

Gendered Experiences of Grief: Exploring the Complexities of Melancholic Subjectivities in *The Blind Man's Garden* by Nadeem Aslam

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Abstract: *This paper discusses how a gendered sense of identities complicates experiences of grief. It analyzes the characters of Rohan and Naheed, in Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*, to see how they cope with loss through a gendered lens, particularly through the exploration of grief and loss. Naheed, due to her flexible sense of subjectivity, finds a way to come out of her submissiveness as her loss shapes her life course. Her mother, Tara, on the other hand, has internalized patriarchy, which makes it difficult for her to move forward in life. It is because of Naheed's determination to question and her flexible nature that she rejects patriarchal norms, which ultimately helps her to move forward from her loss. Rohan, being a rigid patriarch, is forced by his grief to reflect on his male privileges towards the end of the novel. He becomes slightly reflective of his past in a different way, after going through multiple losses. Drawing on insights from mourning and melancholia by Sigmund Freud, Judith Butler, and Maru Ritu, this paper engages with the discussion of gendered subjectivities to explore how these identities intersect and shape the process of grief.*

Keywords: Gender, Subjectivities, Grief, Experiences, Patriarch.

Introduction

The Blind Man's Garden shows how the so-called War on Terror in the wake of 9/11 events affected people on both individual and collective levels. It focuses on a Pakistani family living in a small town, Heer, located in Punjab, on how the ordinary people of this town are pulled into a war they know nothing about. The main character is Rohan, an ageing man, 60 years old, living with his children. The story follows the journey of Rohan's biological son, Jeo, and foster son, Mikal, into Afghanistan, where they go to help the wounded. Their decision sets a series of events in motion, one which changes the lives of their family. Rohan and Naheed, who is Jeo's wife, are left behind, waiting for their return.

Rohan's years at university as a student reflect that he was a shy person and struggled to fit into the crowd among others. Later on, due to war and extremism in his home town, Heer, he developed rigid ideas of religion. Naheed's gendered identity can best be viewed through her relationship with her mother, Tara. Tara went through some traumatic events when Naheed was young, and those impacted on her deeply. She raised Naheed in line with her own twisted beliefs. Gender identities, learnt and habitualized, shape an individual's processes and actions. They also impact on emotions like grief. Rohan's male entitlement and Naheed's gendered negotiations intermingle with their grief, shaping one another.

Pinning down the pain of dealing with loss, and exploring its dynamics, has always been a complex task. Along with the individual's strength, there are many sociocultural factors that also affect how one

deals with loss. *The Blind Man's Garden* is a novel written about melancholy, focusing on a town where everybody is dealing with loss, individually as well as collectively. These characters, particularly Rohan and Naheed, redefine grief as a transformative, rather than a pathologizing, experience. Their lives are shaped by grief. They try to move on while constantly dealing with loss and pain.

Review of Literature:

Rohan's and Naheed's gendered identities navigate their paths to deal with loss. According to Sigmund Freud, there are two reactions to loss, one functions by coming to terms with the loss (mourning); the other through acting it out (melancholia), rather than accepting it. Loss could be anything, even an abstraction, as Freud, (1971) demonstrated "such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (p. 164). He describes mourning as a normal reaction to a loss, where the lost object is eventually grieved and the object is ultimately forgotten, through object-cathexis, and "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" (p. 166). Whereas melancholia, being unaware of what's been lost, is unable to let go of the past. The melancholic subject, instead of accepting the loss, preserves the lost object through identification, a process in which the object is structured in the mind, as a response to loss. According to Freud in *The Ego and The Id* (1960), the lost object is kept alive in the mind, and the person cannot forget it. The melancholic subject, being unable to forget the loss, thus incorporates a new image of the lost object into their ego as an act to sustain the bond that is lost.

