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A Stoic Reading of Suffering and Moral Restraint in Nadeem Aslam's The Blind Man's Garden

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores Nadeem Aslam's renowned novel *The Blind Man's Garden* through Stoic lens with the focus to study the ethical and emotional dimensions of the novel in the context of post-9/11 geopolitics. Though the existing literature has focused on external forces such as imperial power, psychological trauma, displacement, and political conflict, the present focus is on the internal moral struggles of the characters by using Stoic philosophy as a framework to study how characters like Rohan and Jeo respond to violence, socio-political unrest, and loss, with patience, moral clarity, and emotional intelligence. Stoic principles of virtue, rational acceptance, and the distinction between internal and external control show the suffering not as passive resignation, but as a conscious moral construction. These principles advocate that moral endurance and decision-making, rather than ideological or political confrontation shape the characters' responses to crisis. The findings of the paper places Aslam's approach aligned with Stoic ethics contributing towards understanding of how classical philosophical traditions inform contemporary literature. It challenges the limitation of stoicism to its classical context, necessitating its relevance in interpreting modern apocalyptic literature.

Keywords: Nadeem Aslam, *The Blind Man's Garden*, Stoicism, , Post-9/11 Geopolitics, Internal Moral Struggle, Restraint, And Ethical Endurance, Contemporary Literature.

Introduction

The tragic incidence of 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror has no doubt influenced the contemporary literature, especially fiction. The literature of such regions is directly affected by political intervention, ideological extremism, and longstanding conflicts. Such type of literature mirrors not only the visible destructions of war, but equally explores the internal struggles of individuals with displacement, moral uncertainty, and human loss. Written in the same times, Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden* is set in post September 11 Pakistan and Afghanistan. This novel provides a depiction of lives trapped in the crosscurrents of global politics and local suffering. This unique piece of literature shows war not as an abstract geopolitical phenomenon, but as an intimate human experience marked by ethical confusions and emotional restraint. The postcolonial,



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political, and trauma based readings, which have effectively shown issues of imperial power, psychological rupture, and ideological violence, have greatly influenced the understanding of the novel's historical and political context. This tends to foreground external structures of oppression and collective trauma. Therefore, the ethical interiority of characters, for instance, their capacity for endurance, emotional discipline, and moral judgment in the face of unusual circumstances had received comparatively limited attention. This gap suggests the need for a philosophical framework that can account for the novel's sustained focus on inner chemistry and moral responsibility. One of the most relevant frameworks is that of Stoicism. Stoic philosophy, having its origin in ancient Greek and Roman thought focuses on virtue, rational engagement with hardships, and the acceptance of events beyond human control (Epictetus, trans. 1995; Seneca, trans. 2004). Stoicism as a philosophy advocates responses supported by reason, ethical clarity, and commitment to moral values rather than advocating emotional suppression (Hadot, 2002). These features of Stoicism are relevant to the ethical atmosphere of this novel, where characters are repeatedly faced with situations that test their emotional limits and moral convictions as portrayed in the novel.

The characters of Rohan and Jeo in the novel show a form of silent persistence that subscribes to Stoic ideals. Their responses to violence and loss are marked not by emotional excess or moral collapse. They are marked by restraint, patience, and a deliberate effort to act justly despite the surrounding chaos. In *The Blind Man's Garden* suffering is not romanticized, instead it is endured as a conscious moral stance. It shows the Stoic belief that inner freedom can be preserved even when external conditions are hostile (Pigliucci, 2017). Moreover, the ethical foundations of the novel further mirrors Stoic virtue ethics, particularly through its emphasis on wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance as guiding principles in moments of crisis (Long, 2002). Therefore, this paper magnifies the novel through the lens of Stoic philosophy, to explore existing critical discussions and come up with a more ethically grounded interpretation of the novel. Reading through this lens not only enriches the understanding of Aslam's treatment of suffering and moral struggle, but also demonstrates the continued relevance of classical philosophical traditions in interpreting contemporary literature shaped by conflict, uncertainty, and human endurance.

