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"The Tapestry of Suffering: Interpreting Human Struggles in Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*"

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ABSTRACT

This study employs the Wmatrix corpus tool to analyze Nadeem Aslam's novel *The Blind Man's Garden*, focusing on the themes of sorrow and suffering. By generating lexical clouds, the research highlights key lexemes that encapsulate the narrative's emotional and thematic complexities. The analysis is framed through Stuart Hall's reception theory, which emphasizes the active role of audiences in interpreting texts within their cultural contexts. Aslam's rich imagery and symbolism, such as candles representing injuries and bird snares symbolizing entrapment, reveal the profound emotional landscape of characters navigating socio-political turmoil and religious extremism. The study finds that Aslam's diction creates a somber atmosphere that reflects the harsh realities of life in a conflict-ridden society, illustrating the interplay between external circumstances and internal emotional struggles. This methodology enriches the understanding of how language shapes audience engagement with literature, contributing to a deeper appreciation of *The Blind Man's Garden* as a commentary on the human condition amidst systemic oppression and moral decay. The findings suggest avenues for future research on the intersections of language, culture, and emotional experience in contemporary literature.

Keywords: The Blind Man's Garden, Wmatrix, Reception theory, Imagery, suffering

Introduction

Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden* unfolds as a poignant and dark narrative that delves into the profound complexities of faith, identity, and the devastating consequences of conflict. Set against the backdrop of the post-9/11 world, the story illuminates the psychological and social turmoil faced by a devout Muslim, Rohan, who grapples with the lost glory of Islam in a landscape rife with violence and fanaticism (Kanwal, 2015).

The novel paints a vivid picture of Afghanistan, which is engulfed in chaos as local warlords, driven by greed and a lust for power, exacerbate the devastation wrought by the conflict between Al Qaeda and American forces. This grim setting serves as a microcosm of the broader crises affecting not only Afghanistan but also neighboring Pakistan. Here, religious extremists exploit the vulnerability of the populace, inciting them to partake in a jihad against

perceived enemies of Islam. Aslam expertly captures the anguish of a society where the self-proclaimed guardians of faith are dismantling the fragile social fabric, leaving individuals and families shattered in the wake of their actions (Yaqin, 2015).

In *The Blind Man's Garden*, Rohan and his wife Sofia establish 'Ardent Spirit', a school aimed at fostering Islamic knowledge. However, as Sofia loses her faith, Rohan, in a misguided attempt to redeem her, withholds essential medication during her pregnancy, leading to her tragic death. He also destroys her cherished paintings to save her soul and indoctrinates their son, Jeo, with tales of martyrdom. After Sofia's death, Rohan renounces his inheritance and control of the school, allowing Ahmed, a radical, influenced by the ISI, to take over. Under Ahmed, the school shifts from an educational institution to a breeding ground for extremism, promoting violent ideologies. When Ahmed is killed in Afghanistan, Major Kyra, an even more ruthless extremist, assumes command, targeting Rohan (Abbas, 2014).

Meanwhile, Jeo, who aspires to be a doctor, secretly joins a group sending young men to Afghanistan, accompanied by Mikal, Rohan's foster son. Both are betrayed and sold to warlords amidst the chaos of the conflict. Jeo leaves behind his wife, Naheeda, who loved Mikal but married Jeo in haste. Their journeys lead to treachery, violence, and dire consequences, particularly for Mikal, who is brutally interrogated by U.S. forces. Aslam's novel is a graphic portrayal of the violence and despair prevalent in Afghanistan and Pakistan, illustrating the degradation of life and honor. Yet, amid the harsh realities, Aslam's rich metaphors and imagery evoke a longing for beauty and purity, highlighting the resilience of the human spirit in a decaying social landscape (Khan, Noor, and Chaudhary, 2021). This study explores the following question:

Q: How do Aslam's narrative structure and pacing contribute to the emotional weight of the characters' suffering?