Judith Butler (2006) thinks of mourning and melancholia as part of the same process of grieving. According to her, all types of mourning constitute some aspect of identification. Butler writes that "incorporation, originally associated with melancholia is essential to the task of mourning" (p. 21). According to Brady (2010) these two processes, that used to be conceived as opposites, are now considered as being an "integrally related aspect of the grieving process" (p. 54). According to her, introjection (where a person absorbs the lost object into their psyche) is not the only way in which identification works, as it also responds to loss through transformation, "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever ... mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation" (p. 21), or submitting to a transformation. Although, while having the potential for transformation, a reaction to loss is also unpredictable and the results cannot be predetermined. Loss transforms the individual in ways that cannot be easily anticipated. It is a dynamic and evolving experience.

According to Maru Ruti (2205) melancholia needs to be acknowledged rather than preserved. Its potential comes to light when it discovers its course "out of its melancholy entombment" (p. 639). In order to have room to evolve in life, "melancholia must in the end relinquish its hold so as to create space for movement" (p. 659). The healthy way to deal with loss is to engage with melancholia, in order to eventually find a way to move out of it. The characters under discussion demonstrate this process as they transition from melancholia to mourning. Additionally, they show how gender complicates and shapes this process.

Along with other sociocultural factors, gender is one of the major factors involved in the ways that loss is dealt with. Gender has come to be defined as a performance. One is always performing one's gender for the other. Both sexuality and gender mean something complicated, "Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are to be understood as modes of being dispossessed" (Undoing Gender, p. 35). Gender as a discursive construct can be defined as a mechanism through which masculine and feminine concepts are both naturalized and denaturalized (Undoing Gender, p. 42). Subjectivities are constructed and naturalized through historically contingent discourses. By being born into a system of power relations, one enters a system of hierarchies, and this constitutes the legitimacy of gender performances.

Analysis:

Rohan's Male Entitlement:

Rohan's sense of entitlement as a man of the house is rooted in male privilege. Right from the beginning of childhood, men are taught to fight their emotions, other than anger or aggression, as these are considered masculine emotions. This is one of the ways in which men naturally partake in hegemonic power games among each other, by showing their toughness. It has to do with the fact that masculinity is considered an end goal, an ideal to be achieved for a man, which is set out for him at the beginning of his childhood. This can be seen in Rohan's case, as he thinks of his duty as being to fix others, and thinks of himself as responsible for the actions of the women around him. The judgement of women comes naturally to him, as part of his patriarchal consciousness.

Rohan has been stuck in his past for the last two decades. He is constantly conflicted and thinking about how he couldn't save his wife, Sofia, and her faith, or absence thereof, in her last moments. Sofia was an apostate and Rohan wanted her to come back to the faith before taking her last breath. In his desperate attempt to do that, he withheld her medicines from her, to force Sofia to embrace faith. His loss is interlinked with his failure to do that. He is constantly praying for her. Rohan is the character who is suffering the most, as he goes through multiple losses. He lost his wife, his children, his school and his eyesight. Rohan spends his days looking after his garden and reconnecting with memories held in every corner of the garden and his house. He becomes an embodiment of times that his garden has seen, "The glass pane in the window carries Rohan's reflections ... The face that is a record of time's weight on the soul" (p. 6, *The Blind Man's Garden*).

Rohan and Sofia founded the Ardent Spirit school together. But later it was taken over by one of the students, and eventually by Major Kyra, a retired military man who now runs the school. Sofia stopped teaching there when it was under Rohan's administration, because he expelled a student whose mother turned out to be a prostitute. Sofia used to make pictures of the living things, to which Rohan objected. He burnt her pictures when she got sick, including the murals he found on walls in their neighbourhood. After two decades of thinking about his actions, he reflects on his past decisions, "he does sometimes suspect that his conduct had resembled sin, the sin of pride" (p. 43 *The Blind*).

