitizes sovereign violence while codifying the subaltern's survival as an outrage to public

order (p. 15). Each version's silence is what leaves an opening for the novel's counter-history, showing how the biopolitical suspension of law is discursively written into existence by state security narratives. Agamben (1998) explains the shared mechanism of this inclusive exclusion (p. 9); Subaltern Studies explains why recovering what falls outside it matters.

These official, state-sponsored gazes at Afghanistan and Afghan wars have been a component of what Nivi Manchanda terms a discursive regime. Manchanda has closely traced, across nearly two centuries from the First Anglo-Afghan War to the War on Terror, a cumulative body of British and American representation so naturalized that it appears to describe Afghanistan instead of construct it, a discourse that consistently renders the frontier dangerous, tribal, and ungovernable, fit only for containment or conquest. closely relevant is another concept that helps understand the elitist discursive silence around the sufferings of the subaltern victims of the Afghan wars. Benjamin Hopkins argues that the British imperial administration governed British India's North-West frontier through an exceptional and unusual administrative machinery which Hopkins terms frontier governmentality. It was a system in which the frontier's inhabitants are treated, in Hopkins's phrase, as imperial objects, a population to be managed instead of citizens governed under ordinary law. Manchanda's and Hopkins's accounts do not by themselves account for the mujahideen of the 1980s and the Taliban of the post-9/11 period, who have produced a discursive regime of their own, equally overdetermined in its own idiom and equally indifferent to the ordinary lives it claims to speak for. The neo-imperial and the fundamentalist discourses are mutually hostile in their stated aims. They are structurally symmetrical in the exception each imposes. Both construct the borderlands from above, and both silence the same people in the process, for different reasons and toward different ends. Aslam's novels refuse the choice between these two regimes instead of simply favouring one over the other. This double refusal, of the neo-imperial gaze and the fundamentalist gaze at once, serves to "decontextualise the only context that appears relevant—the imperial one" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 60). By centering the localized production of history and memory, Aslam grants the Afghan war subaltern victims a centrality and historical validity of its own, giving the novels' historiographic project its particular difficulty and its particular value.

Set in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden* foregrounds aspects of the Afghan wars that counter both the elitist US official and Taliban's fundamentalist discourses about the war. Through a depiction of subaltern characters caught in the war or affected by its consequences, the novel stages a consistent subaltern perspective on the war. Paradoxically enough, the novel begins narrating the subaltern's understanding of the War on Terror through their belief in conspiracy theories and rumours. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, competing and unverifiable claims circulate among the novel's Pakistani characters. One voice insists that Jewish employees had been warned away from the World Trade Center. Another claims the United States intends to seize Pakistan's nuclear arsenal (Aslam, *Garden* 45). The novel endorses neither claim. What it registers instead is the epistemic condition of people who receive geopolitical events only ever secondhand, through channels the state's and the militant's own official narratives do not control and cannot correct. This condition directly inherits what Martin J. Bayly (2015) describes as the colonial legacy

of imagining the frontier as an exceptional strategic space suspended in a "cartography of danger and exclusion," forever categorized as a "domain of rumour, intrigue, and violence" (pp. 3, 7). A similar structure governs the transmission of the US "Stone Age" ultimatum, relayed among characters as reported hearsay instead of confirmed policy (Aslam, *Garden* 204). In both cases the hegemonic discourse, American in this instance, reaches the frontier as rumour instead of negotiation, arriving already distorted by the very asymmetry of power the novel is diagnosing. Under this imperial "knowledge order," the subaltern witness is systematically denied direct, unmediated political dialogue, condemned to receive the "rules of the game" only through the distorted echo chamber of speculative hearsay (Bayly, 2015, p. 8).

Who is primarily responsible for violence itself? The novel does not resolve the question in any simplistic narrative. Aslam's exploration of the moral responsibility for the violence remains undecided throughout the narrative. For the family of Rohan, Jeo's death and Mikal's captivity are the two shocks that shake the domestic peace and harmony of the family. No single actor, American, Taliban, or local, is allowed to stand as sole author of either event. This formal refusal has a historiographic function. It resists the temptation, present in both US security discourse and Taliban martyrology, to convert an ordinary death into a legible instance of one side's narrative. The novel's most sustained treatment of this irresolvable moral position belongs to Mikal, who at the height of a rescue attempt on a burning bridge finds himself loving, simultaneously and without contradiction, the American soldier he is saving and the men he has earlier killed (Aslam, *Garden* 386). Other characters later fix him in a single term, "jihadi, the killer of American soldiers" (Aslam, *Garden* 235). Aslam's narrative never uses the label and thus resists the imperial tendency to describe the subaltern characters in overdetermined and orientalist idiom. Aslam's refusal to avoid orientalist labels also counters the discursive apparatus that Uzma Abid Ansari (2018) describes as "the taming of the tribal", the imperial and state impulse that seeks to "tame" peripheral subjects by "reducing the complexity of their social system to a simplified image which is easily judged and 'othered'" (p. 151). Mikal is neither the fundamentalist discourse's martyr nor the security discourse's terrorist. He is, in Agamben's sense, a life exposed simultaneously to both discourses' capacity for violence, unprotected by either, successfully preserving his internal complexity against the flattening, totalizing categories of the state's and the militant's "signifying regimes" (Ansari, 2018, p. 151).

