

# Acculturation in Contact Zone: A Transcultural Reading of Aslam's Autoethnographic *Maps for Lost Lovers*

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## **Acculturation in Contact Zone: A Transcultural Reading of Aslam's Autoethnographic *Maps for Lost Lovers***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper explores the dynamics of the transcultural contact zone of the British-Pakistani diaspora through Nadeem Aslam's autoethnographic text, *Maps for Lost Lovers*. Pakistani immigrants in multicultural British society live in political, linguistic, and socio-cultural contact zones that problematise their identities, raising double consciousness toward home and the host culture. As a minority ethnic group, they exhibit two responses to the host culture: one strain upholds tradition and maintains the culture and values of its previous home to avoid cultural contamination, whereas the other supports acculturation to secure a respectable place in mainstream society. Aslam portrays the losses and gains of both moves by British-Pakistani characters. At the same time, he displays their discrete ethnic traits, reflecting their unique cultural positions. Aslam, a diaspora author, demonstrates how the Pakistani community translates its traditions into the world through its present habitus, shaped by a palimpsestic cultural position. His autoethnographic text reveals the dynamics of language, writing style, and issues of representation of the Pakistani diaspora in the contact zone. Aslam's characters, standing at a cultural crossroads, negotiate their identity markers with those of the host society. They are palimpsests in their multicultural habitus and eager to establish their position in the new society. Still, the nostalgia for home and sense of alienation do not allow them to shed traces of their previous culture. Mary Louise Pratt's notion of 'autoethnography' at the contact zone has been employed in the textual analysis of the selected novel.*

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, Diaspora, Home, Habitus, Contact zone, Autoethnography

**JEL Classification Codes:** J15, F22, Z1

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Pakistani community, as the second-largest ethnic minority in England, set foot in England in the 1950s. British Pakistanis have a collective history of frustration, tension, and “struggle to assimilate into a society where Pakistanis have been for decades amongst the most ‘unpopular’ and ostracised of all immigrants” (Arif, 2009, p. 386). Their social life displays fine threads of cross-cultural contact zones, intricately developed to show acculturation and traditionalism, as the second-largest ethnic minority in the United Kingdom (UK). The co-occurrence of this duality results in double consciousness and problematised identities. While part of the British habitus, they are still immersed in nostalgia for home. Nadeem Aslam, in *Maps for Lost Lovers*, details the social behavior, cultural practices, linguistic habits, social integration, economic conditions, and belief systems of his Pakistani characters in British society. The story is set in the background of the 1970s, when the first-generation diaspora was hardly finding its place in the new cultural environment, and the second-generation diaspora was disowning the culture of its ancestors. The first-generation diaspora was at odds with both the host society and their own children. The novel is a description of their struggle on cross-cultural borderlands against social alienation and cultural flux.

Aslam, a Pakistani-British diaspora writer, moved to England in his teenage years. He left and began writing stories professionally. Son of a communist poet and a conventional Pakistani religious mother, Aslam targets stereotypical gender roles, class differences, economic destabilization, social alienation, broken relationships, political instability, and moral corruption of multicultural and multiethnic characters in his novels. His characters try to establish a healthy relationship with the outer world, but their moral, social, or cultural flaws hinder their way to exercising freedom of expression, or career choices, or political rights in their locational habitus. *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2012) is set in a northern English town named ‘Dasht-e-Tanhai’ by the residents of the locality, mainly Pakistani, Indian, or Bangladeshi immigrants. This novel presents identity crises, social alienation, racial prejudice, cultural assimilation, and loss of culture in the diaspora through a culturally sensitive issue of ‘honour killing’ and its impact on the family and social life of the victims and their families. The story presents traditionalist characters, e.g., Kaukab and her neighbouring women, and a progressive mindset, e.g., Shamas and his children. Both mindsets constantly remain in tension with each other. Chanda and Jugnu are two lovebirds murdered in the name of honour by Chanda’s brothers. The convicts are sentenced to death by British law, but ironically, Pakistani immigrants do not condemn these murders. The inhabitants of Dasht-e-Tanhai are leading traumatic lives due to their orthodox belief system, inactive social life, and lack of communication with the dominant society, widening the gulf between first-generation and second-

generation diaspora people, and instances of internal as well as external intolerance. Diaspora identities are victimized in the name of racism. Shamas is brutally beaten repeatedly by White racists. Whites do not socialize with the immigrant community. The immigrants are an economically compromised, socially alienated, and religiously confused minority in a dominantly White society.

England's cultural diversity and multicultural pluralism gain strength from the absorption of previously autonomous, locality-based cultures into a larger state, making these people "national minorities" (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 10), and from individual or familial immigration under the policy of 'Anglo-conformity' (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 14). Mass immigration to England is the primary driver of its cultural pluralism. Currently, half of all legal immigration worldwide is directed to the United States (US), Canada, and Australia (Fukuyama & Gocek, 2022). These immigrants migrate for economic betterment, a motif generally referred to as the "New World Phenomenon" (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 17).

There are certain protocols that an immigrant must follow to seek citizenship of a new country: learning the language of the dominant culture, sound knowledge of history, culture, norms, and traditions of the host land, complete submission to the law of the country, contribution to the economic and political life of the country through personal skills, time, money, and any other means, voluntary association with the host land through the legal oath-taking process, and a pledge of staying loyal to the country in all respects. This 'Naturalization Process', with a little variation in every polyethnic state, is essential for every immigrant. Kymlicka (1995) states that "their distinctiveness is manifested primarily in their family lives and in voluntary associations ... they still participate within the public institutions of the dominant culture(s) and speak the dominant language(s)" (p. 14). Characters in *Maps for Lost Lovers* have also gone through the Naturalization Process, but they are unable to shed their distinctive cultural traits and remain isolated from mainstream society.