Literature Review

Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) intricately weaves themes of suffering and sorrow within the socio-political landscape of Pakistan and Afghanistan post-9/11. The narrative serves as a profound commentary on the human condition, reflecting the complexities of identity, faith, and the pervasive impact of conflict. This literature review examines critical perspectives on Aslam's work, focusing on the thematic elements of suffering, the use of narrative techniques, and the socio-political implications portrayed in the novel (Riaz, Begum, ul Islam, and Ali, 2021).

One of the central themes in Aslam's narrative is the exploration of human suffering in the context of war and religious extremism. Nisar, Khan, and Choudhry (2021) note, "Aslam masterfully illustrates the devastation wrought by both physical violence and emotional trauma, capturing the essence of despair that pervades the lives of his characters". This sentiment is echoed by Kakkar (2015), who emphasizes that Aslam's characters navigate a landscape fraught with moral ambiguity and existential dread, which renders their struggles both poignant and relatable. The intertwining of personal and collective suffering highlights

the broader implications of socio-political unrest, urging readers to consider the ramifications of conflict on individual lives.

Aslam's narrative techniques further enhance the portrayal of suffering. The author employs rich imagery and symbolism to evoke emotional responses from the audience. According to Malik (2016), "the recurring motifs of light and darkness, particularly in the imagery of candles as injuries, serve to underscore the characters' emotional and physical scars". This duality of light and darkness not only symbolizes hope and despair but also reflects the characters' inner turmoil. Aslam's lyrical prose invites readers to immerse themselves in the emotional landscape of his characters, facilitating a deeper understanding of their suffering (Khan, Noor, and Chaudhary, 2021).

Aslam's portrayal of the socio-political environment in Pakistan and Afghanistan emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal and collective suffering. The chaotic backdrop of war, as depicted through violent imagery and the characterization of warlords, underscores the relentless nature of conflict that affects all aspects of life. As Ahmad (2019) notes, "the relentless violence and moral decay in the novel serve as a commentary on the human capacity for cruelty, questioning the very fabric of society". This commentary not only sheds light on the despair of individuals caught in turmoil but also critiques the societal structures that perpetuate suffering (Monaco, 2021). The studies of Rahman, (2020); Moore, (2010), and Mirza, m. (2017) have also produced similar results. Fiction authors always portray themes through the narrative pacing as found in the research studies of Ejaz, Mahmood, and Gill, (2024); Ejaz, Ahmad, Mathroma, and Anwar, (2024); Ejaz, Abbas, and Khalil, (2024) and Sibtain, Ejaz, and Qasim, H. M. (2024).

Research Methodology

The researcher has employed the Wmatrix corpus tool to conduct a detailed analysis of the text of Nadeem Aslam's novel *The Blind Man's Garden*. This tool facilitated the creation of lexical clouds, highlighting prominent lexemes that encapsulate the overarching themes and atmospheric elements within the narrative. Following this lexical analysis, the researcher interpreted these thematic lexemes through the lens of Stuart Hall's reception theory, as articulated in his seminal 1980 essay "Encoding/Decoding." Hall's framework underscores the active role of audiences in the meaning-making process, positing that interpretation is not merely a passive reception but a dynamic engagement shaped by individual backgrounds and cultural contexts. By integrating Wmatrix-generated insights with Hall's theoretical perspective, the study aims to elucidate how the emotional and thematic complexities of the novel resonate with diverse audience interpretations, ultimately contributing to a richer understanding of its socio-political commentary and human experiences.

Analysis of the Blind Man's Garden through Wmatrix

In *The Blind Man's Garden*, Nadeem Aslam intricately weaves together powerful imagery and symbolism to articulate the profound sorrows and suffering experienced by the characters against a backdrop of political turmoil and religious extremism. The narrative's emotional depth is underscored by a series of poignant metaphors, beginning with the striking image of candles scattered throughout Rohan's home, likened to injuries. This metaphor serves

multiple functions: it suggests that each candle flame embodies a wound—both physical and emotional—inflicted upon the characters. The idea that “wounds are said to emit light” reflects a paradox where pain can bring forth insights or truths, illuminating the darker aspects of life. However, it also warns of the scars left behind, emphasizing how trauma can mark individuals profoundly.

