

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Nadeem Aslam, *The Blind Man's Garden*, Random House India: New Delhi, 2013. (hardback). pp. 384. Price: Rs 303. ISBN-13: 978-0307961716.**

*And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

Matthew Arnold's lines in "Dover Beach" find a reverberant note in Nadeem Aslam's fourth novel, *The Blind Man's Garden*, a novel that attempts to provide an insight into the war on terror, the working of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and the role of the warlords. The story is set against the backdrop of a post 9/11 world where the hi-tech army of America and the fanatical Taliban militia fight pitched and violent battles. In this crossfire of ideology, hatred and bloodletting innocent bystanders suffer collateral damage. One such victim is the family of a devout Pakistani man named Rohan. The action of the novel moves back and forth between the war torn lands of Afghanistan and Pakistani towns such as Heer (which is a fictitious town) where the principal characters struggle to grapple with emerging questions about love, faith, religion and war.

A central thread running through the novel is the story of the two sons of Rohan, Jeo and Mikal (his adopted son), who secretly travel to war ravaged Afghanistan with the intentions of tending the injured victims of the war on terror. Jeo, Rohan's only son, a trainee doctor, feels that it is his duty towards humanity to do his bit to help and alleviate the pain of the people suffering. Like his father, his heart bleeds for mankind and this motivates him to undertake this perilous journey in secrecy. He leaves behind the comfort and familiarity of a world that he knows in exchange for the harsh and dangerous terrains of Afghanistan. In this process, he leaves behind his ageing father and his newly wedded wife. Aslam is here, documenting the Pan-Islamist tendencies that urge Pakistani nationals to help out their fellow Muslim brothers in neighboring Afghanistan. Mikal, on the other hand, comes to Afghanistan with much simpler objectives—he simply wishes to keep an eye out for his foster brother and ensure as

much as he can, his brother's safety. As orphans, he and his elder brother had been raised by Rohan as his own sons. It is this sense of gratitude and loyalty that compels him to accompany Jeo. By profession he is a mechanic with a talent for gun making, astronomy and poetry which is a startling resume. Again this is an insight into the socio-political world that Mikal inhabits, where he often has to make compromises, gun making is a lucrative market in modern times. Though both brothers undertake the journey for different reasons, they have no interest in the war as such and take no sides. However, fate gives them a cruel blow as they literally get caught up in the war. In the ensuing madness that follows, Jeo is brutally murdered, while Mikal somehow survives inhuman tortures, hunger and desperation to emerge a scarred being towards the end of the novel.

While the sons are battling for survival in the rugged hills of Afghanistan, parallel stories emerge as Aslam very skillfully shows us the anguish of Rohan on the one hand and that of Naheed on the other. Both these characters emerge as flesh and blood creations, plagued by their own inner demons. Rohan is an educator who along with his wife Sophia founded a school to benefit in the enlightenment of the young people of Heer. Despite his university background and education, Rohan is dogmatic in his interpretation and following of Islam. This brings him into conflict with the liberal views of his wife, a difference that eventually drives a wedge between the two of them. Unfortunately, while delivering Jeo, Sophia dies in child birth. Her last words haunt Rohan for the rest of his life, as he believes that she had repudiated their faith and that she was destined for hell. He is torn between the love for his wife and humanity in general and his religious understanding of Islam. At times he questions his faith, when he witnesses the cruelty that is carried out in the name of religion; when he is unable to believe that *Allah* would banish a good hearted unbeliever like his wife to damnation for not sharing his religious convictions. There are moments where Rohan clearly admonishes the perpetrators of September 11 and feels a sense of loss for the victims of that event. Aslam in his treatment of Rohan's inner conflicts is mature and allows license in the development of his characters.

Naheed, the wife left behind by Jeo, is torn between her love for her husband and Mikal, her first and true love. In fact she had agreed to elope with Mikal a week before her wedding to Jeo, but at a crucial moment, Mikal is seized by pangs of conscience as he is unable to betray