Bengtsson (2008) views *Maps for Lost Lovers* as a story of the complexities of problematised diaspora identity within a multicultural social hierarchy. He observes that "the novel makes visible the forming of identity through the process of othering and consequently deals with the problems which concern this issue" (p. 17). He opines that the ethical indecency of the first world is symbolised in the White woman in Dasht-e-Tanhai. Her lack of virtue establishes the White man's failure (p. 18). The Pakistani community is treated as Others by the dominant White society. Chanda and Jugnu, the two lovebirds, represent White otherness and a threat to Pakistani values (p. 18). Hossain (2021) appreciates this novel for its vivid portrayal of the misconduct of

Pakistani Muslim migrants in England and, at the same time, for challenging the White–migrant binary by pointing to the complexities involved in Pakistani migrants’ negotiation of identity in diaspora (p. 95). The transformation of identity in the process of rehomeing diaspora Pakistani characters is the focus of his criticism. Lemke (2006) argues that the Muslim immigrants in Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* build their identity on the tropes of racism emerging from their fear of losing their ancestral culture. Lemke has focused on Kaukab’s character to explain her stance on identity transformation. She has, however, ignored other migrant characters such as Kaukab’s children, her husband Shamas, Chanda, and Jugnu, who are not disturbed by losing cultural purity while shaping their hybrid identity. Shamas assumed the identity of a liberal multicultural man whose identity, as per Adler (1977), “is inclusive of different life patterns and who has psychologically and socially come to grips with a multiplicity of realities” (p. 25). Hossain (2021) believes that Shamas’ “geographical border crossing brings about his psychological, cultural, and sexual border crossing also” (p. 99). Yaqin (2015) adds another dimension to the discussion on the migrants’ predicament in negotiating identity in the diaspora. She argues that the ghettoisation and lack of material resources of the migrants, among other factors, contribute to their cultural practices, especially honour killing in England (p. 101). Aslam’s intense and richly detailed fiction is deeply embedded in a modern, anarchic globe that encompasses and frames the Pakistani, British, and Muslim worlds that Aslam, on account of his heritage, feels he most intimately knows. It is influenced, according to Aslam (Clements, 2013, p. 145), by Urdu before American, European, or other world literature; inflected with memories of being raised in Zia’s Islamised Pakistan and coming of age in Thatcher’s Britain; and shaped by British Asian politics. Clements argues that the situation gains urgency “after 9/11 as a result of an internalised obligation to raise ‘moderate’ concerns about the situation of globally implicated Muslims in multicultural Middle England or in a benighted Afghanistan which the Taliban have drastically uncultured” (Clements, 2016, pp. 91–92). Ahsan and Raza (2021) explore the novel through its presentation of subalternity and hybridity, with particular reference to its portrayal of religion as orthodox and conservative. They declare his approach reductionist, employing no effort in breaking the “shackles of the negative portrayal of Islam that has been manifest by Western scholars for centuries” (p. 416). Ananzeh and Raihanah (2025) explore Aslam’s *Dasht-e-Tanhai* in the novel as a space that functions as both utopia and dystopia. They view diaspora space as a dystopian environment for the older, tradition-bound mindset of immigrants. The younger generation, or characters like Shamas, who are adaptive and modern, are utopian.

Aslam's spectrum of creating complex thematic lines on a single canvas is a result of the multifaceted practice of Islam in Pakistan and Britain. Aslam's personal experiences with diverse religious practices at home seem not just to have given him insight into the different hues of Muslimness. Clements endorses this aspect by calling his Islamic impressions 'shaded' under a certain kind of Islam. Aslam's calling of his mother a conventionally religious lady, and portrayal of a specific dimension of the Islamic value system practised largely by his mother, bears out the analysis by Clements: "... particular memories, actual and inherited, resurface in various guises in Aslam's fiction and non-fiction, such as the essay 'God and Me', which was published in an edition of *Granta* magazine devoted to exploring through literature 'the varieties of religious belief and their personal, social and political effects'" (Clements, 2016, p. 92). Chambers (2011) declares Aslam "one of the most linguistically adept and poetic of contemporary English language writers" (p. 134) despite his very weak language skills at the time of shifting to England. The refinement in his writing is an indicator of his zealous efforts. Simultaneously, Aslam is a metaphor of all diaspora community members who arduously strive to achieve a strong social position during the process of re-homing. This research provides insight into how diaspora and cultural borderlands cause transformations in identities, and how adhering to the so-called religious practices of their previous home creates resistance to acculturation.

This paper aims to examine how Nadeem Aslam's autoethnographic text, *Maps for Lost Lovers*, functions as a subversive tool to challenge canonical fixity through its transcultural, multilingual, and intermixed generic form. It investigates how the strategic 'contact zone' reflects the complex epistemological shift between the characters' original habitus and their Western environment.

### **1.1. Significance of the Study**

This research is a guide to the transcultural contact zone between mainstream society and its minority cultural groups in a multicultural society. It informs researchers of literary texts, cultural ethnographers, and students of world literatures to explore aspects of cultural transliteration through ethnographic texts produced by writers of minority cultural groups. This research serves as a reference point for viewing the ground realities of a diverse cultural society, where people coexist amid differences while acculturating or assimilating into the dominant culture.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examines *Maps for Lost Lovers* as a literary representation of problematized transcultural identities situated within what Mary Louise Pratt conceptualizes as the contact zone. According to Pratt, contact zones are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (Pratt, 1991/2025, p. 34). These spaces emerge against the sociocultural complexities produced by settlers and colonizers in occupied territories and continue to shape postcolonial and diasporic experiences. Within such zones, minority cultural groups negotiate identity through interaction, resistance, and adaptation, leading to the production of hybrid and autoethnographic forms of expression.