Literature Review

This section reviews literature on the novel under study and on Stoicism. If we talk about stoicism, it has historically been linked to ethical self control, reasoned judgment, and perseverance during times of hardship. It is important to note that stoicism was primarily formulated as a pragmatic philosophy that deals with the orientation of everyday life. However, it has gradually become identified as an effective critical mode in literary analysis. According to scholars, the Stoic philosophy provides useful interpretive approaches to the analysis of depictions of suffering, emotional restraint, moral responsibility, and resilience in literature (Long, 2002; Sellars, 2006). The main idea of the Stoics is the notion of the dichotomy of control. It separate that which is within the reach of the human agency i.e. judgment, intention and ethical action, and that which is not i.e. death, fate and political or social turmoil (Epictetus, trans. 2008). This has been found to be of particular interest to literary criticism, where so often we encounter characters in literature who are faced with forces they cannot control.

Nussbaum (1994) suggests that Stoicism is one of the frameworks through which we can learn how characters can negotiate emotional pain without drowning in despair or going to pieces. Instead of rejecting emotion, Stoicism cultivates the control over destructive



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passions by reason, what is termed as *apatheia*. Stoic ethics greatly influenced classical literature and drama especially in Roman times. Seneca, a prominent Stoic thinker is a good example of a philosopher who intertwined philosophy with literature in his essays and tragedies that covered aspects of anger, grief, and moral restraint (Inwood, 2005). Researchers have observed that Senecan tragedy is not simply the dramatization of overwrought feeling, but reveals the tragic end of the unbridled lust, and teaches of Stoic doctrines by narrative (Wilson, 2014). On the same note, the philosophical discussions of Cicero reveal the process of introduction of the Stoic concepts into the Roman literary tradition, which influenced the views on virtue, righteousness, and self-control of emotions (Long, 2002).

Stoicism has been further used in contemporary literary criticism to study the writings on the topic of war, trauma, exile, and ethical uncertainty. According to Sellars (2006), one can say that Stoic philosophy has become especially important as it tackles the circumstances of uncertainty and suffering that still prevail in the contemporary discourse. The concepts of Stoicism have been used by literary scholars to examine characters that endure violence of the past in their attempts to maintain moral values. This method also changes the main emphasis on heroic victory or ideological resistance into survival based on morals and inner strength. Existential literature and modernist literature have also been associated with stoicism.

Although the concept of existentialism revolves around absurdity and alienation, some critics observe that Stoicism foresees the existential issues by promoting the idea of living in a universe without caring and keeping up with ethical obligation (Hadot, 1995). In the literary context, this parallelism enables the scholar to analyze how characters can face the meaninglessness without nihilism. The mental image of the inner citadel by Marcus Aurelius as an example has been used as metaphor to describe psychological strength in stories of political anarchy and personal defeats (Hadot, 1998).

Although Stoicism is a critically useful discipline, it has not escaped the criticisms of scholars. Critics warn that the Stoic interpretations are tempted to simplify all emotional complexity in favor of a stoic restraint in favor of expression (Nussbaum, 1994). The intensity of emotions and subjective experience is a characteristic of literature especially in Romantic and postmodern traditions, and it might seem antithetical to Stoic restraint. Nonetheless, recent academic research questions this dichotomic view by reminding us that Stoicism does not propose the idea of emotion suppression but, on the contrary, of rational interaction with emotion (Sellars, 2006). This clarification has made it possible to use Stoicism in literature analysis in more subtle ways.

Moreover, ethical focus on responsibility and agency of Stoicism has been useful in postcolonial and trauma studies. According to scholars, a case in point of introducing an alternative to victimhood accounts is the existence of Stoic endurance, which anticipates dignity without suffering (Hadot, 1995). In this respect, Stoicism supplements the trauma theory in the sense that it deals with the question of how people live morally after they have lost something irreparably. The image of quiet endurance, indecisive moralism, and selfless restraint in literature are more susceptible to Stoic ethics especially in works influenced by war and displacement.