The symbolism of bird snares in Rohan’s garden further deepens this exploration of entrapment and suffering. These snares serve as a foreboding representation of how individuals become ensnared in the violent socio-political realities of their environment. Just as innocent birds are caught in these traps, the characters find themselves ensnared by forces beyond their control, caught in a cycle of violence and extremism. This imagery encapsulates the precariousness of existence in a world rife with conflict, highlighting a sense of hopelessness and inevitability about their fates.

Aslam's prose excels in its rich and evocative quality, adeptly matching the mood of each scene. In a romantic moment under the stars, for example, the comparison of the woman to a "snow leopard" imbues the scene with both grace and an underlying wildness, suggesting a fleeting beauty amidst the chaos. The description of "stars falling... in a tremendous living flood" evokes a sense of wonder, capturing the transitory nature of beauty and intimacy in the characters' lives. This lyrical quality invites readers to immerse themselves in the emotional landscape of the narrative, fostering a deep connection with the characters' experiences.

Another significant moment occurs with the image of an ant struggling with the word “Allah” on the facade of a mosque. This powerful symbolism critiques the constraining nature of religious dogma. The ant’s repeated attempts to escape the confines of the world suggest the suffocating effects of rigid religious interpretations on individual lives. This tension between faith and freedom is emblematic of the struggle faced by many characters, who grapple with the burdens of societal expectations and beliefs that often trap rather than liberate them. The imagery of the ant falling back again and again resonates with their plight, illustrating the difficulty of breaking free from oppressive structures.

Nadeem Aslam presents a harrowing portrayal of sorrows and suffering that reflect the tumultuous state of society in Pakistan, particularly in the aftermath of violence and religious extremism. The excerpt illustrates a profound disillusionment with the nation’s moral decay and systemic corruption, painting a bleak picture of everyday life where necessities are compromised, and trust is eroded.

Aslam's direct and scathing commentary highlights the desperation felt by the characters and, by extension, the people of Pakistan. The imagery of “taps don’t have water” and “rotten meat” underscores a deep sense of betrayal by institutions meant to protect and nurture society. The visceral descriptions of a society rife with dishonesty and exploitation—where even the most fundamental aspects of life, such as food and healthcare, are tainted by greed—serve to illustrate the pervasive nature of suffering. This grim reality creates a landscape where survival becomes a moral dilemma, forcing individuals to navigate a world filled with hypocrisy and decay.

The author critiques the very fabric of society, where the actions of individuals—from the butcher to the doctor—are driven by self-interest rather than community welfare. This critique extends to a broader cultural commentary, suggesting that the collective pursuit of independence and identity has culminated in a nation that many seek to escape. The refrain of “emigrate, emigrate, emigrate” encapsulates a yearning for liberation from a country perceived as a “wasteland,” emphasizing a deep disconnection between the ideals of freedom and the lived realities of its citizens.

The suffering depicted is not merely personal but is emblematic of a collective trauma resulting from years of conflict and oppression. Aslam illustrates how religious dogmatism has shaped societal values, leading to a culture where fundamental human rights and dignity are often overlooked. The “fences” that were originally intended to protect have instead become instruments of oppression, confining individuals within a rigid and often brutal social order.

Moreover, the narrative’s tenuous plotline reflects the chaos and fragmentation of a society struggling to find coherence amidst suffering. Rather than adhering to a conventional narrative structure, Aslam opts to weave a tapestry of interconnected lives and experiences, emphasizing the complexity of human emotions and the pervasive sorrow that binds them.

The researcher has used the Wmatrix tool to explore the presentation of the sorrows and sufferings by Nadeem Aslam through narrative pacing. Wmatrix has generated various semantic domains that are studied to verify the results produced by Antconc. Anthony gave the Results in the form of frequencies of words, collocations, and clusters. Wmatrix produced unique patterns in the text in the form of clouds of various semantic domains.