the family that had given him everything after the disappearance of his own parents. He fails to show up and the helpless Naheed eventually marries Jeo. She grows to love the kind hearted and gentle souled Jeo and is troubled by his secret mission to Afghanistan. She worries constantly for the safety of her husband, while also longing for the safe return of Mikal. When she discovers the death of her husband, she is numbed with shock and locks herself in the room with Jeo's corpse. She stares at his now still face, trying to come to terms with her loss. This incident creates a small scandal as a widow is generally not permitted by Pakistani society to see the remains of her deceased husband. Again later in the novel, the grieving women relatives of Jeo are prevented from visiting his grave because of their gender. This is a scathing insight into the pathetic condition of women in Pakistan. Aslam portrays the position that women share within the patriarchal setup of a society where if the woman is a marginalized figure, then a widow is in an even worse situation in being doubly marginalised: first by the patriarchal society and by the womenfolk as well. Cast into the evil world as a helpless widow, Naheed is constantly baited by lecherous men who court her. Rohan provides her protection against such evil men but it is her inner belief that Mikal is still alive that eventually gives her the strength to dream for the day when he would return to her. It is this deep love that gives Mikal super human endurance to out will and out run his adversaries in his quest to return to Naheed. Memories of her keep him sane and though mauled and scarred, he does return in the end to his beloved.

The strength of the book lies not only in the thematic treatment of the parallel stories that run in the novel, but also in the poetic prose of Aslam. Beautiful lines are dedicated to the description of Rohan's garden that is alive with flowers, birds and insects. Moths are described "like shavings from a pencil sharpener", while a tree trunk is "twisted as though struggling with some unseen force". When Rohan loses his eyesight, Aslam beautifully captures the condition of a man who has to get used to seeing under different conditions. He now 'listens' to streets sounds and 'sees' "...the arcades under which pieces of meat sizzle, cubbyhole shops selling Japanese sewing machines, English tweed and Chinese crockery, the fruit sellers behind the walls of stacked oranges and women's clothes hanging in shop windows in sheaths of pure lines and colors, teaching one the meaning of grace in one's life..."

Displaying impressive objectivity Aslam presents the horrors of the war fought in Afghanistan. Refusing to take sides with either the Islamic factions or the Americans, he shrugs off their respective ideologies and is interested in only the human aspect of the war. He literally brings the conflict being fought in distant lands to the reader's doorstep and displays the underrated power of love and mankind. In the end it is the often forgotten face and story of humanity in times of conflict that Aslam narrates in his novel.

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**S. Thianlalmuan Ngaihte, *Elite, Identity and Politics in Manipur*, Mittal Publication: New Delhi. 2013. Pp. 218. Price Rs. 850/- ISBN:8183244254.**

Manipur is an enigma for many. A land of rich cultural history that enthralled Rabindranath Tagore with the spiritual grace of its dance, the home of Chorus Repertory Theatre of Ratan Thiyam without whose plays discussions on contemporary world theatre is not complete and at the same time the discourse on state repression, especially in the context of peripheral locations, would invariably keep coming back to AFSPA and Iron Sharmila. Arguably Manipur is a land of immense beauty and at the same time a terrain of complicated political realities. S. Thianlalmuan Ngaihte's book, *Elite, Identity and Politics in Manipur*, tries to address some of the issues from the vantage of a critical insider with a special focus on the Paites, a significant ethnic community of Manipur.

The book makes an effort to theoretically understand the process of identity formation and the corresponding linkages with the growth of elites/ middle class in the respective section of the people. Ngaihte takes a long view of the historico-political context of Manipur through which the princely state of Manipur emerged in and merged with the postcolonial modern India. Yandabo treaty of 1826 had tremendous impact in the whole of North East when Assam came under the direct rule of the British and

so did Manipur that subsequently brought massive changes to the geopolitics of the land. The princely state of Manipur eventually merged with India in 1949 though it retained some of its administrative structures in force. One such structure was the administrative system under the Hill People's Act. Visible distinctions between the hills and plains of Manipur have been the source of Manipur's great ethno-cultural diversity and also the source of its ethno-political anxiety. The book under review gives laudable details of Manipur's recent history and its geo-politics, especially pertaining to the interrelationship between the communities living in the hills and the plains and provides the historical trajectory through which the present day Manipur evolved and reconstructed itself.

In the introductory chapter the author looks at various theoretical positions (Primordial theories, Relative Deprivation theory, Rational Choice theory, Elite Competition theory etc.) to construct his perspectives to critically look at the issues relating to ethnic conflicts and the role of elites in the consolidation of community's cultural and political identity. He has also thrown interesting light on the gradual transformation of the hills people of Manipur into Christian collectives under the direct intervention of the missionaries with the active patronisation of the British government with the assurance of the missionaries to the royal Manipur durbar that they would not extend their operations to the plains and restrict themselves only in the hills. Though William Pattigrew, the first missionary to enter Manipur, began his missionary activities in 1894 mainly among the Tangkhul communities in Ukhrul but the southern hills of Manipur remained largely untouched by the missionary operations till 1910. The Zo communities living in Churachandpur district of Manipur came under the influence of the Christian missionaries on 7 May, 1910. The missionary activities, apart from changing their spiritual world, made effective changes to their life world as well, primarily through the introduction of modern education among the hill tribes, which has been the biggest factor leading to the gradual emergence of the elites in the hills.

