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Dualities of Strengths and Vulnerabilities: A Literary Study of *Maps for Lost Lovers*

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Abstract

This paper explores the contrasting qualities that are both powerful and weak in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, which are established in a Pakistani Muslim immigrant community in England. The novel exposes the influence of cultural, religious and societal interests on emotional lives and forces even men and women to suppress authenticity to prevent shame and preserve honor. Based on the theory of vulnerability, proposed by Bren E Brown, the research recasts vulnerability as courage-the readiness to confront unknown and emotional vulnerability in spite of fear or social assessment. Using a qualitative literary study, it examined the way in which characters are navigating through emotional stakes, social constraints, and personal struggles and exposes the intersection of how both genders collectively experience the shared emotional damage of patriarchal systems. The study used Brené Brown's theory of Vulnerability as courage as the theoretical model, where she highlighted that vulnerability is also used as courage to counter the challenges of life. After employing qualitative textual analysis, the findings revealed that all major characters comprised of two aspects- vulnerability and strengths. Kaukab tried relentlessly to keep her house, yet she remained illiterate who would need translator to visit outside. Likewise, Suraya took independent and bold decision to remarry Shams for her life and survival, yet she is termed as divorced which is her vulnerability. Similarly, Mah-Jabin is apparently welcome in neither of the two societies- Pakistani and English due to alienation from both. Yet again, she proved to be well-real and could argue to express her free will and choice in her life matters. Thus, all the characters are true manifestations of vulnerability and strengths in the *Maps for Lost Lovers*.

Key Words: Vulnerability, Strengths, Maps for Lost Lovers, Duality, Feminism

Introduction

South Asian literature shows a complex crossing of gender, culture, and religion against the background of the burden and the restraint of being free against conventional expectations. These tensions are described brilliantly in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. As noted in the comprehensive data report, Chanda is threatened with honor killing on the basis of following her heart, Mahjabin is forced into marriage and Kaukab lives with her own internalized sense of guilt that is conditioned through religion and custom. Male characters, such as Charagh, are in a state of emotional repression as they mourn silently in the face of the patriarchal societal ideals that measure masculine strength by rigidity. These lived experiences offer authoritative textual proof as to how vulnerability is socially penalized and authenticity is sacrificed in the interest to keep

family honor intact. All these dynamics are explored by the research in the light of the Brene Brown theory on vulnerability as courage but also providing a gender-neutral view of emotion issues.

Moreover, the south Asian literature provides a rich fabric of stories founded on complex crossings between culture, religion, gender, migration, and family honor. All those stories can express some tensions between personal aspirations and communal demands, and create complex accounts of identity conflict within their patriarchal structures. These struggles are even amplified in immigrant settings where people are forced to live within not only the conventional norms of their home countries but also face dichotomy of values and practices. *Maps for Lost Lovers* by Nadeem Aslam, perfectly takes on these tensions in a very sensitive manner, and presents the reader with a community of immigrant Pakistani Muslims in England who deal with themes of love and faith and even the embarrassment and burdensome issue of cultural compliance. In the novel, the consequences of living in an environment where honor is elevated to authenticity and silence has become a survival tool among men and women in the novel is exposed.

Thus, the collective concepts of morality and respectability driven by patriarchal visions of religion and tradition, act as a social control in many South Asian societies are found. The women are taught that they have to suffer in silence and they should be examples of sacrifice and obedience and the men should bring glory to the family through multiple means of control, dominance, and repression of emotions. The emotional vulnerability be it a feeling of sadness, longing, fear, or love turns to impairment threatening to dishonor and to social reproach. In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Aslam brilliantly demonstrates the result of these pressures as they form fractured identities: people repress their emotions in order to fit into the social environment, although they internally struggle to combat the feeling of isolation, guilt, and loneliness and the wish to find emotional connection.

According to traditional literary representations, vulnerability is perceived to be linked to being weak especially among female characters that are described as though they are victims to patriarchy. Men, on their part, also are seldom portrayed as emotionally stifled victims; they are more commonly destined to be portrayed as controllers or abusers. This reducing lens further feeds the stereotype that emotional openness is synonymous to weakness and that one must be dominant and stoic to be strong. It is the binary that might be upset by the novel, which demonstrates that both genders experience emotional distress in the face of oppressive structures. Men find themselves entrapped in the representations of power depriving them of an intimacy yet women are deprived the ability to be autonomous and chastised when they demand love or liberty. Vulnerability is an emerging common yet stigmatized human reality prohibited due to fear of rejection.

