Archival Anxiety and the Politics of Memory: A Decolonial Reading of Nadeem Aslam's *Season of the Rainbirds*

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Abstract

This paper explores archival anxiety and the politics of memory in Nadeem Aslam's debut novel, *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993), through a decolonial critical lens. Set against the socio-political turbulence of 1980s Pakistan under General Zia-ul-Haq's repressive regime, the novel centres on the accidental discovery of a mailbag lost in a train crash nineteen years earlier. These recovered letters function as a counter-archive—an unsanctioned repository of suppressed truths that threatens to destabilise the postcolonial ruling elite's control over memory. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's (2002) theorisation of the archive as a product of power, exclusion, and epistemic violence, the paper argues that Aslam dramatises how postcolonial societies inherit and reproduce colonial structures of knowledge control. The ruling elite's frantic efforts to intercept and suppress the letters expose their archival anxiety, while figures such as the postmaster and the marginalised character Zafri stage small but significant acts of resistance. The paper concludes that *Season of the Rainbirds* offers a literary counter-archive that critiques epistemic violence and reimagines the politics of memory from a decolonial perspective.

Keywords: archival anxiety, counter-archive, epistemic violence, decolonial theory, Achille Mbembe, Nadeem Aslam, memory politics

Introduction

Coloniality reshaped South Asian cultural, political, and epistemological structures, leaving enduring effects on historical memory and subject formation. After independence, many colonial institutions continued to operate through inherited colonial administrative and ideological structures. Ayesha Jalal in *The Struggle for Pakistan* (2014) argues that in Pakistan, feudal, military, and bureaucratic elites often aligned with religious clergy to consolidate their political power. Nadeem Aslam's *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993) is set against this background and dramatises the political oppression and historical distortion prevalent in Pakistani society. The current study employs Achille Mbembe's theorisation of the archive, which frames archives as sites of both epistemic contestation and political power. Archives regulate collective memory while also producing possibilities for suppressed voices, truths and histories to re-emerge.

Nadeem Aslam (1966-), a British Pakistani Anglophone writer born in Gujranwala, Pakistan, migrated to the United Kingdom with his family as a teenager, and this experience of displacement and exile permeates his fictional exploration of memory, identity, and power. *Season of the Rainbirds* is his debut novel, written after the fall of General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime (1977-1988), a period when Pakistan was struggling under the weight of violent legacies of colonialism, state repression, the rise of dogma, and the erasure of dissenting histories. The novel is set in a fictional town of Zamana during Zia's rule, portrayed as an era of darkness, suspicions, censorship, and state-engineered rewriting of public memory. Aslam's novel emerged from the juncture of historical trauma and literary response, producing an early Anglophone Pakistani critique of postcolonial elites who collaborated with the military and clergy to reproduce colonial structures of control over knowledge, memory and truth.

As Milan Kundera notes, “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (4). Likewise, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that power shapes history by determining which events are remembered and which are erased, and that power constructs and preserves historical narratives. He explores how omission and silencing shape our understanding of the past (25-26). It is evident in the postcolonial society where the apparatuses of colonial rule — military, legal, bureaucratic and epistemological — were not dismantled after formal political independence but rather inherited, repurposed and redeployed by new ruling elites. Among these, the archive holds a privileged place because it is not a neutral repository of truths but a product of authority bearing the imprints of power. Power decides which truth will be passed to future generations, which voice is legitimate, and which deserves to be preserved.

This paper explores how *Season of the Rainbirds* represents the historical erasure of marginalised narratives and subaltern voices within postcolonial Pakistani society, archival anxiety and ideological control during Zia's regime. The novel examines how postcolonial state institutions manipulate memory and suppress dissent through archival and bureaucratic practices. The study centres on the central event: the accidental discovery of a mailbag lost in a train crash nineteen years earlier. This bag, holding letters never delivered, becomes a narrative catalyst of extraordinary significance because its retrieval unleashed violence, intrigue, fear and hopes among the town’s inhabitants. The recovered letters, the study argues, function as a counter-archive: a collection of suppressed truths that threatens to destabilise official control over the memories of the people. It disrupts the stability, authority and exclusivity of official or dominant systems of memory control or of officially approved histories; instead, the letters reintroduce suppressed voices, personal testimonies, and hidden emotional economies into public circulation. The ruling elite’s frantic efforts to screen, intercept and contain these documents

reveal their epistemic anxiety, a condition that often leads to epistemic violence — the systematic devaluation and suppression of alternative truths and knowledge. At the same time, the novel stages a moment of resistance; a postmaster's defiance, and the imagined counter-archive of Zafri, a marginalised character, suggest that power over memory and representation is never fully monopolised by the authorities.