Figure:1

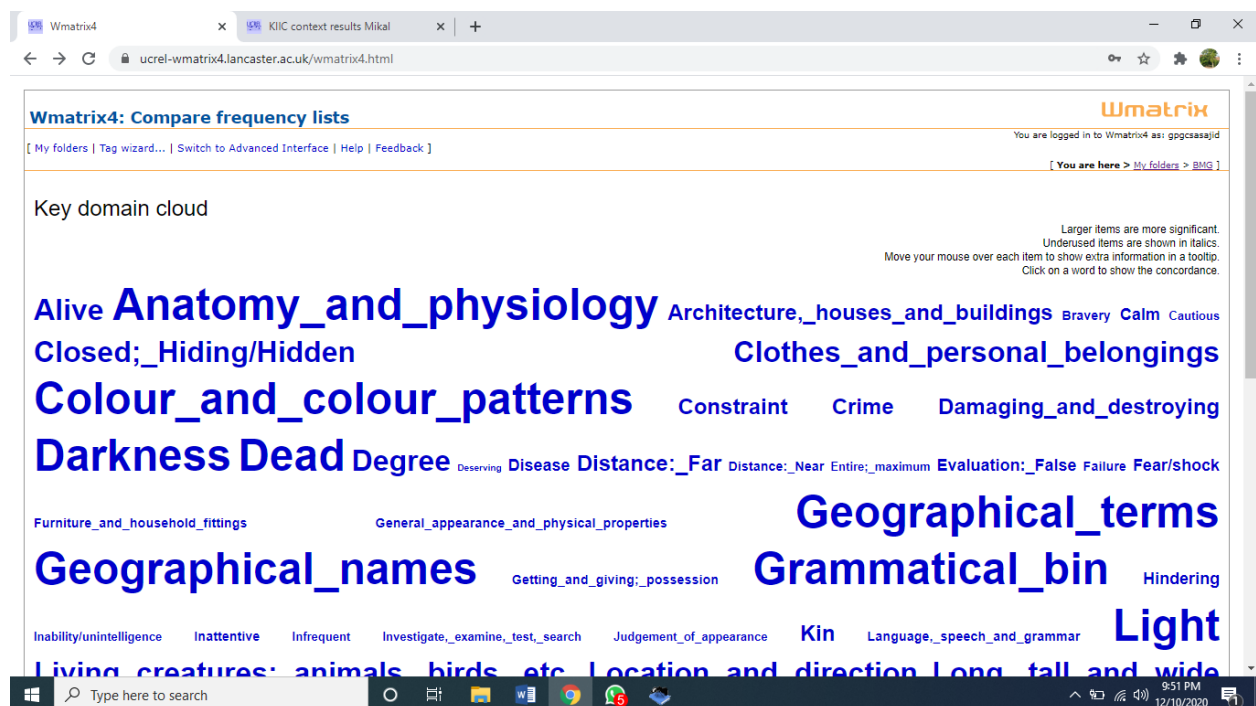


Figure 1: The pictorial view of Wmatrix tool

The Clouds generated by The Wmatrix tool for the thematic lexemes are presented below:

Wmatrix4: Compare frequency lists

[[My folders](#) | [Tag wizard...](#) | [Switch to Advanced Interface](#) | [Help](#) | [Feedback](#)]

You are logged in to Wmatrix4 as gpgcsasajid

[[You are here](#) > [My folders](#) > [BMG](#)]

Key domain cloud

Larger items are more significant.
Underused items are shown in italics.
Move your mouse over each item to show extra information in a tooltip.
Click on a word to show the concordance.