Brene Brown views vulnerability in a different way by establishing it as the attempt to confront uncertainty, emotional risks and allow oneself to be authentic despite fear or shame. Her theory redefines vulnerability as the source of resilience, empathy and connection, providing an existing change in the traditional thinking about the possible source of shame and weakness. When we apply the views of Brown to Maps for Lost Lovers, we can see that the instances of emotional openness such as confession in love or acts of defiance or the silent struggle are very much acts of bravery that break the oppressive cultural constructs. In such a strategy, the novel can be

interpreted to discard the role of victimhood and dominance, and focus on human empowerment in the acceptance of truth and emotional candor.

Research Problem

Despite the extensive body of scholarship on South Asian literature, critical discussions often limit vulnerability to a state of fragility or victimhood, primarily focusing on women as sufferers of patriarchal oppression. This narrow perspective overlooks two important aspects: first, that vulnerability can be a source of courage and emotional strength; and second, that patriarchal systems emotionally harm men as well as women, confining both genders within rigid social roles that suppress authenticity.

In immigrant communities like the one depicted in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, cultural and religious codes tightly govern personal relationships, emotions, and identities. The fear of dishonor, societal judgment, and religious condemnation forces individuals to adopt façades of strength while hiding true feelings of love, grief, or longing. Vulnerability becomes a dangerous act, equated with weakness, disgrace, or rebellion against communal norms. This results in fractured identities and broken human connections, where emotional truth is silenced to maintain external appearances of propriety and resilience.

While feminist criticism has examined female marginalization and honor-based violence, there is little exploration of how emotional suppression affects men, perpetuating cycles of dominance, fear, and disconnection. Moreover, few literary studies engage with modern psychological frameworks like Brené Brown's theory, which redefines vulnerability as courage—the capacity to face uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure in pursuit of authenticity. Without this lens, existing analyses fail to capture the transformative power of vulnerability or the shared emotional cost of patriarchal oppression across genders.

This research problem, therefore, centers on the lack of scholarly engagement with vulnerability as a form of courage in South Asian literature and the neglect of male emotional experiences under patriarchal control. By addressing these gaps through a close reading of Maps for Lost Lovers, this study aims to offer a more nuanced, gender-balanced understanding of emotional resilience, authenticity, and the human struggle for freedom within oppressive cultural frameworks.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To explore the representation of strength and vulnerability in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*
- To analyze how vulnerability functions both as a social constraint and as a courageous act of authenticity within the cultural and religious frameworks depicted in the novel.

Research Questions

This research aims to address the following questions:

1. How does Maps for Lost Lovers depict the dualities of strength and vulnerability in its male and female characters?
2. In what ways does the novel reflect Brené Brown's notion of vulnerability as courage rather than weakness?

Significance of the Study

This paper aims at reconfiguring literary interpretations of strengths and weakness in South Asian fiction. It highlights that the true courage does not consist of dominance, silence, and emotional distance but is based on the ability to look into the unknown, cope with fear, and be true oneself, despite the standards set forth by society. When this is explored in the context of Maps for Lost Lovers, the communal emotional tradeoffs of patriarchy can be analyzed, and a more wholesome approach to the resilience study can be achieved by incorporating both masculine and feminine voices in the picture. The study would be not only part of a feminist literary criticism but also an addition to the interdisciplinary discussion at the boundaries of literature and psychology, providing the information that can be applied in the recent debate around mental health, emotional authenticity, and social change.

