

## MAPS OF MEMORIES. RE-CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY THROUGH REMEMBERING AND THE DEFINING POST DIASPORA

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of (post)diaspora as an act of remembering, as illustrated in the British Asian writer Nadeem Aslam's novel, *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004). The narrative follows several inter-related 'maps', symbolizing 'networks' that link protagonists within and across generations and spaces. Memory being at the centre of this analysis and the core of Aslam's novel, personal experience is interlaced with historical data (the Partition of India and the decades following the 1950s of South Asian immigrants in Britain) thus complicating further the 'maps', both physical and those of the mind, that two of the main male protagonists go through/'wander'. The research study interrogates the meaning of post diaspora in terms of post memory and 'past' diaspora rather than in strict temporal terms, placing identity at the intersection of history, experience, trauma and violence, culture and psychoanalysis.

**Keywords:** *(post) memory, (post) diaspora, identity, trauma, history.*

### INTRODUCTION

British Pakistani writer Nadeem Aslam's novel, *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), is more than just the sad story of two lovers who, thought of by their community to be living in sin (due to their moving in together without being married), are murdered in an honour killing act by the woman's two brothers. The novel should equally not be reduced to the perspective according to which it is a mere account on the wrong-doings of Islamic laws, including honour killing, despite the emphasis put on it both by the writer and by some reviewers<sup>1</sup> of the novel.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hermant Sareen, <http://www.oysterboyreview.org/issue/19/reviews/SareenH-Aslam.html>; Neel Mukherjee, <http://www.neelmukherjee.com/2004/06/maps-for-lost-lovers-by-nadeem-aslam/>; Robin Yassin-Kassab, <https://qunfuz.com/2008/02/06/maps-for-lost-lovers-and-writerly-responsibility/>



*Maps ...* is a novel that includes the personal stories of various characters who either live in the South Asian diaspora in England or characters who live in Pakistan, in the past (pre- and post-Independence of India) as well as in the present (around the 1970's – 1980's). The community of immigrants from countries of the subcontinent live in an imagined neighborhood called Dasht-e-Tanhaii (*Tanhaii*, from Urdu, means 'loneliness'), often referred to as being a 'Desert of Loneliness' or as 'The Wilderness of Solitude'. The protagonist, Shamas, is an atheist but also a respected man within a very religious community, a contradiction explained by his high education and by the fact that he can play the role of counsellor and mediator among diverse religious groups as well as between the white majority population and non-white minorities. His individual and family stories are interconnected with historical accounts of pre-Independence and of India's Partition (of both 1947 and 1971).

The concept of diaspora is scrutinized in connection with the meaning of the words 'past' and 'post' in the context of memory and trauma embedded in history and as defining factors of identity. Thus, past diaspora means here the migration of people that followed Partition in and out of the new states of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, drawing sinuous additional maps across newly and randomly set borderlines, maps that stretch beyond their territorial understanding and reaching over to familial maps that have been forcefully and painfully reconfigured.

In this context, post diaspora must not be understood merely in temporal terms, as a closed period in which diasporas and diasporic identities have lived and then disappeared. Instead, it must be seen as the diaspora of the past which seeks but cannot fully catch up with the present of the individuals (such as Shamas) who have not personally witnessed certain historical events (e.g. the 1919 bombing or India's Partition) but whose parents' and ancestors' personal stories merge with historical events of a 'home' they left behind. This merging of stories and official history makes Shamas's own story become part of the collective memory of the people he did and – at the same time – did not fully belong to.

There are two significant levels of memory: the individual memory (remembering) and the collective memory, which includes a nation's memory, the memory of a religious community, or even literature's memory (intertextuality) (Erll 2008). It is when past diaspora and past memory extend their invisible power over time, immersed with traumatic experiences and events, up to the diaspora of the present and its memory that one can see it as *post* diaspora. Post diaspora can therefore be identified at any moment in time as long as post memory occurs, reaching beyond the personal memory of the individual. The sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) (id.) are numberless and may be extended beyond physical locations (such as places where history has taken place) and thus become more than *lieux de mémoire*: *milieux de mémoire* (environments of memory) (id.). As *milieux de mémoire*, they contain not only the physical location of a past event

but also the traumatic experience both of the time of its happening and of subsequent times.