Rohan was a shy person during his university days. But it was extremism, in Heer, that pulled him to develop a strong sense of strictness. It has to do with the cultural expectations of being a husband and a father, so that he didn't allow his humanistic side to show through. Gender roles and attributes that have been culturally assigned to different genders are derived from sex-role theory, which is based on biological differences between genders. Rohan also exhibits hegemonic masculinity, which hinders his ability to deal with loss. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "The configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 77). Rohan rejects getting in touch with his deep emotions of loss; rather, he is more concentrated on how he could have done better to control the people around him, especially his wife and his son, Jeo. When Jeo disappears, he slowly starts reflecting on the past differently. He encounters a stranger by the name of Fakir when he is searching for Jeo and Mikal. He talks to him. He has been trying to act tough in front of his family, but in front of Fakir, he felt the need to have a conversation, "surprised by the tears he is trying to control" (p. 85, *The Blind*). He confesses to him about his strictness with his son, Jeo. He tells him, "I made mistakes when my son was a child. His mother had died in the state of apostasy and as a result I enforced an extreme form of piety on myself and on my children..." (p. 86-87, *The Blind*). He also remembers how he made Jeo say his prayers by instilling the fear of God, instead of His love.

Vulnerability is something that opposes the masculine essence. Masculinity automatically appears to be considered as something relating to power, strength and virility. Linking a man to a vulnerability

would give the impression that he has failed in his masculinity. But Rohan's character shows that masculinity can also have agency through vulnerability. It is through accepting his vulnerable side that he becomes slightly flexible in his rigid mindset.

Rohan's sense of entitlement doesn't let him find solace in his grief completely, but he does show signs of change in his strict patriarchal thought process after losing his children. Losing his eyesight is also one of the turning points in Rohan's life. His eyesight had been deteriorating for two decades, and then he lost it completely during a gasoline eruption while saving a child of the bird pardoner. Disabilities are not just medical conditions, there are also social stigmas attached to them that are highly gendered. Thomas J. Gerschick writes that, "Bodies operate as canvases on which gender is displayed and kinaesthetically as the mechanisms by which it is physically enacted" (2000, p. 1264). Men with disabilities are challenged socially on two levels, one is that they won't be part of idealized hegemonic masculinity which is generally accepted, and the other is the judgement attached to being disabled, as weak and dependent (2013, p. 455). A body seen as strong entails that a man can be part of the hegemonic games among normative and hegemonic men.

Vulnerability, though often seen as a weakness, can be a powerful and transformative force. It can be seen as something that makes a human, a human being. Living the full human experience includes embracing vulnerability not as a weakness but as a fundamental aspect of a meaningful life (Brené Brown, 2011). Vulnerability as a human characteristic is powerful when accepted and negotiated, rather than resisted. It becomes complex when gender identity is lived as a painful experience, complicating emotional connections. Gender as a social imposition is itself lived through either 'grief or pleasure', and cultural, racial and national identities and emotions play a vital role in their reconfiguration, especially considering that these identities are in constant contestation. So "our sense of who and what we are is continually (re)shaped by how we feel" (Davidson, J., & Milligan, C., 2004, p. 524). The complexities of subjectivities can also be better understood through emotional interactions, "Our emotional relations and interactions weave through and help form the fabric of our unique personal geographies" (p. 523). Rohan's connection with the garden plays a significant role in shaping his emotional responses to grief and disability. Rohan's ageing, and most prominently his disability, makes him come face to face with his vulnerable and human side. One loss after another forces him to come to terms with his rigid sense of patriarchy and self-entitlement. Rohan's blindness proves to be his ultimate loss, as it makes him dependent on women. His core belief that he is the one who should be the dependent centre is questioned. Disability for a man bruises his sense of masculinity and his male ego. He slowly finds peace from the past, which has been bothering him, although he is still struggling with his male ego.

The effects of war and the hegemonic dominance of foreign and local masculinities have steered

Rohan's Garden and the town of Heer towards melancholia. It is only by submitting to one's own limits that Rohan finds a sense of reconciliation with the mistakes he has made through his patriarchal blindness. It is his physical disability that has made him realize the limitations of masculine domination and imposed on him the status of being a human, of being vulnerable.