Literature Review

To explore more the subject, the literature review takes into account scholarly works revolving around the themes such as gender representation, patriarchy, emotional resilience and vulnerability in the literature produced on the South Asian soil, chiefly in the context of immigrant families. Taking on the approach propelled by Brene Brown, the literature review explores psychological perspectives with regards to the notion of emotional vulnerability. The purpose of taking on this specific approach is to adjust this study within the parameters of the existing scholarship on the subject and to address the absence of a gender-balanced, and psychologically informed acknowledgement of vulnerability as courage in the Maps for Lost Lovers. Fiction in the South Asia depicts the patriarchal structure of this region as such where it is the family's honor, societal norms, centuries' long traditions and religious underpinnings altogether which shape a woman's identity most of the time. Literature penned by renowned authors such as Kamila Shamsie and Bapsi Sidhwa usually reflects themes such as the conditioning of the women's life and autonomy, forced marriages and violence on the pretext of family's honor. In the same manner, Maps for Lost Lovers presents women who opt to remain silent and succumb to societal pressures only to be recognized as lovable and independent creatures. Scholars and authors like Mumtaz (2021) note that the female characters of the novel in question exemplify how women in the immigrant families face traditional norms irrespective of the geographical displacement.

However, what is noteworthy is that the research on the subject so far has only taken into account the experience of women in the face of internalized oppression and social stigmas programming the life of women. There is yet no mention whatsoever of how men struggle emotionally in such circumstances. Mirza (2017) notes that the novel also depicts confused masculinities when it comes to Pakistani men, when in conformity with the patriarchal norms and expectations, the men are impelled to ignore emotions and act as per the approved notions of the society often at personal cost. The intersection of masculinity and patriarchy has conventionally received less attention from scholars and authors altogether in the field of literary criticism in South Asia. Men, in South Asia, chiefly appear to be the implementers of social norms, however, they suffer also from their inability to express themselves authentically. In Maps for Lost Lovers, the male characters can be observed navigating and struggling with the fear of religious guilt, dishonor and the social pressure and patriarchal expectations to embrace the established ideals of strength thereby sidelining their emotional well-being and rendering

themselves even more vulnerable. This is exactly how scholarly works on masculinity (Connell, 2005) showcase why men see emotional sensitivity as a gesture of weakness and ignoring sentiments as a sign of strength.

Various accounts based on the themes of immigration highlight the tension between Western norms and cultural values of the South Asian region (Ali, 2016). The tension increases manifold the intensity of emotional conflicts as the immigrant families try to uphold their unique cultural and social norms in the foreign countries. *Maps for Lost Lovers,* clearly exhibits the struggle of the immigrant families to preserve not only the honor codes but also confront cultural alienation. Ahmed (2018), notes that this tension creates increased fear of embarrassment thus favoring otherwise unwarranted confidentiality and fragmented identities among both men and women.

Discourses drawing inspiration from Feminism traditionally shape vulnerability as resulting from oppression borne by women and link to their emotional dependence and fragility (Butler, 2004). Feminist accounts, lately, have, however, has started viewing vulnerability as a general human experience and not the feature of any one specific gender (Gilson, 2014). When fully embraced, vulnerability has the potential to foster empathy, solidarity, and the capacity and willingness to transform. The need of the hour is to employ this arguably newer lens to re-read Maps for Lost Lovers to explore themes of resilience and courage beyond the narratives of seeing vulnerability as fragility.

Brene Brown's approach towards courage, shame and vulnerability offers a strong framework for literary analyses. Brown argues that vulnerability has the potential to encourage facing uncertainty and deal with issues resulting from emotional exposure- fostering love, empathy and resilience (Brown, 2012; 2015). Brown further argues that the emotion of shame or embarrassment originates from the fear of social judgment hence forcing individuals to exhibit as such behaviors which protect them from alienation. This resonates with Maps for Lost Lovers where both genders, male and female, suppress their emotions to either stave off divine punishment or to uphold honor codes. Brene Brown's theory provides a tool to comprehend these actions as defense mechanism against shame whereas moments of rebellion and honesty exemplify authenticity and courage.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses Brene Brown's theory of seeing vulnerability as the fundamental tool of analysis while interpreting the dualities of strength and vulnerability in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. Brown provides for comprehending vulnerability as a basis of empathy, authenticity and courage unlike the conventional approach which decodes vulnerability as an indicator of weakness. Her experience of social work and research on psychology provides a lens to understand how one's emotional courage helps one to navigate the tough terrain of societal oppression. Therefore, such framework is highly useful in comprehending how various characters in the novel operate within the religious and patriarchal constraints.