Trauma is an inclusive element of the memory of a painful past (personal and/or collective). The word 'trauma' comes from the Greek 'traumat-, trauma', which means wound (an alteration of *trōma*). Trauma is claimed as a category due to the relation between trauma and representation (language). Gilmore asserts that language is the key to healing the trauma when the first finds the path to verbalize the latter:

Trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency. Yet at the same time language about trauma is theorized as impossibility, language is pressed forward as that which heals the survivor of trauma. (Gilmore 6, qtd. by Rippl et al. 2013, 9)

In *Maps ...*, the testimony of the violent past is not given by the protagonist of the event (Shamas's father) but by an authorial 'I' (Shamas) who takes over the burden of the autobiographical 'I' (Shamas's father). Jennifer Yusin and Deepika Bahri (2008) question the singular 'I' present in the autobiographical voice and see the fiction of testimony as 'open[ing] up the creative space in which the "I" is able to write as an "I"' (82). The (hi)story of identity of Shamas's father lies back in a time when Shamas himself did not literally live: the immigrant Shamas is not part of the *lieu de mémoire* of India's Partition, yet the latter is a vivid element in the character's *milieu de mémoire*.

The authorial voice allows the autobiographical voice to actually speak up events that are too traumatic for the latter to reveal. Trauma is painful up to a point where the voice is nullified so that the 'I' needs to assume another voice (the authorial 'I') in order to speak about traumatic experiences. In other words, the authorial 'I' has the power to create the distance necessary between the autobiographical 'I' and trauma, as well as between the autobiographical 'I' and its audience.

#### FAMILY, HISTORY, MEMORY, VIOLENCE, AND TRAUMA

Shamas's natal family is not a common one: his mother is a Muslim while his father was born a Hindu and later became a Muslim. This one was not a conscious conversion though. The story of the boy's (Shamas's father as a child) conversion to Islam is directly linked to a historical event that preceded India's independence. The little boy, the protagonist's father (at the time called Deepak), and his elder sister (Aarti), Shamas's aunt, were following the white (British) 'women with tails' (the shape of their garments) in order to get a glimpse of the 'tails' the women were believed to have underneath their long skirts (a Western dress code which the

British white women in India of the Raj still observed even when it went out of fashion as a symbol of their distinctiveness and assumed racial superiority).

The two children, Deepak and Aarti, were unaware of the danger they were in. It was back in April 1919 when a force of several dozen British troops under the command of Brigadier General Reginald Edward Harry Dyer, fearing a mob was forming, had fired unarmed men, women and children at a gathering in Amritsar, a place that has become a *lieu de mémoire*. This event was followed by several riots many of which took place in the Gujranwala district, the place where these characters used to live. Here is how the writer describes the event:

It was a Tuesday in April. The jackals and wolves in the nearby jungles had howled throughout Sunday night, roused by the smell of warm human blood that the winds brought to Gujranwala from forty miles away, and by dawn on Monday the news had spread to the human population also: hundreds of men, women and children had been gunned down at the Jallianwallah Garden in Amritsar.

Enraged by the news, the inhabitants of Gujranwala had stoned a train and set fire to railway bridges, and several buildings along the Grand Trunk Road which passed through the town – the telegraph office, the district court, the post office, and an Indian Christian Church – were reduced to ashes (Aslam 2004, 49).

When the writer brings forth history, he adds a touch of personal (hi)storyemphasising the fact that official history cannot be separated from individual story. As it has been asserted (Maurice Halbwachs, paraphrased by Erll 2008), memory is actually being actualised by the members of a community of remembrance generating several *points de vue* (5). Violent events generate trauma in the psyche and lives of those who are ‘witnesses’ (‘eyes’, ‘I’s), or better yet, of the participants to the events. Deepak (Shamas’s father) and Aarti (Deepak’s sister), were crossing the borderlines of their familiar ‘maps’ into new territory in their search for the mysterious human tails. The writer masterfully intersperses the fictionalised historical account (*milieu de mémoire*) of the lives that have been taken away in violent strokes with images of a burned-down house in which the two siblings entered in their purchase after the women with tails:

Now and then as they moved forward they consulted the guidebooks of stories and hearsay (without realizing that they were getting closer to the pages of history).