In multicultural societies, marginalized communities begin collaborating with dominant linguistic and cultural codes under the pressure of politically powerful groups. Minority populations develop distinctive linguistic practices influenced by hegemonic languages, resulting in hybridized forms of expression. Pratt terms such cultural production autoethnographic texts, which reflect how subordinated groups represent themselves in dialogue with metropolitan discourses (Pratt, 1991/2025, p. 34). These texts register the dynamics of language, style, and representation within the contact zone and articulate identity under conditions of cultural negotiation (Pratt, 1991/2025, p. 35).

Autoethnographic texts are marked by several features. First, they involve “selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis,” merged with indigenous expressions to create representations that intervene in dominant modes of understanding (Pratt, 1991/2025, p. 35). Second, they address both metropolitan audiences and the writers’ own communities, producing varied and often unstable receptions. Third, such texts provide marginalized groups access to mainstream sociocultural circuits, particularly through print culture. Fourth, they are frequently bilingual or multilingual, reflecting the linguistic plurality of the contact zone. Fifth, they display “concrete collaborations” between native intellectuals and canonical traditions, blending inheritance with innovation (Pratt, 1991/2025, p. 35). Sixth, they intermix genres, destabilizing canonical forms and conventions. Seventh, they adopt revisionist strategies that revisit cultural histories and idealized pasts. Finally, they often parody dominant historical narratives.

Within collaborative political environments between dominant institutions and local intellectuals, subordinate groups do not fully control the penetrative forces of hegemonic culture; rather, they “determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for” (Pratt, 1991/2025, p. 36).

Members of marginalized communities select, reshape, and redeploy materials from dominant cultures, and this process of acculturation, like autoethnography, is intrinsic to the contact zone (Pratt, 1991/2025, p. 36). While cultural boundaries tend to preserve literary forms as discrete and coherent, transcultural productions are anxiogenic and unstable. Pratt describes them as “anomalous or chaotic” because they are heterogeneous both in production and reception and are “read very differently by people in different positions in the contact zone” (Pratt, 1991/2025, pp. 36–37).

Such texts engage European and non-European “systems of meaning-making” at multiple interpretive levels for monolingual and bilingual audiences alike (Pratt, 1991/2025, p. 37). Cross-cultural writing in transcultural contexts is therefore multilingual and occasionally multimodal. Genre intermixture becomes a defining feature of autoethnographic discourse, as canonical fixity is replaced by experimentation at cultural crossroads. Texts are no longer isolated verbal constructs; instead, they increasingly integrate imagery, graphic elements, and symbolic representations to enrich ethnographic expression.

Drawing on this framework, the present study explores problematized diasporic identities in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* as an autoethnographic narrative emerging from the cultural contact zone. The novel offers a vivid portrayal of identity transformation and reveals the rapid and far-reaching impact of acculturation on individual and collective life in diasporic contexts.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative research employs textual analysis to study cross-cultural transrelation by multicultural social members. Belsey (2013), in her essay “Textual Analysis as a Research Method,” explains that textual analysis involves a bidirectional interaction between a reader and a text if the reader is attentive to “all the quotations that make up the text” (p. 162). She further contends that textual analysis “involves a close encounter with a text and there is no such thing as pure reading” (p. 162), and “interpretation involves extra-textual knowledge including personal interests, biographical elements, cultural specifications and other secondary sources” (pp. 163–164). This research explores the speaking nature of autoethnographic texts that convey problematized monolithic identities of minority cultural groups in a multicultural world. Text and author are ingrained in the negotiating cultures. Hence, the text is a product of negotiation between the home and the host culture. The author’s biography and the literature review, based on relevant research articles, books, and close studies of multiculturalism, inform my discussion section. This study focuses on a single primary text, *Maps for Lost Lovers* by Nadeem Aslam, employing Pratt’s theory of autoethnography for the textual analysis.

#### 4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

*Maps for Lost Lovers* (2012), Aslam's second novel, is an account of anxiogenic diaspora identities struggling with the dynamics of their new cultural abode. This autoethnographic text positions its protagonist on a cultural borderland where the author, as a cultural mediator, enables his characters to translate their lives and culture into the dominant society. This representative autoethnographic diaspora text is autobiographical in spirit and represents the author's psycho-social journey at a cultural crossroads. His characters belong to North England, the area where his own family settled after migrating. His stories resonate with his real-life events, happenings, relationships, and sentiments. Explaining his methodology and inspirations in his writings, Aslam states that if he wanted to write about an uncle and a nephew, his first point of reference would be his own uncle, a believer (Zakaria, 2017, para. 6). This turns out to be justified in *Maps for Lost Lovers*, where Shamas, the protagonist, is not a practising Muslim. In contrast, Kaukab, his wife, has an orthodox religious mindset. Aslam's father was a communist poet who migrated to England to avoid unfavourable political circumstances under Zia's regime in Pakistan. Kaukab's character reflects Aslam's mother, a staunch believer: "My mother is a believer. She believes in the literal word of the Qur'an. She believes, and she has to believe, that sitting on her right shoulder and an angel sitting on her left shoulder" (Faber, 2021, para. 18). He adds that his "mother is a practising Muslim. She believes that nothing in my life has occurred without God's will. Me failing my Geography O level, my brother scoring a century in a cricket match, me falling and acquiring a scar under my chin as a child, me writing this sentence now – all of it is so because Allah has willed it to be, according to my mother" (Faber, 2021, para. 15). His understanding of biochemistry at the University of Manchester shapes Jugnu's character in the novel, who is an expert on the life cycles, habits, and types of rare butterflies. Aslam took eleven years to write *Maps for Lost Lovers*, which brought him the 2005 Encore Award and the 2005 Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize. These novel indexes the psychosocial tensions arising from cultural differences within the Pakistani community in England. Aslam says that he consumes content "taken from real life [as] a novel is a comprehensive study of how the various remembrances and sensations, and tastes and sights are associated with each other within our consciousness. So it is that life precedes art" (Faber, 2021, para. 9).