Methodology

This research work employs a qualitative, interpretive literary analysis to interpret the dualities of strength and vulnerability in Maps for Lost Lovers penned by Nadeem Aslam, using Brene Brown's theory of vulnerability as courage. This methodology is employed to reveal how religious, cultural and societal constraints shape emotional expression, resilience and genuineness in both male and female characters in the novel. It combines psychological theory,

masculinity studies and feminist criticism to offer a multifaceted understanding of emotional dynamics in Aslam's novel.

Results and Discussion

This novel presents three major characters in the novel, Kaukab, Mah-Jabeen and Suraya. These three characters provide a rich data to the research questions raised in this paper. The following lines offer explanation regarding their strengths and vulnerability. In the novel Maps for Lost Lovers, Kaukab is from the first generation who is the mother Ujala, Charagh and Mah-Jabeen and a Pakistani immigrant who staying in England for the past 20 years and she is unable to speak proper English. This linguistic vulnerability is one of the essential aspects of women weakness in the novel. "*Twenty years in England and she still cannot speak English*" about Kaubab vulnerability. It suggests that the Kaukab always needs someone else to translate for her from Urdu to English which shows her dependence on others. Similarly, in the next line in the text that Kaukab is presented a completely dependent woman who could not go to the bus station alone as she would need guidance and support of other people in the family to take her to the bus station. For instance, the text states: *"She is a woman who has to be led to the bus stop*". This line shows her total dependence of her husband to be led to various places. Even, it is noted in the novel that she would not be able to visit the doctor due to her linguistic inability. This complete dependence on her husband has made her vulnerable in the novel. She had had no schooling beyond the age of eleven, but when she arrived in England all those years ago, bright with optimism. She had told Shamas she planned to enroll in an English learning course as soon as their material circumstances improved, and in anticipation, she filled a whole notebook with the things she overheard, words whose meaning she did not know, proverbs jumbled up, sayings mistakenly glued with other sayings: "*Heaven is other people*". Likewise, she is also vulnerable to patriarchy in the novel as she is a household woman and carrying Pakistani patriarchy rules. She believes in the Pakistani patriarchy rules as the God rules which should never be violated. In fact, this is her biggest vulnerability that she accepted all the patriarchy rules of Pakistani society in English which resultantly oppressed her in so many ways. For instance, she believed: *"A woman honor is in her shyness".* It is a strong evidence of the patriarchy in the novel.

On the other hand, she also carried strengths in her character to bear all the burdens and face the odds and challenges. A strength and resilience has been depicted in her character though the words that Kaukab bore everything, as it said in the novel: *"Kaulab had borne everything*". It shows her endurance of all the challenges, especially the linguistic isolation where she would the assistance of another person. In similar way, she is also deemed as a strong woman who had a firm belief and faith to keep the house. It is found in the novel that she managed her house and took care of everyone as the elder lady, as it is expressed: "*She had kept the house, kept the faith*". She took care of the family really well. For example, *"The white woman praised kaukab as a cook whenever she took a mouthful of something new in the table, the candlelight throwing dark shadows under her breasts, emphasizing them obscenely" (*52). Women are often subjugated for traditional gender roles such as cooking and remaining at home through social prospects which prioritize domestic duties over personal determinations and career opportunities. This mistreatment transmits discrimination and strengthens stereotypes that women are certainly well-matched for domestic responsibilities and chores. Moreover, it can segregate womenfolk, confining their social communications and chances for personal progress, devaluing their

abilities and offerings in other zones. It is also noted in the novel that she maintained her cultural values and norms in a foreign country which shows her strength. In such situation, mostly the immigrant community loses their identity and cultural values, while she remained firm on her values and beliefs which reveals her strength. To analyze the character of Kaukab in the novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*, she holds the duality of strengths and vulnerability.