The Paites are relatively a smaller ethnic community of Manipur having significant presence in Churachandpur district. In terms of their ethnic affiliation they belong to the larger Zo denomination with some ancestral linkages in Myanmar. Despite having strongly rooted with traditional institutions in terms of their social transactions, the Paites have

distinctively evolved with modern ethos and attitudes as they increasingly became part of the growing dissemination of the pan global cultural penetrations. The book has the specific focus to understand the processes of evolution of the configurations like the elites, their ideological and socio-political dimensions and their role in the formation of ethnic identities. Ngaihte has primarily tried to address these issues especially with reference to the Paites. In doing so the author has also tried to look at the issues like anxieties of identity in the location of border, role of culture, language, literature and also the role of memory in the construction of identity. Historically, the Paites began their initiatives to emerge as a distinct ethnic entity basically in the mid-twentieth century or in their post Christianity phase.

The book has thrown interesting insights in mapping the process of the emergence of elites in the given societies and this forms one of the significant contributions of the book. In the context of the Paites, the author has gathered meticulous empirical data to examine the process in relation to the material configurations of the community households. He has provided a minute catalogue of the material details of the Paite community especially in the context of the changing economic conditions and cultural realities of the community. Government and non-government employees, academicians, church and traditional leaders etc., are largely the categories of the Paite elites who share certain common characteristics like modern education, material possessions, considerable economic stability, some amount of inter caste marriages leading to the expansion of cultural ethos, political participation etc. Significantly, despite being numerically marginal, the Paites are substantially well off in terms of their monetary earning which ranges from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 16,000 per month for the families belonging to bureaucrats, intelligentsia, politicians as well as traditional and church leaders.

It is difficult to chronologically place the emergence of the Paites as a distinctive community with a specific ethnic nomenclature in the Indo-Myanmar border region. However, despite having many things in common with that of the Lusei, Kuki, Hmar and others, the Paites have always claimed a distinct ethno-cultural identity like the other communities belonging to the larger Zo denominations. But the Paites are eminently distinguishable from the Meiteis and the Nagas, the two major ethnic entities of Manipur. The Paite elites, through their socio-

cultural activism in the form of writings and cultural renditions, social interventions, production of Paite literatures, through the formations of various social and cultural organisations and so and so forth, have been able to evolve an abiding sense of identity for the community. The author argues that this identity formation has not necessarily been confrontational or an exercise of contestation.

The book reflects the deep engagement of the author with the issues and his well informed research. This is definitely going to enrich the understanding of the readers not only about the Paites but also about Manipur to a great extent. Ngaihte has shown his scholarship and analytical abilities while dealing with the issues relating to identity formation and the role of elites, he has also profitably constructed the theoretical frameworks to make his endeavour to write this book into a highly relevant text to understand the theoretical vantages for future research on similar areas. The value of the book has been further enhanced following the valuable and rare documents furnished in the form of appendices to the book. It is a must read for those who are interested in the history and politics of North East as well as in its allied discursive terrains.

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**Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, Fourth Estate, London, 2012.  
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History of a nation changes with the change of the king, the leader, the dictator. Can the history curve its path in correspondence to change of the king's favourite? Hilary Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) answers this with a poignant tale of Henry VIII's royal court. A historical novel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, is a sequel to Hilary Mantel's Man Booker Prize winning novel, *Wolf Hall* (2009), that talks more about the king's minister and his queen rather than the king. The story narrates the queen, Anne Boleyn's career in the palace of Henry VIII that moves towards a climax, changing direction midway heading for an adverse anticlimax. The narrative pattern appears similar to the preceding novel, *Wolf Hall*,

which moves towards the replacement of the former queen, Catherine of Aragon, by the king's mistress, Anne Boleyn. The second queen's failure to give birth to a prince for the Tudor line turns her fate to a greater dread than the first queen's. Her trial encapsulates a distressing sexual intrigue that puts half of the courtiers into suspicion.