Aslam's autoethnography records his early life and the socio-political conditions in Pakistan. His father's distrust influenced his early life in Pakistan in Zia's religious fundamentalist society. He detests his mother's belief system. *Maps for Lost Lovers* resonates with his distance from conventional cultural Islam: "Islam and Marxism are the two strands of my DNA, my double helix; Islam, which I

received from my mother and her family, and Marxism, which came to me from my father and his brothers” (Faber, 2021, para. 10). He, just like his protagonist Shamas, is happy as an atheist and feels delighted by the recognition of the term ‘cultural Muslim’ being entered in the Wikipedia page. He denies being Eve’s son, and rather claims to be Lucy’s son, Lucy being the name given to the collection of bones that come from one of our 3-million-year-old ancestors. I have never felt wonder at anything in my adult life. ‘Wonder’ is a religious word, in many ways. Religion says, ‘You are not allowed to think about or question anything beyond certain limits; beyond that lies wonder.’ I, however, like the idea of questioning and exploring. I am trained as a scientist and take great delight in the fact that when the space probe Juno entered the planet Jupiter’s orbit in July 2016, after travelling a distance of 3 billion kilometres, its arrival fell short by just one second of what the scientists had calculated it to be” (Faber, 2021, para. 15).

Aslam’s confessions to be a non-believer, his openness towards atheism, his claim of rationalism, and his disbelief in myths are the formative principles in the construction of all of his male characters, Shamas, Charag, Ujala, and Jugnu, who are far away from abstract Islam. They, as eager residents of a dominantly non-Islamic world, believe in the scientific world and empirical realities. Aslam never hesitates to announce his belief that his achievements are a result of his personal efforts, not of God’s doing. For him, religion is of some use only in terms of its humanitarian lessons, “ideas of decency, love, kindness, compassion given to [him] first by [his] mother – this ‘irrational’ person was the one who laid down the first few layers in [his] consciousness of what it means to be a good person. That aspect of religion is something [he is] deeply interested in exploring in [his] novels” (Faber, 2021, para. 15). Aslam’s nationalist characters, such as Kaukab and the neighbouring women of Dasht-e-Tanhai, mourn the losses of place, culture, relationships, values, and belief systems, while Aslam himself favours multiculturalism in his personal life and his writings. The youth of his generation is unable to relate to their parents’ home, nor does Aslam translate monolithic belonging to Pakistan. However, he admits to having a “very strong emotional relationship with Pakistan” (East, 2017, para. 1). His memories are his most precious possession. He values Urdu, accepting his deficiency of command in English that he could achieve if he were born in England: “The language I use has the 26 letters of the English alphabet, but they seem aware of the presence of the 38 letters of the Urdu alphabet too” (Faber, 2021, para. 19). This attitude, Pratt explains, is the outcome of the cultural contact zone; the cultural fusion leads to the mixing of linguistic code, creating a multicultural, polyvocal text that is reader-friendly for a broader readership. His approach to language is similar to his cultural adaptation: he belongs to both

England and Pakistan: “I always say that I could live anywhere if I loved someone. So, I would be happy to belong to a third country too” (Faber, 2021, para. 19). Aslam echoes cosmopolitan Appiah (2007), who posits that individuals are the citizens of the world whose allegiances and loyalties determine their identity in the world (p. 6). To Aslam, a society has to be multicultural “with as many religions as possible, so, yes, I absolutely believe that the land of the pure doesn’t exist” (Zakaria, 2017, para. 10). He quotes Tolstoy: “Patriotism is slavery, and at the deepest level of self, I am unable to accept the demarcations between countries. My loyalty is to humans and the planet, and in that sense, I feel able to question the conduct of the powerful anywhere in the world” (Faber, 2021, para. 20). He transgresses the confines of nationalism and religious homogeneity: “I think part of my task as a writer is to comment on the world. My writing must say something of the world, must say to the unjust people who get away, maybe in life but not in my head; in my head I will put you on trial, and we will judge you and sentence you” (Zakaria, 2017, para. 7). For the same reason, the novel questions malpractices in Pakistan in the name of gender, race, or economic status. His work has both beauty and the terror of existence (Faber, 2021, para. 12), as he intends to present the ugliness of life without “destroying the reader’s capacity for love and happiness” (Faber, 2021, para. 12). Aslam clarifies: “Taken purely on a textual level, if I write about the inner life of a person like my mother and her brothers, people who believe in angels, djinns, Satan, Judgement Day, am I writing realism, or am I writing magical realism?” (Faber, 2021, para. 12). Literary realism, as a literary movement, represents reality by revealing ordinary, day-to-day experiences as they are in real life. The way Aslam portrays social alienation of the Pakistani community in England, social evils of the Pakistani Brahmin system, miseries of the uneducated classes in diaspora, and tensions leading to identity crisis, aptly presents a realistic picture of the dilemmas of diasporic life for Pakistani immigrants. Aslam supports realism and detests supernatural descriptions of this universe. Aslam speaks about the benefits and responsibilities of an author who belongs to the margins, stating that, by temperament, he is on the sidelines. In Pakistan, he belonged to a small town, which nurtured him with the instinct for observation. Claiming himself not to be on the margin, he firmly believes that “the job of a writer is to be a voice that is not the majority voice” (Zakriya, 2017, para. 5). Aslam admits being “a deeply political creature, fully conscious of [his] responsibilities towards [his] fellow human beings” (Naeem, 2018, para. 15).