They arrived, but in the place where the dak bungalow was said to be situated (...) they found nothing but the perfunctory sketch, charcoal on sky: only the framework of the building had survived yesterday’s conflagration, the walls and roof had fallen to the ground in a black heap (Aslam 2004, 50).

The remaining of the house is remindful of the historical event. Aslam continues by bringing in the memory of a house that was supposed to be built but that has never become reality – the house that the children’s now dead father wanted to set up for his family:

The outline [of the burnt down house] reminded [the children] of the drawing [read 'map'] of the house their father had made on the floor with a piece of coal, the house he said he was building for them, the house that was wrested by their father's family from their mother as soon as she was widowed, leaving her homeless with no alternative but the brutal charity of her sister's husband (Ibidem).

The writer has carefully chosen the moment when Shamas's family story is revealed to the readers. This story, rooted in history, is the core of the protagonist's identity. The trauma generated within his father's psyche as a child holds on to Shamas himself. Despite him belonging to a different generation than his father's, the protagonist has an obligation to remember the past. According to Yusin and Bahri (2008), the way in which one can talk about trauma is difficult in that 'it emerges out of obligation to remember an event that remains trapped within a past never fully experienced in the present' (83). The call of the past, the call of history is haunting Shamas even when he crosses several physical borders. Nonetheless, the writer restricts the oral narratives on pre-Independence India and on Partition to only one character in the novel (Shamas). It is as if only he is the heir of painful memory and violent history (*milieu de mémoire*), the other inhabitants of Dasht-e-Tanhaii being mainly preoccupied with current mishaps and fears generated by an awareness of their status as immigrants in a time (post 1970s) when the Other as (South Asian) immigrant in the UK was – the least to say – undesirable.

The description of the bombing whose victim was little Deepak, as if in slow motion, instantly followed by speed forward motion, is artistically presented by the writer, including the painful consequences of the terrific performance of pure unbounded violence: physical injuries of the two siblings and Deepak's loss of memory.

The shadow of the returning biplane poured itself down the dark bungalow's boundary wall and advanced like a sheet of unstoppable black water undulating along the ground's gentle rise and fall.

It had lost height and made Aarti feel she had grown taller in its absence.

Perhaps, she thought, the metal bird was about to flex two-gracefully aligned legs like a stork and alight on the drake tree which was now suddenly on fire.

A red lily grew out of her arm. The sharp images blurred like a carousel gaining speed and suddenly she was so tired she had to sit down against the wall she found herself against and close her eyes.

Uprooted, lifted high onto the contours of expanding air, Deepak saw the ground rushing under him and smelled oranges being cut open before he forgot everything, the last sensation being the flesh-eating heat of his hair on fire against his scalp.

The bomb, like a foot stamped into a rain puddle, had emptied his mind of all its contents (Aslam 52–53).

History and violence trigger trauma and painful memory that induce silence on the part of those who participate in such events. It has been found that the scarce

number of narratives and even of historical accounts on violent historical events is due to the witnesses' avoiding to recount and remember that which generates pain or is too aberrant, illogical to be put in words. Aware of this, Aslam makes his character lose his memory for a period of time. Deepak's temporary lapse of memory is of a deeper nature than the silence chosen by witnesses (instead of narrating the irrational, the painful): it is a *milieu de mémoire* void of *mémoire* in an act of violence and terror.