Rohan is still a patriarch, but not as strict. He tells Naheed to ask for forgiveness for touching Jeo's body, as the marriage contract ends at death (p. 95, *The Blind*). Similarly, he still feels entitled to judge others openly. He meets his student, who is now a doctor, for an operation on his eyes. He was the student he expelled, because he thought his mother was a prostitute. Instead of thinking about the trauma that this student had to go through, because of being expelled for such a reason, he brings that up again after so many years. It is due to his sense of privilege that he cannot see his own wrongdoings but is quick to jump and criticise other's actions. The doctor tells him that he has built a hospital in his mother's name. Rohan, despite viewing things through a patriarchal lens, still reveals a different, more nuanced side of himself. He takes a stand for Naheed. He objects to Sharif Sharif's proposal. He asserts,

“I have raised one daughter who makes an honest and honourable living, and I will make sure Naheed too takes that path if she wishes” (p. 163, *The Blind*).

With his disability, Rohan is challenged and starts reviewing beyond patriarchal structures, although his transformation is slow, but it does show some change. Lynne Segal (2006) acknowledges the concept of masculinity evolving with changing times, but at a very slow pace. Despite the resistance from staunch ideas of masculinity, these changes are underway in very subtle ways and contribute to making a difference when it comes to prevalent gender roles.

Naheed’s Negotiations of Gendered Subjectivity:

Naheed’s loss is also multilayered and deeply complex. After Jeo secretly leaves for Afghanistan, Naheed starts waiting for news of his return. For her, “the house drifts in darkness ... she knows it will never again be the same...” (p,78). She was in love with Mikal, but her marriage was arranged with Jeo. Mikal asks her to elope with him, but then he didn’t show up at the agreed time (p,19. *The Blind*). Mikal prioritized his bond with his brother over Naheed’s love. She still carries Mikal’s letters. She took them to the river but couldn’t find the courage to let go of them (p, 20). She misses Mikal, “In some respects, grief for the lost and missing is worse than grief for the dead...” (p. 18).

Naheed has lived her entire life under the shadow of her mother’s traumas. Her mother wanted the best for her, but she herself has unhealed traumas from the past. It is visible from Naheed’s thought process that she is trying to make up for what her mother went through. Naheed is a victim of generational trauma. Her gender identity can be viewed through her relationship with her mother, Tara. Tara’s sense of patriarchy is shaped by her own experiences of past trauma, which she faced during Zia’s regime under the weight of misogynistic laws. She was assaulted by a man. When she went to the police to file a case, she got jailed instead for adultery, because she couldn’t bring four male witnesses to prove the assault, that were needed according to the law, and so Naheed as a young child had to stay with her grandmother. Due to this, Tara developed overprotective feelings for her teenage daughter, Naheed. She rented a house from Sharif Sharif, where she lived with Naheed. Sharif Sharif displayed inappropriate behaviour towards Naheed. He once underlined an English word, “nude” (p. 70), on a book and went up to Naheed to ask its meaning. When Tara found out, she went to Rohan and asked him to accept Naheed as his daughter-in-law, because she didn’t want her daughter to face the same struggles she faced in her life. Mikal met Tara secretly to ask for Naheed’s hand in marriage, but Tara refused, because she thought Jeo, who was a medical student, would be able to provide a more secure future for her daughter.

Tara has internalized patriarchy based on her experiences in the society. Subjectivity is constructed through power institutions and discourses (p. 79, Margaret A. McLaren, 2012). Tara’s gender identity is also constituted through her experiences as a woman (Simone de Beauvoir, 2023). She never thought of marrying again out of fear of societal judgement. She raised Naheed as a single mother, but with strictness due to her own past.

Naheed, being part of the second generation of Zia’s era, reflects on how she is impacted by it through generational trauma, and also how she is fighting for new directions. Her gendered negotiations help her to deal with her loss in a more progressive way than Rohan. Throughout the history of Pakistani feminist activism, female voices have had to reinvent themselves and adapt to the changing faces of conservatism and militancy. The generational gap between Tara and Naheed reflects this. The episode between Naheed and the extremist women in Burqa, who didn’t let her enter the graveyard because they thought it is forbidden for women and made her feel she was in the wrong, shows this clash between two feminist voices that have been part of Pakistani feminism since its beginning, starting from the birth of the nation (Afiya Shehrbano Zia, 2009). Naheed has been questioning patriarchal structures whenever she encounters them. When she hears the announcement in the mosque, the person addresses the listeners as “Gentlemen, please listen to the following announcement”; hearing this, Naheed objects,

questioning why he is addressing only the men, “What about us ladies?”, she says (p. 76, *The Blind*).