Geographical, cultural, and religious displacement in *Maps for Lost Lovers* plays a key role in putting characters in an identity crisis. These people from third-world countries are sensitive about their home, the impact of the dominant culture on their cultural confinements, the hostile behaviour of the racist Whites,

and their own poor economic position due to failure in meeting the requirements of the dominant society. Their growth, social and personal rights are limited due to “insult, dishonour, and lack of opportunities to personal growth” (Hussain, 2013, p. 30). For Shamas, “among the innumerable other losses, to come to England was to lose a season, because, in the part of Pakistan that he is from, there are five seasons in a year, not four” (Aslam, 2012, p. 6). Kaukab, owing to her ethnic identity and Pakistaniness, fails to learn English. To her, “...even things in England spoke a different language than the one they did back in Pakistan” (Aslam, 2012, p. 49). She is compelled to use Urdu for communication. Her inability to cope with a foreign language hinders her collaboration with the host society.

The national sentiment of Aslam's first-generation characters requires them to remain connected to their previous culture, people, and national interests, to use the Urdu language, celebrate important national days, and hold national symbols dear. Traditionalist homemakers, representing the family union phase of immigrants during the 1970s–80s, are the custodians of their homes due to either their limited educational backgrounds or the tradition of being confined to the home. Resultantly, they are a gulf away from mainstream society and are at a crossroads. Kaukab’s worries that “[they] should never have come to this deplorable country, sister ji, this nest of devilry from where God has been exiled. No, not exiled but denied and slain. It’s even worse” (Aslam, 2012, p. 41) represent the first-generation’s cultural and religious abandonment and acculturation of their children and husbands with the Whites.

Kaukab has to endure many practices of her family and society that conflict with her beliefs. She is to unveil her face to the public, her elder son gets a vasectomy as a result of “Christian conspiracy to stop the number of Muslims from increasing” (Aslam, 2012, p. 83), her daughter wants to marry a non-Muslim, her youngest son is an atheist, and her husband often goes blasphemous. She accuses Shamas of having “confused the children with his Godless ideas” (Aslam, 2012, p. 47). Every passing day, the residents are increasingly becoming dejected about their difficulties as Muslims. Kaukab’s neighbour apprehends that “it would soon be a hanging offence to be a Muslim anywhere in the world, it seems” (Aslam, 2012, p. 109).

Kaukab, once displaced from her country, prevents Mah-Jabin from moving to America, a “strange country full of strangers!” (Aslam, 2012, p. 113). Still, Mah-Jabin disagrees, as America is a familiar land for her. Aslam believes that “perspective tricks the eyes” (Aslam, 2012, p. 6), due to their limited perspective. Kaukab’s pride in Pakistani religious identity and snobbery of belonging make her intolerant towards the cultural differences. Her traditionalist

intolerance towards Charagh's English girlfriend causes a widening gulf between the minority–majority relationship, and the resulting communication gap problematises social space.

Pratt (2025) contends that in a multicultural world, people no longer imagine their countries as sovereign and autonomous cultural bodies, but rather as fluid, contributory, and collaborative spaces for multiethnic people (p. 39), and through a ‘discourse of belonging’, these minorities assert their ethnicity. Mah-Jabin, Shamas, Charag, Ujala, and Jugnu appear to be residents of a multicultural world with liquid identities. Society also gives them space for their individuality. On the other hand, Kaukab's fixity is not befitting in this ever-changing multicultural world. Therefore, they are thrown into a realm of loneliness by even their own progressive family members, and they become “resident aliens” (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 2).

Aslam’s diasporic characters integrate cross-cultural local expressions, titles, and proverbs as “local symbolic structures embodied in European genres” (Pratt, 2025, p. 37) through linguistic mixing and switching. He uses Urdu and Punjabi expressions with literal English translation. For example, “Twelve or so princesses deep in conversation in their palace, huddled in a circle” (Aslam, 2012, p. 22), a popular puzzle in Urdu referring to corn. Chanda’s brothers threaten her with a literal translation of an anger expression: “We’ll drink from your veins...We’ll make you lick our injuries” (Aslam, 2012, p. 28). At times, Aslam has sparingly used Urdu words for food, colours, seasons, household articles, kitchen utensils, and traditions to show the characters’ cultural origins. The word ‘ji’ in “sister-ji” and “brother-ji” (Aslam, 2012, p. 58) to address Kaukab and Shamas is a marker of respect used by South Asians. Shamas calls his friend Sohnia (Aslam, 2012, p. 16) instead of ‘my dear’.

