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## Existentialism and Transnationalism: A Critical Insight into Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*

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#### Abstract

Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* reflects existential crises, the life of migrant settlers in the western world and transnationalism. The present paper proposes to have a study on existentialism which reflects that an individual person is free to think and to make decisions by himself. But an individual should remember that such decisions are taken for immediate purposes. This research is about the Existentialist strain and transnationalist elements in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. *Maps for Lost Lovers* reflects these elements in the text as “*She realized how it must’ve got there, such accursed practices such godlessness*” (*Maps for Lost Lovers*, 30). The study examines the Existentialist strains and transnationalism in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*. *Maps for Lost Lovers* also shows the terms of transnationalism in it such as in the line “*they live in a society named as Dasht-E-Tanhai (loneliness) seemingly godlessness with white society*” (*Maps for Lost Lovers*, 11).

**Keywords:** transnationalism, existentialism, Islamic tradition, hegemony, hybridity

#### Introduction

A researcher has taken Nadeem Aslam as the author whose works essentially show existentialism, multiculturalism, cultural hybridity, post-colonialism and Muslim identity. Nadeem Aslam was born on 11 June 1966, in Gujranwala Pakistan. He moved to Britain with his father when he was fourteen years old. Before pursuing his writing, he was a student of Bio-Chemistry in Manchester but later he left the University without taking a degree and wanted to become a writer. His family settled in West Yorkshire, England in a working-class English Muslim community. Today, now Nadeem Aslam is considered a venerable figure amongst the British Pakistani authors who have risen to global prominence. When he was 13<sup>th</sup> years old, he wrote his first short story in Urdu for a Pakistani newspaper.

His novels combine verbal fluency and operative drama with a nuanced interpretation of international socio-political conflicts and a depiction of the way they affect local communities. Pakistani Diaspora includes many luminaries such as Hanif Kureishi, Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsi and Tariq Ali, who introduced themselves by their works in the whole world over the last twenty to thirty decades. In his work Nadeem Aslam, wants to show how cultural hybridity and multiculturalism impact on Pakistani identity both at home and in the Diaspora. He wrote his first novel *Season of Rain birds* in 1993 who won the award for him. He wrote his first world-famous novel, *Maps for Lost Lovers* it was taken eleven years to be completed. In an interview, Aslam tells about the novel that the first chapter took six years to complete. He is the author of five novels and a short story namely *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993), *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), ‘Leila in the Wilderness’ published in *Granta* 112 (2010), *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) and *The Golden Legend* (2017). In the novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* is a story of the Pakistani Immigrants in England, a story of the struggle of individual versus society. In this novel

character of Chanda and Jugnu are killed in the name of honour by her brother at the beginning of the novel. And in this novel, it is seen the author criticizing religion and Pakistani Society.

First of all, the researcher will discuss existentialist theory which belongs to contemporary theory. It was established by nineteenth-century philosophers and thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard, who was the first pioneered who introduced Existentialism in Denmark. However, Existentialism is also found in the other great theologian's works such as Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Some existentialists tried to define it through their works but no one could give any exact definition of existentialism. Kierkegaard clarified in his judgment, as below;

“An existing individual is himself in process of becoming...in existence the watchword is always forward” (Fredrick Copleston, 1973:348).

“Existence is the child that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and temporal, and his therefore a constant striving” (Ibid: 348).

The existentialist theory is concerned with the aspects of human existence and their struggles. Existentialism is a philosophical study that emphasizes individual existence. In this theory, some different but very simple questions are asked it like “why I am? What I am doing? Why I exist?” Existentialism is a concept in which an individual person is free to think and to make decisions by himself. But an individual should remember that such decisions are taken for immediate purposes. In it, the individual is responsible for his actions and reactions. On the other hand, we find in existentialism that an individual wants to try to make rational decisions due to existing in an irrational universe. Many other theorists have also used this theory in their work to have the taste of existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre is the major theorist of existentialism and Kierkegaard is known today as the father of existentialism. Other theorists are, James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Samuel Becket, and they are the big names in the field of modernism and whenever modernism is talked about existentialism. It should be automatically considered as a part of the study. Different authors are having a different point of views about Nadeem Aslam and his *Maps for Lost Lovers* is considered as a good piece of fiction which is-

“Heartbreaking... A must read... The characters are so real the reader wants to speak with them... Aslam is a very skilled and talented writer. He gives us a window into a community we don't often see. (The Decatur Daily)

In the novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*, most characters are following norms of existentialism in different situations through their actions, reactions and dialogues. This novel is divided into different chapters and sections which are named as seasons, ‘Winter, Autumn, Summer and Spring’. This novel is about the struggle of the individual person versus society, about the dislocation and the brutality as well. Kiran, she is having no choice to do anything in her life. “I don't want to see them or work next to them to I don't mind working next if I am forced to, as long as I don't have to

speak to them, as long as I don't have to talk”.(Aslam,223) Existentialism is a theory that covers the element of meaninglessness in human life. In his writings, Nadeem Aslam uses the word “I” which shows the individual's importance in his writings. In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, everything is meaningless for all because they have nothing to do in their life and what they get to do is useless for them. “Allah does not consider them worthy enough to place them in any position” (Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Winter).