The only character that escapes the court trial despite being once the queen's favourite and who wielded power as the queen maker, is Thomas Cromwell. *Wolf Hall* shows his rise from the son of a blacksmith to Cardinal Wolsey's attendant to finally become the Prime Minister of the king, Henry VIII. In *Bring Up the Bodies* he continues with his position even after the queen is suspected of not being a virgin before marriage to the king, though Cromwell was the chief guarantor of Anne Boleyn's virtue. An intriguer of the sexual politics of the court, Thomas Cromwell considers him as the maker of the queen. But he himself gets intrigued as the queen fails in her effort to produce a male heir. However, Cromwell's sheer practicality and Machiavellian wisdom reverses the danger as he becomes the chief agent of the king to collect verdicts, willing or averse, against the queen's claims to be Henry's legal wife.

The issue of chastity and fertility have been raised again and again in this novel. But chastity tends to be nothing personal. Anne Boleyn's adulterous expeditions were discovered only after the king loses his hopes of getting a son from her and switches his interest to her lady-in-waiting, Jane Seymour, the plain, quiet, not much witty daughter of Sir John of the Wolf Hall. While Anne's disloyalty to the king becomes a popular gossip, Jane Seymour attracts the king through her seamless virtue. Behind this lurks a series of manipulations of the members of the Wolf Hall and their supporters. She achieves power by pretending ignorance of the court politics and treacheries practised by women to become the queen. But behind the veil her whole family and even Cromwell lays the trap for the king, using her virginity as the bait. Not only Boleyn's enemies but also the enemies of Thomas Cromwell get a chance to defame the queen. But the sly Cromwell switches his loyalty from the Boleyns to the Seymours. He even serves as the foremost spy of the king to manoeuvre witnesses against the queen and her possible lovers. He takes this as a chance to bring down the fortunes of those who had plotted the fall of Cardinal Wolsey. Lady Rochford, the sister-in-law of Anne Boleyn, serves as his chief informer from the inner chamber.

The plotters against the Cardinal and Sir Thomas More as well as the queen, Anne, pay the penalty of their crimes. But politics works more than poetic justice; no reversal of fortune occurs in case of the king and his shrewd prime minister, Cromwell. Of course the king had to pay the penalty for disregarding the Roman Catholic Church and empowering the Arch Bishop of Canterbury as the substitute to the Pope. His kingdom was in the constant threat of being overtaken by the joint European forces. But the adversity is soon overcome as Anne Boleyn is tried and sentenced to death. King Henry VIII is spiritually pardoned while in the secular sphere he is offered friendship even by the Spanish Emperor, the nephew of the late queen, Catherine. The religious history of Britain at this phase seems to be shaped by the court politics and even more shrewdly by the inner chamber of the court.

The book is divided into six chapters, named as, “Falcons”, “Crows”, “Angels”, “The Black Book”, “Master of Phantoms” and “Spoils”. The first three replicates the queen’s conspiracy to nullify Lady Mary’s claim to the throne, persuading the king to declare her daughter, Elizabeth, as the only princess. The last three chapters, however, shows her gradual downfall. The narrative runs from Cromwell’s point of view. It starts from his personal reflections about his dead wife and daughters and ends with his speculations on his past, present and future. The language is dreamlike whenever there are references to Cromwell’s personal life that comes as a contrast to the pithy language that he uses in the court affairs. Yet his language varies while he plays the trickster in the inner chamber of the palace, gathering information about the queen’s admirers. Not only he speaks with double meaning but also digs up and forces layers of meaning to the words spoken by those whom he indirectly interrogates. The language of the inner chamber reflects subtle sexual undertone. The king, Henry also speaks a variety of language while he talks to his courtiers in contrast to his language of courtship. In the court, sonneteering becomes the main tool of persuasion and expression of chivalry, no matter whether the lady love is a maiden or a married woman. Thomas Wyatt becomes the rival of the king in sonnet writing, heightening the king’s jealousy of his being Anne’s former lover.

The novel shows the power of women only through their body, essentially as sexual entities, source of procreation, the embodiment of virtue; body which transcends its natural dimension to be an epithet of

political power game. The failure of Anne Boleyn's body naturally leads to the political doom of the family and even the death of her brother and her admirers. In contrast Jane Seymour's body as an embodiment of virtue raises her family fortune. So the women exert power only through their influence upon the king. The only independent woman seems to be Cromwell's late wife, Elizabeth Cromwell, who is absent from the novel except through Cromwell's reveries.

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