Critical analysis of *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) by Nadeem Aslam indicates that the novel is increasingly becoming an important work in the modern literary studies. The text has been investigated using different approaches that include post-colonialism, trauma theory, gender studies, and reconstruction of cultural identity. These papers focus on thematic complexity, such as the psychological effects of war, geopolitical narrative reactions to post 9/11, and the literary depiction of suffering. The context of placing this



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body of research and Stoic ethical issues brings into focus several overlapping issues in endurance, moral agency, and emotional control.

A current research line of investigation is on gender and social precarity. Nawaz, Khan and Danish (2024) discuss the ways in which the patriarchal systems influence male subjectivity in the novel by Aslam, revealing the ways in which the social expectations are interlaced with the war and cultural identity. In their analysis, it can be seen that the male characters are placed in an uncertain situation between intersecting systems of nationalism, religion, and violence- indicating that not only physical safety is compromised by war, but social roles and emotional stability as well. The discourse of research is also dominated by post-colonial perspectives.

Using a post-colonial lens of ideological racism, Munir, Talat, and Yasmin Khan (2024) draw on the concept of Western discourses of power, identity, and the lived experiences of the characters in Aslam. Their evidence highlights the ways in which the histories of colonialism and racialized discourses intensify the ideas of otherness and marginality of cultures. Although the focus of their research is the post-colonial thought, it overlaps with the Stoic concepts on effects of external forces (empire, war, and ideology) on subjective identity formation. Following the idea of violence and identity, another paper by Khan, Noor, and Chaudhary (2021) examines *The Blind Man in the Garden* as a work of trauma fiction. Their study adopts the trauma theory to explain how the experience of war re-configures individual psyches and societal facts by showing that traumatic events get ingrained in the collective consciousness. Here, the dominant impact of war on the emotional experience and cultural identity is highlighted, and narrative forms of traumas demand analytical methods that support individual experiences of suffering and the larger sociopolitical disruptions. The Stoic lens, a differentiation of what is controllable (internal judgments) and what must be observed (external events) provides a fruitful reading of such trauma narratives to indicate how the characters cope with emotional pain without losing ethical value.

Amjad, Hayat, and Akhter (2025) discuss the aspect of Jihadist culture and identity reconstruction presentation by questioning the psychological and sociological consequences of extremism in the post-9/11 era and focusing on the topic of the studies of cultural identity. Their study suggests that *The Blind Man Garden* does not confront binary judgments of moderate and radical Muslim identities easily because it anticipates lived experiences of alienation, prejudice, and ideological struggles. The paper attributes cultural stigmatization and stereotyping as some of the factors that lead to identity reconstructions that characters experience. This piece of work helps comprehend how literature is a mirror of and a challenge to a larger cultural discourse of Islam, violence, and the identity of community. Another aspect that is looked at in a Stoic reading is how people bargain between their inner judgments and outer influences, in this instance the ideological and the cultural, without succumbing to bitterness or ideological absolutism. The article additionally provides an overview of previous studies examining the subject of gender stereotyping.

Research Gap

The above cited literature and empirical studies on the novel show that it has been explored from various perspectives by critics and research scholars across the globe. However, its exploration from the perspective of Stoicism and Stoic philosophy has remained underexplored that the present research paper explore to contribute as to how the application of stoic lens to postmodern and apocalyptic literature strengthen the contemporary literature and literary criticism.