To read the text, the study draws a framework from Achille Mbembe's decolonial theorisation of the archive. In his work, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits" (2002), Mbembe challenges the Western conception of the archive as a transparent, neutral space of knowledge and facts. Instead, he illustrates that archiving is selection, exclusion, and preservation; what he calls the 'violence of ordering'. It hierarchises, classifies, and selects what is necessary, thereby supporting the power structure. The archive is not a window to the past but a tool to carve the future. Archives in the postcolonial world function under the colonial matrix of power, the persistent structure of domination that outlived formal colonialism (Walter Mignolo). These structures operate through the control of authority, knowledge, and subjectivity, and marginalisation of subaltern ways of knowing. Aslam's novel, the study argues, dramatises these dynamics precisely: the postcolonial Pakistani town, having inherited the colonial archives and its logics, deploys epistemic violence through its bureaucratic, police, legal and religious institutions to control and suppress dissenting truths.

Several critical studies have examined the role of postcolonial memory, literature, and state power. Marianna Michałowska, for example, interrogates the relationship between silence, memory, and visual documentation, demonstrating how archives become sites of both political power and historical remembrance. Her work critically studies how traumatic histories are represented, interpreted and preserved through photographic records (55–69). Similarly, Gopal

highlights the relationship between radical literary movements and postcolonial Indian literature during the transition to independence. His study explores how nationalism, gender and political resistance shaped literary and cultural production in colonial and postcolonial India, and demonstrates the influence of progressive writers and the theatre movement in challenging ideological and imperial structures (45). Complementing this line of discourse, Ayesha Jalal states that the ruling elite in Pakistan inherited a colonial state apparatus and employed ideology to consolidate their power. They formed a system within which dissenting voices are systematically destroyed, entombed, or exiled (Jalal 2014**).** The current study extends this discussion to Aslam's *Season of the Rainbirds* by demonstrating how the text fictionalises archival anxiety through the discovery of lost letters, which function as a counter-archive that disrupts official memory and reimagines memory as a contested decolonial space.

Existing critical studies on *Season of the Rainbirds* largely situate the text within frameworks of political history, identity formation, and postcolonial power dynamics. Javed and Haq (2021) examine the novel through the lens of New Historicism, arguing that the text reflects Pakistan's socio-political instability. Similarly, studies grounded in postcolonial theory emphasise the text's representation of ideological power and religious authority, producing 'Othering' and reinforcing binary thinking (Chauhan et al., 2022). Another strand of criticism extends this focus to broader concerns of migration, racism and identity, linking *Season of the Rainbirds* with Aslam's other works to examine displacement, cultural belongings and anxieties (Nisar et al., 2021). Together, these works establish Aslam's debut novel as a politically charged narrative that critiques colonialism, state-unchecked power, and social fragmentation.

This study proceeds in four parts. The first section grounds the analysis in Mbembe's work on the colonial archive, backed by insights from Mignolo's decolonial notions. Second, the

study presents a decolonial reading of *Season of the Rainbirds*, centering on the event of the recovered mailbag as a counter-archive, and tracing the depiction of archival anxiety among the ruling elite, the institutional operations of epistemic violence, and moments of subaltern resistance. Third, the study presents the findings and discusses their contribution to decolonial understanding of power, representation and memory. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of the study for postcolonial and decolonial criticism and the contemporary struggle over justice, memory and history in societies shaped by colonial legacies. The paper aims to show that fiction is not merely a reflection of political realities but a form of counter-archiving in its own right, a space for unheard voices and buried truths.