Naheed’s decision to terminate her pregnancy is a turning point in her life, as it is through this decision that she claims full bodily autonomy. When she tells her mother that she is pregnant, her mother asks her not to tell anyone because that will lower her chances of getting remarried. Naheed wants to wait for Mikal, as he is still missing. Tara locks Naheed up in her room and brings her adulterated food to end the pregnancy, but Naheed doesn’t eat anything for two days. When she is discussing having the child with her mother, she brings up her childhood. She tells her that when Tara came back from the prison, she had to deal with her madness, “You and your djinns” (p. 103). She also tells her how it affected her grades in school. It was the first time they had talked about this. It shows how unresolved trauma travels through generations and shape identities. Naheed decides to terminate the pregnancy on her own rather than by being forced by her mother. When her mother says it was God’s decision, she replies, “It wasn’t Allah. I did it myself” (p. 114).

Naheed’s negotiations reflect how female gender identity is shaped through mother-daughter relationships. Jane Flax writes about the complexities of mothering. Mothers have to balance between nurturing and encouraging independence in their daughters, which often comes with them clashing with each other. A mother’s desire to see her daughter in her own reflection often impacts on her daughter’s sense of individuality. The mother, being part of the patriarchal system, is herself under the effects of patriarchy, since her own psychological development takes place within a patriarchal context, so it is likely to shape her perceptions of herself, her womanhood and her role as a mother (Jane Flax, 1978, p.173). A child’s development occurs under a patriarchal system, which is simultaneously also impacting on the mother. Both motherhood and daughterhood are heterogenous experiences that extend beyond the singular roles of being a mother and a daughter, even though they do shape these very roles (Jane Flax, 2003)

Naheed was a submissive young girl who said yes to Jeo’s proposal, despite being in love with Mikal. After Jeo’s death, Mikal’s disappearance and losing her baby, she still finds a way to come back to life, and this is through navigating her gendered identity. She finds a voice. She confronts her mother about things she has been holding inside herself. When Tara says “The world is a dangerous place”, she replies, “I don’t care what you have been through, but you should never ever frighten those younger than you with your own fears” (p. 211, *The Blind*).

Naheed always wanted to be a teacher and she finds that chance again. She breaks free from what Betty Friedan termed ‘the feminine mystique’ and discovers a sense of fulfilment beyond the sociocultural rules being offered to her. Naheed’s negotiations help her to deal with grief in a more futuristic manner. She questions and refuses to conform to traditional norms. The decision to terminate her pregnancy proves to be a key turning point in her life. She finds a voice to confront her mother about her childhood, and finds reconciliation and clarity about her direction in life.

Conclusion:

A gendered identity is part of an individual’s subjectivity and it can complicate one’s ability to become attuned to one’s emotions, like love and loss. Rohan and Naheed show how a sense of a gendered self complicates emotions, especially the process of grief, which is already complicated enough to make sense of. Both grief and gender shape each other as seen through the lives of these characters. Rohan’s loss and his physical disability make him dependent on women. He becomes reflective of the past in a slightly different way. Naheed’s loss becomes transformative for her in a more assertive manner. Although not visible, these characters carry the heaviest burden of grief inside them, yet they navigate life and move on while showing hope for change in their gendered identities. Rohan, due to the bandages on his eyes, appears to have suffered more from loss, even though they all are carrying the weight of grief and loss, “it is one of life’s great mysteries, human beings living with secret grief, unseen, and unsympathized” (p. 206, *The Blind*). This reflects the complexity of grief. This paper concludes by

showing how grief can be viewed as a relational force that has the potential to engage with transformation and vulnerability, thus rejecting traditional ways of looking at grief as singular and static (Donnelly, K. 2019). Rohan's and Naheed's experiences of grief become more complicated as they intermingle with patriarchal norms and expectations, prompting them to reflect on their gender identities.

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