The capture of the Ardent School by militants is a direct consequence of the war as it enters into the lives of the subalterns in Heer, shattering their traditional patterns of life that had so far ensured a social order. The social order is disrupted once a section of society adopts the militants ideology and opts to resist the US forces in Afghanistan. Imagined through in Major Kayara's and his militants' view, Rohan's loss of the Ardent Spirit School is the result of a radical shift in the people's perspectives on the conflict between Islam and the West. However, the narrative does not subscribe to this essentialisation propagated by the Islamist militants who have captured the school. In fact the capture is enabled, the novel insists, by an ordinary widower's private reckoning with loss. It is a causal chain the fundamentalist discourse, which would read the capture as vindication, has no use for, and the security discourse, which would read it as evidence of endemic radicalization, has no use for either. This private register of domestic causation constitutes a distinct subaltern "will and reason" that stands in direct

opposition to what Ranajit Guha (1983) identifies as the state's "secondary discourse" of pacification—a system of writing that retrospectively dechronologizes popular agency to satisfy "reasons of State" (pp. 3, 18). By centering Rohan's deeply personal, emotional motivation, Aslam ensures that subaltern agency is represented not as a "mindless reflex" or a "natural phenomenon" to be managed, but as a "real historical personality" whose internal truth remains entirely external to hegemonic narratives of containment (Guha, 1983, pp. 3, 29, 47).

Read as a private archive of subalterns' embodied experience of the war as it inscribed itself into the subalterns' bodies, this private register matters historiographically. It is this private archive that both the imperial state and Taliban militants are unable to accommodate in their narratives of the War on Terror. Frontier governmentality, as Hopkins describes it, administers populations as aggregates: village, a tribe, a category of suspected sympathizer. It never administers a widower's decision made in the specific privacy of grief. This administrative and narrative erasure operates as Guha's (1983) "code of pacification" in mirrored form, where both the state and the insurgent factions translate the subaltern's localized struggle for survival into a standardized "clash of codes" (p. 13). Neither account has room for the fact that the school changed hands not because of doctrine or conquest but because one man could no longer bear to administer an institution built with his dead wife. Aslam's insistence on this domestic, ungeneralizable causation is itself a subaltern-historiographic move. It returns to the level of the individual household precisely what governmentality, on either side, must discard in order to function as governmentality at all, retrieving a "rebel consciousness" that the official "prose of counter-insurgency" systematically attempts to silence and overwrite (Guha, 1983, p. 1).

In contrast to *The Blind Man's Garden*, Aslam 2008 novel *The Wasted Vigil* set predominantly in Afghanistan, explores the subaltern experience of life shaped by the Cold War Afghan Jihad, a proxy war that the US fought to expel the Soviets out of Afghanistan. The novel insists that the US support for Islamist militants fighting a proxy war against the soviets led to a huge loss of life whose magnitude may never truly be gauged. The worst to suffer in the war were the weaker segments of Afghan society" women, children and non-combatant civilians. The trauma caused by the war to these subaltern sections of the Afghan society is a phenomenon that the official US and Mujahideen discourses of the Afghan-Jihad do not accommodate. Aslam's narrative highlights the contradictions between the USA's official discourse on human freedom, democracy and human rights and the US support for a retrogressive Islamist militancy that did not share any of the American dreams. For example the novel. For example, the novel juxtaposes David's memory of his father quoting John F. Kennedy's undelivered Dallas speech, the United States as "watchmen on the walls of world freedom," with the novel's account of waterboarding and other interrogation techniques later outsourced to contractors handling War-on-Terror detainees (Aslam, 2008, p. 234). The juxtaposition is highly subversive in nature. Aslam positions Kennedy's rhetoric of moral guardianship as the same self-justifying vocabulary that, decades later, authorizes practices the novel elsewhere condemns outright. This alignment illustrates what Edward W. Said (1994) identifies as an imperial "structure of feeling" and a persistent rhetoric of benevolence, wherein the great power represents itself not as a classical conqueror, but as a "righter of wrongs around the world, in pursuit of tyranny, in defense of freedom no matter the place or

cost" (pp. 4, 10). What persists across the Cold War and the War on Terror is a repetitive rhetorical structure—a discourse of protection that, by asserting global moral guardianship, simultaneously produces the biopolitical exception it claims to guard against (Said, 1994, p. 10). The detainee, like the frontier tribesman, becomes a body reachable by sovereign violence because this hegemonic discourse has placed that body outside its own ordinary protections.