Back in 1919, the boy (Deepak) and the girl (Aarti) are separated and, with the occurrence of the Partition of 1947, Aarti is believed to have ended up in India, while the boy drifted for a year until he came to the shrine of a Muslim saint (see the past diaspora discussed in the 'Introduction'). No longer called by his Hindu name, Deepak, but Chakor (moonbird), Shamas's father stayed back in the new state of Pakistan. As he had lost his memory and did not know his identity, the boy and the community that adopted him believed he was a Muslim. Later on, he got married to a Muslim woman, Mahtaab (moon). Using the *leit-motif* of the moth attracted to the light that becomes its very source of death, Aslam asserts that 'a chakor is to the moon what the moth is to the flame' (53) emphasising the fact that the end of Deepak as Chakor is the best symbolized by his assumed 'sinful' union with a woman of a different religion than his.

These pieces of information are also narratives of Shamas's natal family. They have impregnated his consciousness and memory (*milieu de mémoire*) so that every element of his present life that is connected to India and Pakistan is enough for the protagonist to re-member the past that he had not personally lived in but that calls on to him to re-ignite. Thus, a parcel containing a small tamarind-tree branch from India supposed to reach Pakistan via England instantly makes Shamas re-member the current unsteady relations between the two countries (India and Pakistan) as the consequence of and the background for his changed family dynamics.

The hostility between the two neighbors makes it necessary for a letter to Pakistan from India, or one to India from Pakistan, to be posted to a third country – to a friend or relative in Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia or the countries of the Persian Gulf (...). Direct correspondence is often destroyed out of pettiness disguised as patriotic duty, or violated by the authorities who are quick to see a regular communicator with the other side as traitor. Countless thousands of families wait for the news of their loved ones from the other side of the border – a wall that also effectively cuts the whole of Asia in half – but what they feel is less important than nationalistic ideals. (Aslam, 74)

This situation triggers re-membering in Shamas's consciousness so that, should his aunt 'Aarti had been located over there in India he would have arranged the supply of foliage through her' (id. 75). The memory of his family and his present thoughts as a grown man in England join in an instance of what I call post

diaspora: the past diaspora of post-Independence India is part of a painful traumatic history that clings onto diasporic Shamas whose consciousness is turned into a *milieu de mémoire* where the past catches up with the present and vice versa. Without this dual connection, meaning of aberrant violence embedded in the collective consciousness is impossible to achieve.

The thirteen-year old girl who had become separated from her brother during the bombing of Gujranwala in April 1919 would be ninety-one this year – if she's alive. At the time of Partition she must have left the Gujranwala – which was part of Pakistan now – and moved to India. Shamas's parents would try to find her and the rest of the family short after his father's true identity and early past came to light, but there was little access to India. Nor was there any way of knowing whether they had survived the Partition massacres during the move to India. (id.)

The narrator(-protagonist) reflects upon the memories that – due to the fact that he had not been born at that time – do not actually belong to him. Nonetheless, they are embedded in official history and in his family history, making it almost compulsory for the protagonist to consciously turn those floating memories into his own:

She is lost forever. It is conceivable that, as a grown man, he would not have felt the loss of an aunt with as much intensity as he sometimes does Aarti's – but she's linked with the tragedy of his father, and his mind keeps returning to her for that reason (Ibidem).

The first flashes of memory come to Chakor (former Deepak) only three years after the bombing, in 1922, when he finds himself staring at a white woman's feet. This act generates a series of interconnected thoughts that end up in him remembering his real name – Deepak. Subsequently, his memory returns gradually, like 'objects taking shape with the slow arrival of dawn' (Idem, 77).

The news of his retrieved memory and of his real identity impacts the members of the man's conjugal (Muslim) family differently. Although he had known about his past long before he revealed the truth to his wife, she did not see this as an act of betrayal. Nevertheless, his eldest son is profoundly disappointed and ashamed for being a hybrid instead of a 'pure' Muslim, as the writer emphasizes. Shamas (Chakor/Deepak's younger son) finds out later on about the harassment his father was submitted to by the community after the news of his rediscovered identity. The man (Chakor/Deepak) saw himself forced to resign from his position as an editor of a magazine, *The First Children on the Moon* (a p.u.n. on his own name, 'moonbird'), the first magazine to be published in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan. One may notice the irony of the situation: a man whose fluid identity is seen by the community as a cultural and religious traitor is the same who promotes the language of this culture.