Archive, Memory and Coloniality in Anglophone Pakistani Writing

Anglophone writing in Pakistan frequently addresses the problem of identity, memory, and colonial history. Fiction writers such as Mohsin Hamid, Nadeem Aslam, and Kamila Shamsie have addressed the legacies of inherited colonial structures. Hamid's novels, such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *Exit West* (2017), explore identity formation, migration and unequal power relations. Similarly, Shamsie's *Kartography* (2002), *Burnt Shadows* (2009), and *Home Fire* (2017) interrogate questions of belonging, displacement, history and memory. Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), and *The Golden Legend* (2017) foreground religious conflict, violence, and memory, revealing how coloniality continues to shape contemporary Pakistani identities. According to Muneeza Shamsie (2011), literature can be considered a counter-narrative to the official history where it enters a space of difference and dissent, and Aslam's fiction presents a fine example in this regard. Kavita Daiya (2023) has discussed this silencing and archiving, particularly after partition, in the context of the postcolonial condition. Humaira Saeed (2013) explores British Muslim writers for their

negotiation of migration, identity, and belonging within British society. She emphasises that these writers challenge stereotypical representations of Muslims by presenting complex and diverse experiences in contemporary fiction (Saeed 123). Parry (2004) argues that postcolonial literature can be used to reinforce the colonial paradigm or subvert it, depending on its engagement with the language used. This study shows that Aslam performs a calibanistic act of appropriating the master's language to rewrite the paradigm, as in *Season of the Rainbirds,* the English language becomes a vehicle for exploring and exposing the internal colonial inheritance within Pakistani postcolonial society, where the elite class replicates colonial strategies to maintain their power structure.

A decolonial approach also advocates that fiction can function as a counter-archive, an alternative repository where buried truths, silenced voices, and unofficial histories surface. As several recent studies have shown, the concept of the counter-archive has been applied to postcolonial literature. For example, Maity examines Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* as a counter-archive that challenges abstract narratives by documenting the lives of those excluded from the official historical narratives. Similarly, scholarship on Nadeem Aslam's later work has identified his fiction as a form of counter-archiving. Jahangir Khan and Syed Hanif Rasool (2025) argue that *The Wasted Vigil* offers a counter-archive, which unsettles the imperial grammar of the Af-Pak frontier. In the context of African theatre, Hajarimayum Sadhana Devi (2022) portrays how Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) denies the authority that writes colonial records and builds a counter-archive grounded in African fraternity using rituals, movements and embodied performance.

Recent critical scholarship on Asian Anglophone fiction has increasingly examined the relationship among power, memory, and resistance in literary texts that engage with suppressed

histories and authoritarian regimes. In their study of Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police*, Foong Soon Seng and Gheeta Chandran argue that memory functions as a form of resistance against dominating power structures that seek to erase individual identities. They show how the preservation of memory becomes an act of agency that enables the subject to reclaim individuality, space and historical consciousness. Similarly, Nikhitah Mary Mathew and Smita Jha explore M. Mukundan's *Delhi: A Soliloquy* as a work of cultural counter memory that reconstructs the silenced history of the Indian Emergency. Their study shows the role of literature in producing counter-histories that challenge the absence of official records and recover marginalised experiences excluded from dominant historical narratives. Extending this discourse into a decolonial framework, S. Sethuparvathy and Smita Jha examine how regional Malayalam novels generate alternative histories and counter-narratives that resist colonial cartographies and hegemonic modes of representation. They argue that fiction can decolonise by restoring the histories and identities of communities erased from colonial discourse. Similarly, Altaf and Batool (2024) employ Text World Theory to examine Daniyal Moeenuddin's *Our Lady of Paris* (2009), demonstrating how narrative structure shapes the ambivalence of colonial subjects negotiating modernity and coloniality (37-57). Collectively, these studies show the capacity of literature to function as a space of preservation, discussion, memory, counter-history and resistance to the dominant structure of power. However, they pay little attention to the archive itself as a contested site of power and resistance.

The current critical literature on Aslam's works offers a multi-faceted analysis of power, trauma, and postcolonial identity. His novels, such as *The Golden Legend* and *Maps for Lost Lovers,* received literary recognition worldwide. *Season of the Rainbirds*, in comparison, did not receive much attention from the wider international scholarly community. However, it has