Alive Anatomy and physiol
ogy Architecture, houses and buildings Bravery C
alm Cautious Closed; Hiding/Hidden Clothes
and personal belongings Colour
and colour patterns Constraint
Crime Damaging and destroying Darknes
s Dead Degree Deserving Disease Distance: Far Dista
nce: Near Entire; maximum Evaluation: False Failure Fear/shock Furniture a
nd household fittings General appearance and physical properties Ge
ographical terms Geogra
phical names Getting and giving; possession
Grammatical bin Hindering Inability/unintellig
ence Inattentive Infrequent Investigate, examine, test, search Judgement of appearance

Kin Language, speech and grammar **Light Living creatures: animals, birds, etc.**

In *The Blind Man's Garden*, Nadeem Aslam employs a rich tapestry of lexical items, particularly words like "dead," "darkness," and related themes, to effectively convey the sorrows and sufferings of his characters. These lexical choices serve multiple functions in the narrative, reinforcing the overarching themes of despair, loss, and existential struggle.

Creating Atmosphere and Tone

The recurring use of words associated with death and darkness establishes a somber atmosphere that permeates the novel. By invoking imagery of death, Aslam sets a tone of bleakness that reflects the harsh realities of life in a war-torn society. This atmospheric darkness not only mirrors the physical environment of Pakistan and Afghanistan during the turbulent aftermath of 9/11 but also symbolizes the internal emotional landscapes of the characters. The characters' lives are shadowed by loss, reflecting a collective mourning for their nation and the ideals it once represented.

Symbolizing Loss and Mourning

Words like "dead" evoke a sense of finality and irrevocable loss. In the context of the narrative, they serve to underscore the emotional weight of the characters' experiences. For instance, the deaths of loved ones, the loss of innocence, and the obliteration of dreams are all encapsulated in these stark lexical items. Aslam's characters often grapple with the consequences of their past choices, and the recurring motif of death serves as a constant reminder of the fragility of life and the sorrow that accompanies every loss.

Conveying Emotional States

The lexical choices associated with darkness and death effectively convey the psychological states of the characters. As they navigate through trauma and grief, their internal suffering is often expressed through language that reflects despair. For example, characters may describe their experiences in terms that evoke emptiness or voids, reinforcing their feelings of alienation and hopelessness. This alignment of language with emotional states helps readers empathize with the characters' struggles, allowing for a deeper understanding of their suffering.

Highlighting Themes of Entrapment and Isolation

The themes of entrapment and isolation are further emphasized through the use of dark lexical items. Characters often feel trapped in their circumstances, much like the imagery of darkness suggests a lack of light or hope. Words associated with confinement, such as "darkness," imply not only physical constraints but also emotional and spiritual imprisonment. This imagery reinforces the idea that the characters are ensnared in a cycle of suffering, unable to break free from their fates or the oppressive socio-political realities that surround them.

Contrasting Light and Dark

While darkness and death dominate much of Aslam's narrative, the juxtaposition of these elements with moments of light or beauty becomes significant. The contrast between dark lexical items and more hopeful language serves to highlight the tenuousness of joy in the face of suffering. This interplay emphasizes the resilience of the human spirit, suggesting that even amidst overwhelming sorrow, there exists a flicker of hope or a yearning for beauty, which is central to the human experience.

Figure:

Light Living creatures: animals, birds, etc.

The imagery and symbolism employed throughout the narrative profoundly encapsulate the sorrows and sufferings of the characters, weaving a rich tapestry of emotional and existential struggle.

Imagery of Candles as Injuries

The novel opens with a poignant image of scattered candles likened to injuries within Rohan's home. This metaphor serves to represent both physical and emotional wounds, suggesting that each flickering flame symbolizes the pain experienced by the characters. The idea that "wounds are said to emit light" creates a paradox: while pain can illuminate truth, it can also mark those who bear it. The image invites readers to consider how suffering can be a source of insight, shedding light on the harsh realities faced by the characters in a tumultuous landscape.

As Rohan reflects on each candle as an injury, it speaks to the pervasive nature of sorrow in his life and the lives of those around him. Each wound—whether a personal loss, a societal injustice, or the scars left by conflict—contributes to an atmosphere of grief and hopelessness. The candles' light, which could symbolize hope or clarity, is overshadowed by the acknowledgment of pain, reflecting a profound sense of despair and longing for healing.