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Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative research design grounded in close reading of the text to examine the representation of Stoic philosophy in the novel. The analysis is informed by key Stoic concepts, including endurance, rational acceptance, emotional discipline, and virtue, as articulated by classical Stoic thinkers such as Epictetus 1995 and Seneca 2004. The primary data for this research consist of the text of the novel where relevant passages were selected through close reading where characters confront suffering, moral uncertainty, and socio political turmoil. These textual instances were examined for their alignment with Stoic ideals. Secondary sources, including scholarly works on Stoicism, trauma studies, ethical philosophy, and existing criticism on the novel. The analysis follows a thematic textual approach on pattern of Braun and Clarke's (2006) model. Key themes related to Stoic philosophy were identified, interpreted in relation to classical Stoic teachings, and synthesized to explore how Stoic principles shape characterization, narrative development, and ethical meaning within the novel.

Data Analysis

This section includes data analysis, which is essentially the textual analysis of the novel from the viewpoint of Stoicism. This concept placed emphasis on endurance, moral responsibility, emotional restraint, and acceptance of whatever is beyond human control. At the heart of Stoic philosophy lies the dichotomy of control, which assumes that while people may control their judgments and actions, they are at the mercy of fate, death, or large-scale historical violence. This context allows a Stoic reading of the novel, as Nadeem Aslam builds characters who, if facing chaos, do not aim at an open rebellion but at ethical endurance in silent suffering and at moral restraint. The following analysis shows how these Stoic qualities are signaled in character behavior and narrative moments-primarily, in their acceptance of uncontrollable circumstances and their commitment to moral agency within these circumstances.

Rohan as the embodiment Stoicism in the Novel

In the novel, Rohan emerges as the novel's most explicit Stoic figure. If we look deeply into his character, his physical blindness symbolizes a forced inward turn that makes him parallel with Stoic introspection. Rather than attempting to rationalize or justify the chaos around him, Rohan as a wise and stoic character acknowledges the limits of human understanding. Instead of offering explanations for suffering, he acknowledges the limits, the blind father, represents Stoic endurance. His physical blindness forces him inward, aligning him with the human understanding. This occurs after violence and displacement, when moral clarity falls down and easy explanations fail. After experiencing violence and moral confusion, Rohan reflects on the impossibility of explanation.

"How can anyone explain the world?" (Aslam, 2013, p. 77).

This instance shows that is known as Stoic realism. The question is not followed by protest or despair but by silence. It shows the Stoic belief that the universe is indifferent to human desire for meaning. Wisdom lies in patience rather than explanation. Similarly, one of the most Stoic tensions in the novel is Rohan's anger over his wife Sofia's apostasy and death. His pain does not arise only from loss, but from his inability to control her spiritual fate. Rohan reads the Quran obsessively and also thinks about posthumous punishment for Sofia. It shows his struggle against Stoic acceptance.

"He reads the Holy Book, trying not to think of how her beautiful body is receiving injuries inside the ground at this very moment" (Aslam, 2013, p. 147).



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From a Stoic perspective, this moment shows how attachment to uncontrollable outcomes intensifies suffering and violates the Stoic principle of emotional moderation (*apatheia*). Unlike extremist figures in the novel, Rohan never converts grief into hatred. When confronted by a former student, whose life he once judged harshly, Rohan responds with humility rather than authority. This exchange occurs during a medical consultation, when past moral certainties are challenged.

“There are many ways to live a good life, and Allah is all-forgiving” (Aslam, 2013, p. 147).

This statement is in agreement with stoic cosmopolitan ethics, which give preference to virtue over dogma and reject moral absolutism. Mikal’s imprisonment and loss reflect Stoic endurance without self-pity. Rather than blaming fate or history, he internalizes responsibility which is, however, painful. After returning from captivity and learning of Jeo’s death, Mikal speaks not in accusation but in guilt.

“I should have protected him” (Aslam, 2013, p. 111)

Stoicism does not deny grief; it disciplines it. Mikal’s response reflects the Stoic belief that dignity lies in how one bears suffering, not in escaping it. The garden functions as a metaphor for Stoic order and inner discipline. Amid political chaos, it represents cultivated calm and moral reflection. Rohan walks through the garden at night, relying on touch rather than sight

“Night, and he walks in his garden, hands outstretched, touching the skin of the world in the darkness” (Aslam, 2013, p. 147).