garnered considerable attention from indigenous and emerging critics from academia. For example, Azhar Shah and Muhammad Khattak (2024) argue that Aslam centres on the colonial legacies in Pakistan's political culture, in which religion and hierarchies are used as instruments of control. On the other hand, Idris et al. (2025) analyse ghost characters such as Judge Anwar in *Season of the Rainbirds*, exploring how Aslam makes absent characters convincing. Nisar et al. (2021) explore how identity anxieties and racism together shape hybrid identities in *Maps for Lost Lovers* and *Season of the Rainbirds*, arguing that these novels depict displacement and the complex interplay of marginalisation and belonging. Barirah Nazir et al. (2018) critically challenge the global reception and commodification of Aslam's text within the Western publication industry. The idea of 'Brand Aslam' frames his international acclaim. Parallel to this, studies like those by Arshad and Akram (2023) broaden the postcolonial scope by juxtaposing feminist concerns with postcolonial identity and exploring violence against women, notably in *The Golden Legend,* and situate *Season of the Rainbirds* as a text deeply entangled in discourses of power, narrative, and identity, drawing on the theoretical basis of Edward Said (1995), Bhabha (2004), and Fanon (1967). In their work on *The Blind Man's Garden,* Altaf et al. (2024) claim that imperialism lives on in neoliberal disguises and continues to define identity and historical consciousness. Their study emphasises how the text challenges archival silence by rewriting the oppressed into history, and in the process, revealing the epistemic violence of Western modernity. Continuing along this line, Altaf et al. (2024) identify strategies of cognitive decoloniality in *The Golden Legend* (2017), including border thinking and epistemic disobedience, which break down the colonial matrix of power and provide pluriversal alternatives (450-471). These studies highlight the ways in which Pakistani Anglophone texts challenge the epistemic hegemony by resisting archive erasure and re-centering silenced voices.

Collectively, these studies also demonstrate that fiction can recover and give voice to what the state archive systematically excludes because literature does not follow rules, bureaucratic procedures, or political constraints that govern institutional archives. A literary text can imagine what is absent, speculate about what is suppressed and give voice to the silenced. Fiction in this sense becomes a decolonial practice by creating space where multiple epistemologies, contested histories, and marginalised perspectives can co-exist and speak back to power. The current study examines the dynamics of memory and state control over the truth portrayed in the text. The suppressed pasts in the novel epitomise not only archival anxiety but also highlight the epistemic violence inherent in the postcolonial condition. While existing scholarship has approached the text from various perspectives, it has not fully engaged with the issue of memory and archives in postcolonial societies from a decolonial perspective. The current study employs a conceptual framework of archival anxiety and memory politics to offer a new perspective that situates Aslam's Anglophone fiction within the global debates around decolonial thinking.

The Decolonial Archive as Method

The study examines the symbolic, metaphorical, and ideological layers of fiction centred on epistemic violence and archival anxiety, and is grounded in decolonial concepts of Achille Mbembe (2002), one of the most influential contemporary thinkers in postcolonial and decolonial theory, especially known for his work on sovereignty, power, violence, memory and the archive. Mbembe's works examine how colonialism continues to shape modern systems of knowledge, power, governance, and life itself. To gain insights into the politics of knowledge production in postcolonial society, this study employs a qualitative literary methodology to uncover the metaphoric, thematic, and symbolic significance of the pivotal event in the novel. In

this context, the study uses textual analysis and close reading techniques to analyse the symbols, imagery, and metaphors in the texts. The argument is built on direct evidence from the primary text, and a core part of the analysis involves deciphering the key event of the discovery of letters and its symbolic and metaphoric interpretation.

The study is embedded within the field of decolonial thinking, and draws on the foundational work of Mbembe that theorised the archive as a product and instrument of power and authority. It also builds upon insights from Walter Mignolo (2018), whose works offer a perspective to examine how structures of colonial power persist in postcolonial societies, not merely as legacies but as active, ongoing influences that shape memory, knowledge and subjectivity. The study takes Aslam's work as an example of what decolonial scholars have called an alternative space where suppressed histories and silenced voices can re-enter public discourse.

At the core of this study is Mbembe's essay, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits" (2002), which disrupts Western modernity's notion of the archive as a neutral, objective repository of facts. He writes: "Over and above the ritual of making secrets, it seems clear that the archive is primarily the product of a judgement, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded" (20). It illustrates that an archive is not a transparent window but a designed edifice that reflects the interest, hierarchies, and ideologies of those who control it. The term "archive", as Mbembe notes, refers both to a public institution of the state and to the documents within it, and its power derives precisely from this entanglement of bureaucratic procedure, physical space, and symbolic authority. He argues that archiving is never a natural act:

> The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged 'unarchivable'. The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status. (20)

Archiving is thus a process of discrimination, selection and judgment. It involves converting some documents into items worthy of preservation while excluding others from the historical record. As Mbembe suggests, archives are the product of a process that converts a certain number of documents into items judged to be worthy of preservation and kept in a public place, where they can be consulted according to well-established procedures and regulations. Mbembe describes archiving as laying something in the coffin. In this sense, the archive appears as a term for forgetting and remembering.