Symbolism of Bird Snares

The symbolism of bird snares in Rohan's garden deepens the theme of entrapment. These snares, set without Rohan's permission, serve as a chilling metaphor for the characters' fates—caught in the web of violence and chaos that characterizes their lives. Just as the snares ensnare innocent birds, the characters are trapped in a socio-political landscape that limits their freedom and agency. This imagery foreshadows the suffering that awaits them, highlighting the precariousness of life amidst conflict.

The bird snares evoke a sense of vulnerability and helplessness, suggesting that the characters are not just victims of their circumstances but also emblematic of a larger societal malaise. Their entrapment reflects the broader human condition in a world marked by turmoil, where escape seems impossible and suffering is inescapable.

Diction and Emotional Landscape

Aslam's skillful diction adapts to the mood and tempo of each moment, effectively mirroring the emotional landscapes of the characters. The contrast between the dark, sorrowful elements and moments of beauty—such as the romantic rendezvous described with vivid imagery—underscores the fragility of joy in a world rife with suffering. The romantic scene, filled with metaphors of nature and wonder, stands in stark relief against the backdrop of pain, accentuating the transience of happiness.

The description of a woman with a "snow leopard" in her arms evokes both elegance and danger, reinforcing the complexity of the characters' experiences. The stars, falling "in a tremendous living flood," represent fleeting moments of connection and beauty, juxtaposed against the overwhelming sorrow that permeates their lives. This interplay of light and

darkness encapsulates the characters' struggles, emphasizing how moments of beauty can emerge even amid despair.

Symbolism of Religion and Confinement

The scene with Mikal outside the mosque introduces another layer of suffering related to the constraining nature of religious dogma. The ant, struggling to escape the shallow trough forming the word "Allah," symbolizes the tension between faith and individual freedom. Mikal's observation of the ant's repeated attempts to climb out, only to fall back, resonates with the struggles faced by many characters in the novel. It suggests that rigid interpretations of religion can entrap individuals, stifling their growth and potential.

This symbolism critiques the way that religious obligations can lead to suffering rather than solace. Mikal's position outside the mosque illustrates his disconnection from a faith that should offer guidance and refuge but instead feels suffocating. The imagery captures a profound struggle for meaning in a world where religious identity becomes a source of conflict rather than a source of comfort.

Figure:

Location and direction Long, tall and wide Measurement Mental actions and processes Moving, coming and going No constraint No respect No plants No obligation or necessity Non-existing Not understanding Objects generally Open; Finding ; Showing Parts of buildings People: Male People: Female Personality traits Plants Psychological Actions, States And Processes Putting, pulling, pushing, transporting Quantities: little Relationship: Sexual Religion and the supernatural Sad Seen Sensory: Sound Sensory: Sight Sensory: Touch Sensory: Smell Shape Short and

narrow **Sound: Quiet** Sound: Loud Spacious **Speech act**
S Speed: Slow Speed: Fast Stationary **Substances and**
materials: Solid Substances and materials: Gas Subs
tances and materials: Liquid **Temperature: Hot / on fire** T
exture **The universe** Time: Late Time: Ending Time: Beginning Tim
e: General Time: Old; grown-
up Time: Momentary Time: Beginning Unethical Unexpected **Unmatc**
hed Unnoticeable **Unseen** Vehicles and
transport on land Violent/Angry **W**
arfare, defence and th
e army; weapons Weak Weather

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Here in the above results, it is very clear that the results produced by Wmatrix are very accurate. Wmatrix has generated clouds for the words according to their role in the novel. Thematically important words are generated in bigger clouds. The overall environment of the novel is full of war and pangs of war. Wmatrix has generated clouds for the words related to war and killing.

In *The Blind Man's Garden*, Nadeem Aslam employs a diverse range of lexical items—including terms related to warfare, transportation, and the environment—to powerfully convey themes of sorrow and suffering. The prominence of words like "unseen vehicles," "violent warfare," and "weak weather" illustrates the intricate ways in which Aslam weaves together the external and internal experiences of his characters. This use of language reflects not just the harsh realities of life in a conflict zone, but also the emotional turmoil and existential struggles faced by individuals caught in such circumstances.