‘EncyclopaediaPakistanica’, a regular section in *The First Children on the Moon*, is an invitation for the readers ‘to write the histories of their towns, villages and neighbourhoods’ (Idem, 76). The accounts of the readers (who become story-tellers) is a sort of “scriptotherapy” (Suzette A. Henke 2000), used by individuals who are likely to overcome trauma by writing about the events that generated the trauma in the first place. Aware or not of the risks that lurk at the corner when one undertakes such an action (writing about one’s own traumatic experiences), Aslam makes his character (Deepak/Chakor) be witness to ‘scriptotherapy’ instead of performing it himself (since he reads the stories accounted by others). According to Cathy Caruth, as paraphrased by Rippl et al. (2013), ‘putting the unspeakable into words may create problems of its own’ (10). This assertion is based on Bessel Van der Kolk’s and Otto Van der Hart’s neurological research, taken over by Caruth:

(...) only a conscious effort via linguistic endeavours helps to release the threatening power of trauma and to integrate it into memory (...) the process of putting memories of trauma into language, the effort to shape and contain the unspeakable by way of words may in fact result in even greater imprecision and loss (Ibidem).

In a similar way with the readers’ accounts, Shamas’s thoughts are also a sort of post-scripto therapy, as the protagonist of the event (Deepak/Chakor) has never succeeded to write about it himself.

The conflict between the newly created countries (re-configured India and the new state of Pakistan), the sense of insecurity and distrust that existed at the time, made some assert that ‘Encyclopaedia Pakistanica’ was ‘nothing more than his excuse for publishing detailed maps of Pakistani towns and cities which the Indians could use during war – a war with India being always a possibility, the most recent only five years ago, when, to distract the attention of the public who had become disaffected following that election back in 1964, the government had sent the army into Kashmir, and India had retaliated by crossing the border into Lahore’ (Aslam 81). Under historical and political circumstances such as these, betrayal and suspicion at country level may be symbolised by the Other-ness of an individual (such as a Hindu who has unwarily become a Muslim). Due to him being an Other, such an individual’s actions are politicised and always under the scrutiny of those who have suddenly become his opponents.

One reader (of the Encyclopaedia Pakistanica) from Gujranwala sent in the details of the 1919 bombing which made Deepak/Chakor look for the historical accounts of the event. Erll (2008) identifies two modes of memory that reflect the way in which memory is formed: selective memory (identity-related memory) and historical events (historiography) (6). One characteristic of memory is its ‘dialectical movement in and out of consciousness’ (Anze and Lambek 2016, 7). This proves that authority cannot lie with the individual alone but also with institutions (the power of the state), experts and with collective memory (Ibidem).

The description is a full account of the bombing, giving the readers the opportunity to confront individual memory with its official report. The account, edited in italics in the novel in order to show that this excerpt is the official version written in history books, contains a fully detailed report of the bombing (with times, dates and names of locations) and a paragraph that mentions Deepak's loss of memory yet not his name nor any other detail related to his identity:

The three First World War BE2c biplanes, under the command of Captain D.H.M. Carberry, arrived over Gujranwala at 3.00 p.m. that Tuesday. He dropped his first three bombs on a party of 150 people in the nearby village of Dhulla, who looked as though they were heading for the town. One bomb fell through the roof of a house and failed to explode. Two fell near the crowd, killing a woman and a boy, and slightly wounding two men. The rest of the crowd fled back to the village, encouraged by 50 rounds from the Lewis machinegun.

A few minutes later, Carberry dropped two bombs – one of them a dud – and fired 25 rounds at a crowd of about fifty near the village of Garjhak, without causing any casualties.

Returning to Gujranwala, he attacked a crowd of about 200 in a field near a high school on the outskirts of the town, dropping a bomb which landed in a courtyard, and followed up with 30 rounds of machinegun fire: a sweet-seller was wounded by a bullet, a student was hit by a bomb splinter, and a small boy was stunned. (Aslam 76)

By reading this excerpt, the re-discovered Deepak is able to reconfigure the episodes that led up to what had happened to him. He can identify the events and those who participated in the events, he being one of them. For a moment, history has caught up with the present and the present has caught up with history in an uncanny embrace. Relying on Erll's opinion (2008) again, the past is not a given but is continuously re-constructed and re-presented.