Like Marcus Aurelius’ idea of the inner citadel, the garden symbolizes a space where external violence cannot destroy inner virtue.

Stoic Conflict: Grief, Attachment, and Emotional Discipline

One of the most significant Stoic tensions in the novel arises from Rohan’s anguish over his wife Sofia’s apostasy and death.. His anguish is not just a result of him being bereaved but, rather, a result of his being unable to control her spiritual destiny. This internal conflict shows the limitations of his Stoic calm with regard to being emotionally invested in something he cannot control. This is reflected in the following line:

“He reads the Holy Book, trying not to think of how her beautiful body is receiving injuries inside the ground at this very moment” (Aslam, 2013, p. 147).

From the Stoic point of view, this example shows that suffering is exacerbated when one is attached to an outcome that is not under one’s control, in conflict with the *apatheia* (emotional moderation) dogma. Rohan’s pain is not rejected, only imperfectly controlled, to suggest that the tenets of stoicism in this story tend to be more ideal than actual. However, unlike radicals in this story, Rohan never lets his pain cloud his judgment and progress forward to hatred and absoluteness. When facing his former pupil, whose later life he once disapproved of, Rohan speaks not with authority, but with humbleness:

“There are many ways to live a good life, and Allah is all-forgiving” (Aslam, 2013, p. 147).

This moment shows Stoic cosmopolitan ethics that give preference to virtue over dogma and reject rigid moral order. Rohan’s moral authority derives not from certainty but from restraint.

The Garden as a Stoic Metaphor: Inner Order Amid Chaos

The garden functions as a powerful metaphor for Stoic order and inner discipline. It stands in contrast to the political violence and ideological breakdown in the novel. It symbolizes, in turn, the ordered and virtuous mind that is impervious to the destructive forces of the external world. This is conveyed in "The Inner Citadel," which is Marcus Aurelius’s



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concept that refers to the area that cannot be penetrated by external forces. This is how Aslam portrays Rohan's nightly strolls through the garden:

"Night, and he walks in his garden, hands outstretched, touching the skin of the world in the darkness" (Aslam, 2013, p. 147).

The imagery in the line is one of touching, of patience, of cautious movement, all showing the Stoic ideals of awareness and tempered engagement with the world. The garden becomes a refuge of ethical continuity, standing in opposition to the surrounding disorder of war.

Mikal's Stoic Endurance: Responsibility without Resentment

Mikal in the novel represents a more physical, more psychological form of Stoicism, which is marked by endurance, but not self-pity. His experience, one of captivity, displacement, and loss, is countered not by complaint but by self-controlled restraint. In Aslam's account, during captivity, Mikal requires himself to remain composed:

"He must remain composed" (Aslam, 2013, p. 166).

Even under extreme conditions, his response is one of silent persistence:

"Mikal sits still" (Aslam, 2013, p. 166).

After returning from captivity and learning of Jeo's death, Mikal does not blame fate, history, or others. Instead, he internalizes responsibility:

"I should have protected him" (Aslam, 2013, p. 111).

It communicates that stoicism does not refute sorrow; it controls it. Mikal's attitude is a good example of how Stoics believe that true honor is found not in avoiding pain but in how it is endured. Later, exhaustion threatens to overwhelm him:

"His hands placed on top of his head, all the exhaustions of his life catching up with him" (Aslam, 2013, p. 347).

Yet he continues forward, embodying Stoic perseverance rather than collapse.

Naheed's Stoicism: Practical Resolve and Forward Vision

The character of Naheed in the novel portrays Stoicism through the aspects of resilience and prudence in spite of emotional turmoil resulting from personal tragedies. Her family may never have experienced such instability had war not come along. Aslam describes her growing strength as:

"Her increasing resolve helps keep the household running" even as their lives are "upended by the turmoil of war" (Aslam, 2013, p. 2).