Purab Ji’s “shiny brass garvi” (Aslam, 2012, p. 26) instead of ‘vessel’, Kaukab’s thoughts about creation of “Adim” (Aslam, 2012, p. 42) instead of ‘man’, Jugnu’s “loi” (Aslam, 2012, p. 120) instead of draping shawl, Kaukab’s presenting “naan” (Aslam, 2012, p. 43) instead of bread on the dinner table, “aloo bhurta to be turka’d” (Aslam, 2012, p. 51) instead of ‘sautéed potato fills’, “zarda” rice (Aslam, 2012, p. 51) for yellow rice dessert, “raita” (Aslam, 2012, p. 54), a typical Indian cuisine vegetable condiment of yogurt, black “masar” (Aslam, 2012, p. 76) for a type of lentils, and “qasuri methi” (Aslam, 2012, p. 391), a local herb in the subcontinent, are examples of Pakistani–Indian cuisine existing on a mini-scale in the north of England.

Aslam has embedded works of Pakistani poets Munir Niazi and Abid Tamimi to introduce home literature to an international readership. Both the quoted poets are known for their overwhelming feelings of loneliness and alienation; the

sentiments are quite relatable to the condition of the immigrants in the diaspora. Aslam quotes Niazi: “Kuj Sheher de lok vi zalim san – Kuj mainon maran da shauk vi si” (Aslam, 2012, p. 399), translated as “on the one hand, the city surrounding me was easily provoked. On the other, I was curious about ways of dying” (Aslam, 2012, p. 399). With Tamimi’s poem *Dard di Ronaq* (Celebrations of loneliness), Aslam concludes the chapter where Chanda’s mother is counting the miseries of her exile that has brought disasters to her daughter’s life:

*Ki pata-thikana puchde ho -  
Mere sheher da na Tanhai ey  
Zila: Sukhan-navaz  
Tehseel: Hajar  
Jeda daak khana Rusvaai ey  
Oda rasta Gehrian Sochan han, te mashoor makam Judaai ey  
Othay aaj kal Abid mil sakda ey -  
Betha dard di raunaq laai ey.* (Aslam, 2012, p. 386)

**Translation:** “You ask for my address / The name of my town is Loneliness / District: The Relating of Tales / Sub-district: Longing / And its post office is Condemnation and Disrepute. / The road leading to it is Devoted Thought, and its famous monument is Separation.” (Aslam, 2012, pp. 386-387)

Aslam’s selection of this poetry also translates the sentiments of remorse, aloofness, alienation, helplessness, lack of strength to sustain their life overseas, and lack of links with the host society, resulting in failure in the process of re-homing, and the shame associated with decisions of desperate sons and daughters of immigrant families developing social and physical relationships with white people.

Aslam proclaims his writings as “Persian miniatures” (Procter, 2008), displaying the precision of every element. The story is divided into four sections, namely Winter, Spring, Summer, and Autumn. The male protagonist, Shamas, misses “monsoon” (Aslam, 2012, p. 6), the rainy season that is part of the Pakistani climate, while chanting the names of all seasons together as “Mausam-e-Sarma, Bahar, Mausam-e-Garma, Barsat, Khizan” (Aslam, 2012, p. 6). The naming of English places, such as Dasht-e-Tanhaii, or “Desert of Loneliness” (Aslam, 2012, pp. 40, 92), a town named by its Asian-born residents, “there is a Park street here as in Calcutta, a Malabar Hill as in Bombay, and a Naag Tolla Hill as in Dhaka” (Aslam, 2012, p. 40). Characters refer to Pakistan as ‘Sohni Dharti’ (Aslam, 2012, pp. 89, 137). Shamas names his boat “Safeena, which meant both a boat and – in archaic use – a notebook” (Aslam, 2012, p. 193) after the name of his “rowboat during [his] boyhood on the banks of Chenab” (Aslam, 2012, p.

195). Thus, Safeena is a reminder of his connection with the past and its part and position in the current habitus. Aslam's collaboration with and appropriation of indigenous idioms with English idioms is "merged and infiltrated to varying degrees to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding" (Pratt, 2025, p. 35).

Collaboration of majority and minority cultures in *Maps for Lost Lovers* can be explored through the movement of characters among the Whites, the text's language, and the cultural appropriation between co-existing ethnic groups. Aslam's characters are acculturated and assimilated to claim the right of social acceptance, as, to Pratt, it is "inescapable when cultures come into contact" (Aslam, 2012, p. 474). However, their collaboration with the dominant society is limited; thus, the characters enact ambivalence toward both home and host cultures, often expressed through violence. They inhabit a borderland where they "meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt, 2025, p. 34).

The collaboration between immigrants and the host society depends on economic, cultural, religious, and social factors. Residents of Dasht-e-Tanhai are treated as "resident aliens" (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 2), facing physical segregation, economic discrimination, and denied political rights in a multicultural state, as "all...work in restaurants, drive taxis and buses, or are unemployed" (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 64). *Maps for Lost Lovers* reveals two distinct modes of collaboration: a strong collaboration between the dominant society and second-generation diaspora members, whereas first-generation immigrants experience little to no collaboration, and what exists is conditional. Their limited education, lack of practical skills, and poor command of the host language widen the communication gap. Kaukab, who had "no schooling beyond the age of eleven" (Aslam, 2012, p. 44) with a "rudimentary grasp of English" (Aslam, 2012, p. 45), is "a picture of loneliness" (Aslam, 2012, p. 63) and "barely know[s] what lay beyond the neighbourhood" (Aslam, 2012, p. 44). Her narrow mental horizon prevents her from surrendering her native identity to the dominant culture.