War and Its Implications

The lexical field surrounding "violent warfare" and "defense" highlights the omnipresence of conflict in the characters' lives. Aslam's use of terms related to the military and weapons underscores the brutal reality of their environment, where violence is a daily occurrence. This vocabulary evokes feelings of helplessness and despair, illustrating how warfare transforms landscapes and lives alike. The characters navigate a world where the repercussions of war manifest not only in physical destruction but also in psychological scars—highlighting the long-term suffering that conflict inflicts on communities.

Transportation and Movement

The phrase "unseen vehicles" suggests a world marked by surveillance and uncertainty. It conveys a sense of danger and the constant threat that looms over the characters. The imagery of vehicles moving through a landscape filled with tension evokes feelings of fear and vulnerability, reflecting the characters' struggles to find safety and solace. This notion of movement, coupled with the idea of being constantly watched or threatened, emphasizes the instability of their existence. The inability to control one's movement or environment adds to the sense of entrapment and despair.

Environmental Context and Emotional Landscape

Aslam's incorporation of terms related to "weak weather" is particularly significant in conveying the emotional states of his characters. The weather often serves as a metaphor for the characters' internal struggles, mirroring their pain and suffering. Weak or harsh weather can symbolize the unpredictability and harshness of their lives, reinforcing the idea that just as nature can be unforgiving, so too can human existence be fraught with hardship. This interplay between the natural world and human emotion deepens the reader's understanding of the characters' sorrows.

Imagery and Symbolism

Aslam's narrative technique is characterized by rich imagery and symbolism that enhance the impact of the lexical choices. For example, the "unseen vehicles" can symbolize the hidden forces of war that disrupt daily life, while "violent warfare" serves to illustrate not only physical battles but also the moral and ethical conflicts faced by the characters. This layered

use of language encourages readers to engage with the text on multiple levels, uncovering deeper meanings behind the characters' struggles.

Emotional Resonance

The combination of these lexemes creates an emotional resonance that permeates the narrative. Aslam's language captures the weight of sorrow and suffering in a way that is both visceral and poignant. The readers are invited to feel the characters' pain, anxiety, and longing through the careful selection of words. This connection is vital for understanding the depth of their experiences in a world that often feels chaotic and unforgiving.

Conclusion

In summary, this research methodology has employed the Wmatrix corpus tool to conduct a nuanced analysis of Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*, focusing on the thematic elements of sorrow and suffering depicted throughout the narrative. By generating lexical clouds that highlight significant lexemes, the study effectively illustrates how Aslam's linguistic choices resonate with the emotional and existential struggles of his characters. Integrating this lexical analysis with Stuart Hall's reception theory enriches the understanding of how audiences actively engage with and interpret these themes based on their own cultural and social contexts.

The findings demonstrate that Aslam's intricate use of imagery and symbolism—such as the metaphor of scattered candles as injuries and the symbolism of bird snares—serves to underscore the pervasive entrapment and despair experienced by the characters. The emotional weight conveyed through lexemes associated with death, darkness, and violence not only reflects the harsh realities of life in a conflict-ridden environment but also reveals the deeper psychological scars that accompany such experiences.

Furthermore, the analysis emphasizes the role of environmental factors, such as warfare and weather, in shaping the characters' emotional landscapes, highlighting a complex interplay between external conditions and internal turmoil. By presenting a tapestry of interconnected lives fraught with suffering, Aslam invites readers to reflect on the broader socio-political commentary inherent in the narrative.

Overall, this research contributes to a richer understanding of *The Blind Man's Garden* as a profound exploration of human struggles, illustrating how the intricacies of language and the reception of meaning can deepen our appreciation of literature's role in reflecting and interpreting the human condition. Through this methodology, future studies can further explore the intersections of language, culture, and emotional experience in contemporary literary works.

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