In the novel, Suraya is one of the characters who is divorced by her husband in Pakistan in a fit of drunkenness and according to Islamic law, has to get married to and divorced from another man in order to be reunited with her first husband and their child. Desperate, she starts an affair with Shamas, hoping he is going to be the route out of all this but this does not work as she thinks. Basically, *Maps for Lost Lovers* is a story which is in first thought considered as an investigative story but later on, when readers read it, can be understood that there is a story of a couple (Jugnu and Chanda) and both were killed at the beginning of the novel. The mainstream of the whole book is the story of Jugnu and Chanda, they both decide that they will live together and invite the ire of not just their relatives, but almost all the residents of their town Dasht-E-Tanhai.

“But it is there even when absent, drawing attention to its own disappearance” (Aslam, 5)

There are two different ways of understanding the existential element in the above-given examples from the text. Denotatively it means to just find the attention in any surrounding area, while contextually it will be understood and covers the existential element of creating meanings in a meaningless situation. The same thing is described and found out by the researcher while drawing attention in symbolized form with the meaninglessness and nothingness situation of life.

“The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless”.

Shamas is one of the main characters who show existentialism in his actions, was in a great depressed mind of the state. So it can be seen in the whole novel that Shamas knows the traditions and he knows how to cope up with other people of the society. But after the murder of Jugnu and Chanda, he was also in depression and tries to find out the reason for their murder. Aslam has portrayed this scenario in very poetic words that are to find attention in their own disappearance. So as is mentioned earlier that finding meanings in meaningless situations is the name of existentialism and it is available in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. Here are different examples of the same point from different pieces of Literature. “We encourage parents to ignore this meaningless nonsense. (Times, 2009) ”He tries to find out meanings of personally what he desired in his life”. (Aslam, 3).

By the thought of existentialists, finding out meanings for their own benefit and for their own sake is one of the major priorities. It is the same findings mentioned in the above given example where the character is trying to find out the meanings of his life. At the beginning of the novel,

can see that people migrated from Pakistan to the United Kingdom and then the honor killing of two main characters made it difficult for all the other characters to know about the meanings of their lives. In the novel, all other characters are also busy thinking that what is the reason behind their murder and also question that what is the purpose of their lives? Shams stands on the balcony and thinks about the murder and then thinks about the meaning of his own desired life. He tries to find out the meanings of life in the same way as other peoples of the story. And existentialism is the finding of meanings in meaningless situations. "Life has no meaning, each of us has meaning and we bring it to life. It is a waste to be asking the question when you are the answer." (Joseph Campbell, Meanings of Life).

No one can be happy till one finds out his desired meanings of desires. Existentialism is that kind of philosophy in which individuals' own choices and desires are of worth in importance. "You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life". (Albert Camus, Happiness: Meanings of Life). Other examples of the same context can also be found out in the text. For example "He tries to inhale but can't breathe because of the undesired situation of life" (Aslam, 33). The given example presents the same issue of finding meanings in the meaningless situation and lives according to the desired life.

Nothingness is a situation when an individual couldn't leave anything to live. He is left with no purpose, no meanings and no faith left behind in him. Nothingness in existentialist plays a very important role because it is a major part of the philosophy. In the story of *Maps for Lost Lovers* nothingness can be seen through different lines, for example:

"He does not know what to do about the knock and in his life." (Aslam, 5)

He does not know what to do means that he does not know about the meaning of his life. He has nothing to do because he thinks that he does not know even what to do in his life. He is meaningless and he is unable to find the situational and required meaning. This thing can also cause anxiety which is also an important part of existentialism. Different lines show a different point of view for example "He lay down in a complete paralyzed form because of the shock of Jugnu's murder" (Aslam, 45). A paralyzed person can represent the elements of anxiety, fear and nothingness. Anxiety is shown in the above lines because of the way Aslam portrayed the situation of Pakistani migrants. It can cause anxiety for the characters and the readers. And this thing is well understood that anxiety is clearly in the domain of existentialism.