Kaukab views Whites as conspiring (Aslam, 2012, p. 83), strange (Aslam, 2012, p. 113), and mischievous (Aslam, 2012, p. 126), though she is intrigued when meeting Charag's white girlfriend for the first time. Shamas faces penalties for his Asianness, and an Indian girl, Kiran, is racially slurred as "darkie" (Aslam, 2012, p. 403). The second generation embodies hybrid identities as borderland residents. Charag, the eldest, has a white pregnant girlfriend and gets a vasectomy, which Kaukab calls a "Christian conspiracy to stop the number of Muslims from increasing" (Aslam, 2012, p. 83), creating estrangement from his traditionalist mother. Ujala, the youngest son, leads a customary social life and

adopts atheism, earning Kaukab's rejection but enjoying freedom outside her confining worldview. Mah-Jabin aspires to marry a non-Muslim, non-Pakistani boy after a traumatic forced marriage in Pakistan. Kaukab laments her children's assimilation, declaring England an "accursed land" that has transformed them: "each time they went out they returned with a new layer of stranger-ness on them until finally [she] didn't recognise them anymore" (Aslam, 2012, p. 209). The inevitable cultural collaboration inherent in the contact zone is evident in Shamas and his children's lives.

Aslam criticizes the disastrous effects of adhering to obsolete cultural and traditional 'laws' in a multicultural world. The short-lived marriages of girls with Pakistani men highlight incompatibility between a reason-based worldview and patriarchal abstractions. Yet, fear of divorce traumatizes Chanda, Mah-Jabin, and Sorraya. Mah-Jabin resents the tradition of honour killing, which immigrants "have dragged into this country with [them] like shit on [their] shoes" (Aslam, 2012, p. 163). Kaukab, however, justifies it: "religion is not the British legal system, it's Islam" (Aslam, 2012, p. 164). Pratt (2025) maintains that members of subordinate social groups "select and adapt materials from the dominant culture" (p. 36). A careful negotiation of cultural practices from both home and host worlds is essential for genuine collaboration in multicultural spaces.

Autoethnographic texts, especially bilingual or multilingual ones (Pratt, 2025, p. 35), are capable of attracting a wide readership from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* not only represents Pakistani tradition but also addresses the social, domestic, and psychological problems faced by minority immigrant communities. The book, relatable to any marginalized social group, offers a broader understanding of diasporic life, which Pratt (2025) terms appealing to both "metropolitan audiences and the speaker's own community" (p. 35). Dasht-e-Tanhai, the novel's central setting, houses people of multiple ethnicities, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, who name their area reflecting a shared sentiment of loss and loneliness. Shamas rows his boat in the lake where "many hearts carved on the xylophone jetty enclose initials in Urdu and Hindi and Bengali as well as English" (Aslam, 2012, p. 23), symbolizing the multicultural, polyphonic space of the diaspora.

First-generation diaspora characters are over-occupied with their memories of 'home' and the widening gap between themselves and their children. This situation serves a dual purpose: it highlights the cultural differences between Pakistani and British society and also provides an opportunity to introduce Pakistani culture to the global audience. The text critiques the overgeneralized opinions and biases held by both cultures about each other. The Chanda-Jugnu case, named "Operation Ivory" (Aslam, 2012, p. 34), illustrates how Whites

exoticize immigrants, reinforcing perceptions of them as 'exotic' regardless of their actual origins. Similarly, Pakistani immigrants practice illogical or outdated traditions, such as Shamas' mother sending Japanese nightingales to Kaukab to "rub bird shit into her face to enhance her complexion" (Aslam, 2012, p. 48); Kaukab starving her one-month-old baby during Ramadan; girls engaging in handicraft instead of education to impress others; valuing people's opinions over children's wishes; and honor killings justified in the name of religion. On receiving a gift from her daughter, Kaukab "wishes some neighbourhood woman would drop by so she could show off the flowers to her with pride" (Aslam, 2012, p. 98), showing the preoccupation with social image.

*Maps for Lost Lovers* presents the polyvocal socio-cultural dynamics of life at the cultural contact zone. Life at these borderlands requires flexibility, tolerance, space, and open-mindedness for co-existence. Aslam, as a borderland intellectual, questions the stereotypes of both host and migrant communities, taking inspiration from "real life ... [because he does] not have the imagination to compete with reality" (Faber, 2017, para. 11). By pointing out problem areas, the novel raises consciousness within communities to reconsider hyphenated social practices. Aslam emphasizes that his work "has both beauty and the terror of existence – [his] aim is to show the ugliness without destroying the reader's capacity for love and happiness" (Faber, 2017, para. 12), blending realism with ethical engagement to explore the complexities of diasporic identity.

Diaspora writing actively reclaims the history of minority communities whose displaced lives are overwhelmingly shaped by their past. Their cultural baggage functions as a repository of their history, which they reclaim while, for example, discussing political issues back 'home', facing stereotyping based on their ethnic identity, being victimized for their color, making choices for their future relationships, planning visits to their previous homeland, picking items from their wardrobes, enjoying food at their dinner tables, and mixing and switching linguistic codes as a response to unavoidable heteroglossia. Their unique position at the cultural contact zone enables them to strategically use their past for survival and adaptation in the new habitat. Autoethnographic texts project the plurality of discourse on the ground, reflecting that culture itself is inherently plural. They manifest the multiplicity of values, practices, and negotiations of both the home and host societies, integrating history into contemporary sociopolitical and cultural modes of life. Every discourse requires some form of regulatory structure to function effectively within the larger framework of social practices (Krupat, 1992, p. 27). Diaspora writers often glorify or satirize the history of their former homelands to present a nuanced overview and to develop a counter-discourse challenging stereotypical portrayals by other writers or dominant societies.