In addition, there is another prominent character in the novel which Suraya. She was not accepted and considered as modest due to her divorce. In the Pakistani society, divorce is considered as stigma through which the woman suffers throughout her life. For instance, it is said: *"There is a fire in this word".* It refers to the word divorce which is not acceptable many in this society. The blame is always leveled against the female partner, not male in divorce since woman is considered as the house keeping one. Similarly, in another occasion in the text, it is noted that: *"The community looked at a divorced woman and saw only one thing".* Thus the word "Divorced" is labeled a stigma and bad term for woman but the same was not for man which shows vulnerability of woman in the novel. In fact, this one word defines her identity and she is not considered as complete women. Simply, being divorce was her vulnerability and the family members would give her that much respects what she deserved. Contrary to this, she was also strong and resilient to counter and face all these things. This strength illustrates her duality of strength and vulnerability in the novel. For instance, she had the courage to face everything and not be called as victim anymore. It is stated: "*She was tired of being pitied".* In this line, she denounced victimhood and wanted to live her life on her on terms, not on the people around her as they would often present her as victim of divorce. In the same manner, she expressed her wish to stay strong and remarry Shams for love. It is stated: "She wanted to live a life, not just existence". Here, she was not acting like a weak person who is totally dependent upon others; rather she made her own decision about life and wanted to live. This is the evidence of her strength in the novel which is reflected through her strong commitment in life. In fact, the character of Suraya is another instance of duality in the character by highlighting the strengths and vulnerabilities.

Another very prominent character in the novel is the character of Mah-Jabeen. She is also presented as embodiment of duality where the strengths and weaknesses can be found. She is deemed vulnerable in that sense that she is accepted in neither of the two societies. Pakistani believes that she is too much of English since she behaves like English and becomes more liberal in her approach. On the other hand, English people see her as Pakistani due her origin and race. It becomes her vulnerability because is not considered a permanent part of any of the two societies. Mah-Jabin was allowed to wear Western clothes to school but only if they mirrored Shlwar Kameez in cut and style: the shirts had to be long tailed and had to remain untucked whenever she wore trousers, a skirt had been allowed to her once, though skirts on the whole were forbidden because they were an easy access garment. When someone they met at a wedding ceremony was considered "skimpily dressed" by Kaukab. Mahjabin said "*she was wearing a sari! Six and a half yards of fabric*". "The number of yards in itself is immaterial when it comes to modesty" had been kaukab's response. Despite the fact that Mahjabin said she had lost the receipt, she was made to return to the shop a blue sweater that had a broad paler strip running from armpit to armpit calling attention to the chest (115). Mahjabin is afraid of sounding casual

about her new familiarities, anxious not to hurt Kaukab by presenting herself to her in any capacity other than a daughter, her daughter.

However, there is another aspect of Mah-Jabin character which shows her strength. It is her free will and education. She openly rejects things which she does not want to accept them. She is also educated one who can survive all alone if she needs to do so. In contrast to Kaukab, she is well-qualified and articulate in her expressions, as it is stated: "*She read. She argued. She would not be married off". "My body belongs to me*". These lines from the novel highlight the strength and power in the words of Mah-Jabeen, where she is not subject to the orders of others to follow, rather she is confident enough to take her own decisions. Along with that, the lines also highlights the she is well-read who can demonstrates her case confidently and courageously by putting certain arguments which shows her strength. It suggests that she has been voiced to speak up on her behalf. Thus, on the one hand she is weak in terms of the family restriction and societal division; while on the other hand, she is confident and strong to make her decisions freely. Together, these elements make the character a duality in of vulnerability and strength in the novel. To sum up, the key findings of the paper, it is found that most of the characters are consisted of duality of strengths and vulnerabilities. Each character contains both the aspects simultaneously.

Conclusion

The paper aimed at exploring the dualities of vulnerabilities and strengths in the major characters of Nadeem Aslam's novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*. The study used Brené Brown's theory of Vulnerablity as courage as the theoretical model, where she highlighted that vulnerability is also used as courage to counter the challenges of life. After employing qualitative textual analysis, the findings revealed that all major characters comprised of two aspects- vulnerability and strengths. Kaukab tried relentlessly to keep her house, yet she remained illiterate who would need translator to visit outside. Likewise, Suraya took independent and bold decision to remarry Shams for her life and survival, yet she is termed as divorced which is her vulnerability. Similarly, Mah-Jabin is apparently welcome in neither of the two societies- Pakistani and English due to alienation from both. Yet again, she proved to be well-real and could argue to express her free will and choice in her life matters. Thus, all the characters are true manifestations of vulnerability and strengths in the *Maps for Lost Lovers*.

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