Despite Deepak's recovery of his memory, he cannot retrieve his identity. History and current social codes do not allow him to re-become Deepak. After the two events – the 1919 bombing and the Partition of 1947, a third traumatizing event takes place affecting Chakor's/Deepak's psyche: the Partition of 1971 when West Bengal was separated from East Bengal (which later became the new state of Bangladesh). By this time, Shamas, a poet and a Communist, had already migrated to England, fleeing the hunt after Communists of the new government of the time (1958).

Shamas returned to Pakistan in 1963 in order to get married (to Kaukab) but came back to England. In 1970, his father fell ill. As his body is consumed by illness (pancreatic cancer), so is his psyche consumed by the need to get control of his identity. Society and family refuse to set his dead body on fire (according to the Hindu religion) when he would be dead; instead, they make it clear he would be buried like a Muslim. Consequently, afflicted Deepak/Chakor runs away from home one night to the deserted old Hindu temple 'fallen into disrepair since 1947

when the Hindus of SohniDharti had left for India' (Aslam 84) where he puts himself on fire as a symbol of his taking control of his identity.

### CONCLUSIONS

Memories are often connected to one's dreams. Long-forgotten memories or feelings buried deep in one's subconscious travel to the surface and are released via dreams. The protagonist, Shamas, is forcefully influenced by his father's past and memories:

Shamas doesn't remember his dreams, but on some mornings, like today, he awakens with a gentle deliberateness to his gestures and from that he knows that his father has managed to infiltrate his dreams, just as a lover long gone and not allowed to surface in the waking thoughts comes to place a flower in the mind during sleep, not settling for being forgotten. (Aslam 48)

One must emphasise here the artfulness of Nadeem Aslam's wording as well as of his interlacing returns to the ideas of maps and lovers that also exist in the title of the novel, *Maps for Lost Lovers*. There are more maps to be found and decoded, reread while re-membered, than those that lead to the lost couple (Jugnu and Chanda) around whom the novel is built; there are more sorts of lovers that have been lost or who lost each other than these two; the 'lover' as father was lost to Shamas (the man's identity was forcefully taken/called by history) and so was to himself until he retrieved his identity in and via death; the 'lover' as aunt (for Shamas) and as sister (for Deepak/Chakor) who was lost for them forever; the 'lover' as 'home' (homeland) both for Deepak/Chakor and for Shamas.

The latter's present life looks as if he has no control over his identity because of his father's personal story embedded in traumatic official history. Assumed to be an atheist, his lack of religiousness is deemed to be the mere consequence of his father's 'unclear' if not assumingly 'impure' identity. Shamas is believed to be 'confused' – and 'confused' he is in his relations with the people around him despite displaying the image of a perfectly balanced individual, a counsellor and mediator.

Shamas's (past) memories are thus not fully his own. He has inherited Deepak's memories which filled the empty space left in his son's psyche (*milieu de mémoire*). (Past) memories are dis-possessed and become *post* memories of a past diaspora that reach beyond personal memories and stories into the history of the Indian subcontinent. If 'past' may be understood in temporal terms, *post* describes how the past catches up with the present – and vice versa - but only partially, as there is always something to still be retrieved, re-membered, and accepted. Not only is identity re-membered and fragmented, it is also re-configured and re-negotiated like the pieces of a continuously changing puzzle so that the final image (read 'map') is never completely drawn.

These memories are imbued with trauma which ‘irreparably fractures a formerly “whole” self’ (Caruth, qtd. by Yusin and Bahri 83). Traumatized subjects re-live experiences of a self that has been and that both is and is no more the same in the present. Adding a diasporic layer to them, it appears that the post diasporic self is both one that has been constructed by others as well as by oneself at different moments in time.

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