Festivals, celebrations, religion, national symbols, and the construction of communal ties vary between Eastern and Western contexts. Within the same diaspora community, these variations coexist but are constantly in tension. This intergenerational and intercultural conflict is mirrored at the social level between the mainstream white society and multicultural minority immigrant groups. Kaukab is remorseful that people, including her own children, fail to observe or remember important religious festivals and rituals. Mah-Jabin is embarrassed by forgetting to greet her mother on two consecutive Eids. She pleads that Muslim festivals follow the lunar calendar, whereas other civil matters are organized according to the solar calendar. Kaukab rejects this plea, highlighting the complex space-culture nexus experienced by culturally displaced characters: “No one would need reminding in Pakistan when Eid is, or Ramadan, the way no one can remain unaware of Christmas here” (Aslam, 2012, p. 140).

Maps for Lost Lovers reflects the disastrous stay of Pakistani immigrants in England. The consequences of applying ‘old laws’ or traditional codes of conduct to a modern, multicultural world illustrate how residents cannot remain tied to the confines of outdated relationships. Mah-Jabin, Surraya, Chanda, and all other girls married to cousins back in Pakistan are unable to maintain their marriages for long due to cultural incompatibilities. Their short-lived marriages reflect a lack of compatibility between people from two different worlds whose ontologies and epistemologies do not align. One prioritizes reason and rationality, whereas the other establishes its life's superstructure on patriarchal abstractions and inherited traditions. Divorce, a social stigma in Pakistan, is a nightmare for all immigrant Pakistani mothers in England. They pressure their daughters to marry and remain with only Pakistani husbands, despite these husbands being abusive and unjust. The horrific consequences, manifested in the traumatic lives of Chanda, Mah-Jabin, and Surraya, are self-evident.

For Chanda’s brothers, the Pakistani community does not use words such as ‘killers’ or ‘murderers’ because honour killing, even if proven, is socially and religiously excused in parts of the subcontinent. Even while living in a dominantly Christian country, Kaukab insists on following Islam as her code of law, denying the legal framework of the country where she resides, despite an assimilationist strain in the diaspora community. Aslam’s text is an awareness-raising account urging members of the Pakistani diaspora to collaborate with their previous home judiciously. Pratt (2025) maintains that members of subordinate social groups select and adapt materials from the dominant culture (p. 36). This principle applies equally to the selection and adaptation of their previous cultural practices. A fair selection and rejection of cultural practices from both sides are necessary for residents of the borderland to lead cooperative, meaningful lives.

The textual layers of *Maps for Lost Lovers* reveal that the novel is not merely a record of the diasporic experiences of a few characters, but a profound negotiation of 'habitual' identity within a resistant host culture. By weaving Urdu poetry, domestic minutiae, and culturally grounded expressions into the narrative fabric, Aslam demonstrates that transculturation is jagged, contested, and non-linear rather than a smooth, unproblematic transition. This analysis shows that the 'Desert of Loneliness' emerges structurally from both the preservation of an 'imaginary home' and systemic exclusion in the cultural contact zone. Consequently, the text functions as an ethnocritical intervention challenging the canonical fixity of the Western novel, setting the stage for a broader understanding of how silence, alienation, and trauma are articulated in the diaspora. This synthesis of linguistic hybridity, cultural memory, and psychological dislocation leads to a final consideration of the immigrant as a perpetual seeker of a tangible, meaningful home.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Aslam's autoethnographic *Maps for Lost Lovers*, written in a transcultural context and in a multilingual, sometimes multimedia format, does not follow the canonical fixity of form. Its vivid imagery enriches the picture of the diaspora life. The language of this novel is studded with Urdu nouns and Urdu and Punjabi poetry to reflect its uniqueness as an autoethnographic text. On being asked about the recurring use of Urdu poetry in his novel, Aslam responds that, "it links with Islamic mysticism, the quest for the beloved, the search for the soul, the need for the soul to connect with something other than what is tangible" (Aslam, 2012). Talking about the standardised use of a language, Pratt challenges the notion of language homogeneity among its users. In a diverse ethnic society, language is also diversified. As an ethnocritical discourse, the novel traverses the frontier or contact zone, developing its own unique epistemological grounds; it finds ways to bridge the gap between the West and the rest of the world by associating and dissociating its characters from their previous and current habitus (Pratt, 2025). Aslam's text does not portray the happy-go characters moving hand in hand with society. His portrayal of hopelessness stems from two factors: the distance from their home and the distance from the host. The Desert of Loneliness is the result of resisting cultural flux to stick to the tradition of the imaginary home. It deprives the characters of the opportunity to regain the comfort level of a home at the new abode; despite the long time they invest in the process. Dislocation and relocation are traumatic for them, with no real gains, neither economic nor social. Sheer loneliness is the result of the cold shoulder of mainstream society, which is also responsible for the prevailing silence and sadness among immigrants (Aslam, 2012).

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Multiculturalism and the marginalised position of cultural minorities are a global issue. Therefore, there is a pressing need to conduct further studies to establish the social emancipation of minority cultural groups to enjoy religious, political, and cultural freedom for a peaceful habitus. There are multiple elliptical spaces in the world where minorities are silenced, and their representation is restricted. Kashmiri, Palestinian, Dalit, Latino, and Chicano literature are some of the examples of this. Their literary discourses can be explored to investigate the dynamics of cultural contact zones.

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