Instead of resolving this exception in any simplistic manner, Aslam's narrative further complicates it, forcing the reader to look for complexity as a dominant mode of the novel's engagement with exception. For example, Marcus is confident in his belief when he tells Lara that imperial interventions into Afghanistan have ruined the fabric of Afghan society, (Aslam, 2008, p. 74). This view of looking at Afghanistan sharply subverts the Anglosphere discursive regime that holds traditional Afghan forces, especially its geography and medieval culture, as the root causes responsible for Afghans' backwardness and destruction. Aslam holds the fundamentalist militants equally culpable in the destruction of Afghanistan and the lives of the Afghan subalterns. Both the western and the m armies and Islamist guerrilla fighters (known as Mujahideen or Taliban) are to blame for the death and destruction caused by Afghan wars since the Cold War Jihad to the War on Terror. The scene in which Qatrina is coerced at gunpoint into performing a Sharia-mandated amputation (Aslam, 2008, p. 206) subverts the Islamist militants' discourse on their war against the invading forces. This inhuman violence justified in the name of belief operates as what Giorgio Agamben (1998) defines as the "sovereign ban," where the law remains "in force but does not signify," reducing human existence to a pure relation of abandonment (p. 51). Visited on a domestic body already marked, through Marcus's earlier amputation, by an older colonial and Cold War history, this act demonstrates that bare life in this novel does not arrive from a single source. Instead, it accumulates, one oppressive force layered on another, on the same bodies and the same house, exposing the subject to an inescapable zone of biopolitical indistinction (Agamben, 1998, p. 28).

In Aslam's narrative of the subaltern life, it is not only the human bodies that have suffered over the past five decades since the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. It is the cultural artefacts too that have been victims of the wars and imperial interventions. A huge quantity of Afghan antiquities, stolen and smuggled from Afghanistan, are warehoused near Heathrow while the local museums of Afghanistan have been deprived of their precious and proud possessions, artefacts of Afghan culture and history. Imperial and official historiography of Afghanistan usually do not record this cultural theft. In one of the scenes we find Casa, a young boy who has been trained into a militant and has now become a suicide bomber, climbs the half-buried statue and leaves his own marks which the narrative calls 'inkless confessions' in the stone (Aslam, 2008, p. 321). By physically carving his presence into the stone, Casa has symbolically shown the close affinity between Afghan subaltern lives and Afghan relics. Through a depiction of this apparently meaningless act performed by Casa, Aslam symbolically insists that both the living, dead bodies and objects of Afghanistan are in need of representation to be heard and understood. An archival silence has enveloped both and both need to be retrieved from the burden of discursive silence around them. When Kevin Olson (2024) calls archival silence, a systemic institutional exclusion of peripheral subjects from hegemonic registers of representation (p. 92). By physically carving his presence into the stone, Casa transcends the archival silence that marks as a dominant and defining characteristic of the official, state-sanctioned archives. His act thus produces a tactile counter-archive that the hegemonic knowledge order does not generally record or represent.

The statue of Buddha is a recurring theme that connects Marcus's house to the ancient culture of Afghanistan. The image subverts both the predetermined discursive representation of Afghanistan as a hardline Muslim country, because the presence of the statue testifies to the diversity of cultural history of Afghanistan. Afghanistan's history begins, the novel insists, not with the militant Islam that the West supported against the Soviets; the country's history goes much further back into an ancient past when the region was home to a thriving Buddhist culture that promoted peace and tolerance. The statue of Buddha also subverts the Islamist militant discourse that views Afghan culture as a homogeneous and monolithic body, refusing any presence of cultural diversity. That the Afghans have historically preserved their diverse culture—a fact supported by the presence of relics of ancient civilizations across Afghanistan—subverts the Taliban discourse which promoted a narrow and myopic interpretation of Afghan culture, unsupported by the diverse nature of Afghan history and society.

By giving the Buddha head a central position in the narrative, the novel reminds us of the Bamiyan Buddhas detonated and destroyed by the Taliban, implicitly forcing readers to compare two forms of destruction. On one hand, the novel, through the representation of the stoning of Qatrina and the amputation of Marcus's hand, retrieves a history of the violence committed against subaltern bodies. On the other hand, through the presence of the Buddha's head in Marcus's house, it constantly reminds us of the Taliban's violence against Afghan cultural objects. The narrative insists that both subaltern bodies and their cultural relics have been victimized by war. While the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas attracted global media attention and global condemnation of the Taliban's barbarity against cultural artifacts, the violence inscribed onto subaltern bodies has remained largely ignored, silencing the human cost represented by Qatrina's death by stoning, as well as by her daughter Zameen's abduction, rape, and trauma.