This field is composed of a growing number of persons who live dual lives at the same time and speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders. Activities within the transnational field comprise a whole gamut of economic, political and social initiatives ranging from informal import-export businesses to the rise of a class of binational professionals, to the campaigns of home country politicians among their expatriates.

The growing number of ties linking persons across countries and the fluidity and diversity of these exchanges have given rise to many contradicting claims. In some writings, the phenomenon of transnationalism is portrayed as novel and emergent, whereas in others it is said to be as old as labour immigration itself. In the case of transnationalism, it is not enough to invoke anecdotes of some immigrants investing in businesses back home or some governments giving their expatriates the right to vote in national elections to justify a new field of study. This is the case with Vertovec's definition of transnationalism as

"Sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations spanning nation-states". (2009: 2).

Generally, Transnationalism is considered to be very closely related to globalization, but the exact nature of this relationship is subject to discussion, as is the perspective on globalization.

The fictional immigrants' situation develops from an initially appreciated communal life (cf. *MLL* 13) into coexistence with only limited interaction—a development which is based on the growing numbers of immigrants, but which also critically mirrors the situation on the subcontinent, where the Partition of India divided the country along religious lines and has also led to bitter wars about territorial claims ever since. And as on the subcontinent, it is religious beliefs that now segregate the people of Dasht-e-Tanhaii. The main characters, Shams and Kaukab live in a fictional town Dasht-e-Tanhaii. Shamas tries to rebuild his parental home in England in order to create a home for himself and his family in an environment where they are strangers.

In the blind defensiveness of their traditions and beliefs, the immigrants of Dasht-e-Tanhaii are passionate in their racism against the white inhabitants of the town and condemn their exile in Great Britain for all the evil that has happened to them: "Kaukab knows her dissatisfaction with England is a slight to Allah because He is the creator and ruler of the entire earth—as the stone carving on Islamabad airport reminds and reassures the heartbroken people who are having to leave Pakistan—but she cannot contain her homesickness and constantly asks for courage to face this lonely ordeal that He has chosen for her in His wisdom". (*MLL* 31).

Aslam writes that as a young immigrant to England, Shamas's wife Kaukab was so excited at the prospect of learning English that she filled a notebook with "jumbled up" proverbs she had overheard. Aslam presents a list of these, the last of which is "Heaven is other people." As Aslam explains, "The last she had heard and remembered correctly, Hell is other people, but she had later begun to doubt herself: surely no one—no peoples no civilization—would think other people were Hell. What else was there but other people?" According to the definition of transnationalism which is mentioned above, Kaukab is one of the main characters who explore it by her action. Shamas is the husband of Kaukab but completely opposite of Kaukab, both immigrants from Pakistan to England. She feels

uncomfortable when one English woman joins her because she cannot speak English properly.

Kaukab is a sweet, caring person who would never truly believe that other people make the world into hell. For her, relationships are rewarding and fundamental. Yet, unwillingly, Kaukab's prejudices often create a hellish setting for her friends, her family, and herself. Her rigid fundamentalism and her continual disapproval of the ones she loves send her husband into the arms of another woman and prevent her three children from ever coming home. Although this paradox may be most easily seen in Kaukab, it is no less present for Shamus, Suraya, or many other characters. Tragically, instead of coming together in a time of despair, they make things even more difficult for one another. The question Aslam ponders in presenting this paradox is whether his characters are tragically flawed, simply incapable of doing better, or if they are coerced into such things by their memory of Pakistan and their interpretation of Islam.

In my interpretation of existentialism and transnationalism within the atmosphere of the novel, I aim to strengthen my argument for the multiple possible interpretations of *Maps for Lost Lovers*.

Most characters explore existentialism and transnationalism by their actions in the novel through the character of Kaukab, who stands in opposition to her husband Shamas in every possible way. Aslam powerfully undermines any singular interpretation of the narrative, in that the novel offers a multi-layered critique of its depicted society, a critique that moves beyond essentialist readings of existentialism and transnationalism.

### Conclusion

In touching upon topics like nationalism, tradition, community and religion through the different perspectives of mainly first-generation immigrants, *Maps for Lost Lovers* offers a differentiated social commentary on Muslim immigrants in Great Britain. Taking up the notions of existentialism and transnationalism, the novel can be read as a critique of both the closed immigrant communities that avert all attempts at integration and the host cultures that easily fall for prejudices without trying to look behind the façades. However, most importantly the novel offers reading and interpretation that puts love and loss into the focus of the narration.

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