Rather than succumbing to despair, Naheed articulates concrete plans:

"This year I will help Father through the trouble with his eyes. After that I will begin studying for a diploma to become a teacher" (Aslam, 2013, p. 180).

It shows that this much focus on action in the context of volitional capability corresponds neatly to the ethics of the Stoics, who emphasized action and self-control in the face of the uncontrollable

Religious Stoicism and Fatalistic Acceptance

It is yet another dimension of stoicism in the novel. For Rohan, Stoicism is intertwined with Islamic fatalism. His belief system frames suffering as purposeful rather than arbitrary, reinforcing acceptance over resistance. He reflects:

"A follower of Allah knows nothing of chance. In this life everything is significant and meaningful" (Aslam, 2013, p. 112).

Even when burdened by the search for his son, Rohan responds with restrained composure:



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“He smiles and shakes his head” before returning to his religious studies (Aslam, 2013, p. 111).

Even his daily rituals which include prayer and Quranic recitation on his part become acts of ritualized patience. It is mentioned as:

He reads the Koran “for the repose of Sofia’s soul” with “solemn effort” (Aslam, 2013, p. 4).

These practices reflect Stoic discipline, reinforcing endurance through routine rather than emotional expression.

Collective Stoicism: Resignation and Survival

Apart from their characterization, the literature illustrates both a mass Stoicism of displaced civilians and the prisoners of war in general. With circumstances completely outside their control, some people choose to yield in resignation rather than in hopelessness.

Aslam says:

They are “just walking out, resigned to their fate, reciting the verses of the Koran” (Aslam, 2013, p. 166).

This collective endurance reveals the Stoic subtext present in this novel—to survive, one must accede to and control rather than resist or deny.

Discussion and Conclusion:

This aforementioned analysis has offered a Stoic reading of the novel in order to illuminate the moral and emotional dimensions of the novel, which are not discussed in the critical discussions of the text. On the basis of the founding principles of Stoicism, such as the distinction between internal and external control, the efficacy of morality, endurance, and control of emotions, the paper has demonstrated the ways through which the novel reflects a philosophy of internal control in the face of extreme external turmoil. Rather than presenting an image of open political defiance or ideological confrontation, the text foreshadows the concept of moral endurance in the face of violence, loss, and uncertainty in a silent manner. This study has demonstrated through its findings the fact that the trauma or geopolitics are not the only determinants of the struggles the characters are faced with but are instead controlled by the capability of moral decision-making in situations beyond the characters' control. A Stoic outlook on the concept of suffering in the novel is not chosen as a passive response but active where moral character is put into question, which is reaffirmed. This perspective re-casts the novel itself as essentially philosophical, arguing against the impulses of emotions, revenge, and ideological dogma and instead arguing for the power of acceptance, compassion, and moderated reason as moral-sustaining approaches.

In placing a contemporary South Asian novel within the context of classical philosophical discourse, this paper seeks to contribute to the kind of cross-disciplinary scholarly work that seeks to combine literary and moral philosophical approaches. This paper seeks to resist the literary criticism impulse to locate and contain the tradition of Stoicism in its proper pre-modern, classical, and potentially white and/Western context, and instead to identify its significance in interpreting contemporary narratives about war, displacement, and cultural dislocation. Such studies would make even more evident the scope and elasticity of the Stoic idea in a modern literary framework. In conclusion, the Stoic analysis of *The Blind Man in the Garden* gives a useful key to understanding the balance between inner freedom, moral responsibility, and emotional constraint in a framework of the great disorganization outside the stories. Moreover, the discussion concludes with a takeaway



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that moral endurance and decision-making, rather than ideological or political confrontation shape the characters' responses to crisis. By placing and validating Aslam's ideas and themes with Stoic ethics, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of how classical philosophical traditions continue to inform contemporary literature. It challenges the tendency to confine Stoicism to its classical context, necessitating its relevance in interpreting modern apocalyptic literature.

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