The novel mobilises the image of the statue to retrieve a history of bare life conditions imposed upon both bodies and objects in ways that neither imperial nor the militants discourse can accommodate. The violence against Qatrina Nad Zameen represents an ordinary, illegible trace left by a "real historical personality" whom the elite "prose of counter-insurgency" is structurally unable to see (Guha, 1983, p. 29). This is bare life's own form of historiography, a silent assertion of a conscious, motivated agency that directly resists the dominant "code of pacification" designed to reduce the subaltern's presence to a passive object of containment (Guha, 1983, p. 13). It is not only a counter-narrative that argues back against the elitist accounts of war, it is also a physical remainder that persists in the object, representing a subaltern consciousness that remains entirely external to the overdetermined nature of what Nivi Manchanda terms as discursive regime (Manchanda, 2020, p. 47).

Both novels deliberately resist linear chronology of events arranged in the plots. Both distribute their narrative attention across shifting timeframes and ensembles of subaltern characters. *The Wasted Vigil* goes further still. It builds a literal palimpsest architecture in which successive occupants of Marcus's house have painted over one another's murals across decades. This formal choice syncs with the author's agenda of subverting both imperialism and fundamentalism by retrieving the people's perspective on the wars imposed by these two powers. A linear chronology is the form official historiography already possesses in the form of the timeline of interventions, withdrawals, and operations that state, foreign-military, and militant discourse can each narrate fluently. This is obvious for the simple reason that each of those discourses is itself organized around dates, campaigns, and declared victories or defeats.

What none of those linear accounts can hold is the chronic, cumulative experience of an ordinary inhabitant for whom the Cold War, the Soviet occupation, the civil war, and the War on Terror are not merely chapters in a textbook or official document. For him they represent a single, continuous and helpless condition of exposure to suffering and violence. Aslam's fragmentation is the formal correlate of this continuity, reflecting Antonio Gramsci's classic insight that the history of subaltern social groups is, by its very nature, "necessarily fragmented and episodic" due to their lack of access to institutional means.

The two novels *The Wasted Vigil* and *The Blind Man's Garden*, set against the background of two wars along the Afghan borderlands, do more than just represent the subaltern suffering imposed by the Afghan wars. The novels diagnose why that suffering has remained so consistently unregistered by the discourses claiming authority over the region's history. Agamben's idea of bare life provides an answer by naming the mechanism. The novels do not merely restore a lost voice. They also expose how this systemic occlusion is structurally produced as what Kevin Olson (2024) conceptualizes as an "archival silence" (p. 92). Rather than offering a romanticized, unmediated recovery of the subaltern, Aslam's narrative focus remains on exposing the political and discursive architectures that ensure this silence persists across competing discourses.

References

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. (2005). *State of exception* (K. Attell, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
- Ahmed, M. (2011). Adam's mirror: The frontier in the imperial imagination. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 46(13), 60–65.
- Ansari, U. A. (2018). The taming of the tribal within Pakistani narratives of progress, conflict, and romance. In A. Kanwal & S. Aslam (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to Pakistani Anglophone writing* (pp. 151–161). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315180618-14>
- Aslam, N. (2008). *The wasted vigil*. Faber and Faber.
- Aslam, N. (2013). *The blind man's garden*. Faber and Faber.
- Basu, S. (2021). Indian poetry and oral narratives during the First World War: A subaltern response. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 6(6), 74–80. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.66.12>
- Bayly, M. J. (2016). *Taming the imperial imagination: Colonial knowledge, international relations, and the Anglo-Afghan encounter, 1808–1878*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316339176>
- Fellner, A. M. (2023). The border turn in literary studies: Border poetics and figurations of border crossings. *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies*, 34(3), 19–34. <https://doi.org/10.33675/ANGL/2023/3/5>
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers.
- Guha, R. (1983a). *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India*. Oxford University Press.
- Guha, R. (1983b). The prose of counter-insurgency. In R. Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern studies II: Writings on South Asian history and society* (pp. 1–42). Oxford University Press.
- Hopkins, B. D. (2020). *Ruling the savage periphery: Frontier governance and the making of the modern state*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674246164>

- Khan, S. S., Danish, E., & Ahmed, Q. H. (2023). Mestiza as speaking subaltern in Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* in new historicist perspective. *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 5(1), 142–146.
- Manchanda, N. (2020). *Imagining Afghanistan: The history and politics of imperial knowledge*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108867986>
- Morris, R. C. (Ed.). (2010). *Can the subaltern speak?: Reflections on the history of an idea*. Columbia University Press.
- O'Gorman, D. (2015). *Fictions of the war on terror: Difference and the transnational 9/11 novel*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137506184>
- Olson, K. (2024). Archival silence: How do we write the history of the subaltern who cannot speak? *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 57(1), 92–94. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000525>
- Said, E. W. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage Books.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.