Mbembe connects the power of the archive to epistemic violence: the systematic marginalisation, destruction, or devaluation of alternative ways of knowing. The archive does not merely store knowledge; it actively produces it and, in doing so, it enforces a particular epistemological order. What is excluded is not simply absent; it is considered illegitimate within the dominant regime of truth. As Mbembe shows, the colonial archive was not just an administrative tool but an instrument for constructing racialised identities and heresies that justified colonial domination. Postcolonial societies, as this study explores, inherit this logic, employing the archive as a weapon to silence dissent and maintain their total control.

Colonialism gives rise to a global pattern of power; a coloniality that persists into the present, structuring social relations, economic systems and knowledge production along racial and hierarchical lines. Mignolo theorises it as a colonial matrix of power. This matrix continues

to operate in postcolonial societies through local elites who have internalised and reproduced colonial categories. With this system, the control of knowledge is a primary mechanism of domination. Aslam's texts critique the inheritance and reproduction of that logic of domination in postcolonial societies as they deploy epistemic violence through bureaucratic, legal, and religious institutions to suppress alternative truths and maintain their dominance. But Mbembe insists that the archive is a site of contestation because power never has absolute control over memory. The archive is also vulnerable to disruption: suppressed memories and histories have a way of returning. This return of the repressed, the sudden resurfacing of that which was deemed unworthy of archiving, constitutes an archival rupture, a moment of crisis in which the authority of hegemonic discourse is exposed as contingent, partial, and fragile. The recovered mailbag in *Season of the Rainbirds* represents such an archival rupture; a sudden eruption of buried truths that destabilises the epistemological order of the town and throws its ruling power into a state of archival anxiety. This study critically engages with Aslam's text to reveal the conceptualisation of archives, archival anxiety, and the novel as a space for counter discourse.

A Decolonial Reading of *Season of the Rainbirds*

Season of the Rainbirds unfolds in a fictional town, a microcosm of postcolonial Pakistani society during the regime of General Zia–ul-Haq (1977-1988). The accidental resurgence of a mailbag lost in a train crash nineteen years earlier serves as the central event in the narrative, and also functions as a metaphor of archival rupture. The event becomes a symbolic counter-archive, a repository of suppressed realities and truths that threatens to disrupt the authorities' control over memory and history. A counter-archive refers to alternative forms of knowledge, testimony, and memory, which challenge dominant narratives and recover suppressed voices. In *Season of the Rainbirds,* the recovered mailbag is read as a counter-archive, reintroducing forgotten

relations and buried truths into the public sphere. Based on Mbembe's theorisation, in which the archive serves as a space of epistemic violence and power, the analysis shows how Aslam dramatises the partiality and fragility of archival authority, the production of archival anxiety among the ruling elite, and the emancipatory potential of subaltern truths when buried histories resurface.

The seemingly mundane announcement of the recovered mailbag becomes a source of profound social disturbance: "They've just found three sacks of letters that went missing after a train crash nineteen years ago" (Aslam 19). This event initiates a chain reaction of fear, anxiety, hope and violence. The letters have been buried for almost two decades, and this sudden retrieval is not the result of institutional practice; no state archive, no bureaucratic procedure, no authorised historian sought them out. Instead, they emerged through chance, a rupturing event that bypasses the gatekeepers of history, memory and representation. Mbembe calls the archive "the product of power and authority" (20), and this authority is challenged by the sudden discovery of that lost mailbag. The mailbag becomes a metaphor of a counter-archive; uncontrolled, unsanctioned, and potentially subversive.

The contents of the letters are not disclosed to the reader, which confers them a symbolic power. Letters usually contain personal contents, official documents, love letters, business transactions, and perhaps evidence of crimes committed by the powerful. The postmaster begins to realise that these letters are not just dead words on paper; they are pieces of people's lives, fragments of a past that were stolen from them. The announcement of martial law in the country is viewed as against the public will and in favour of the elite. The postmaster said: "This martial law has been an answer to Mujeeb Ali's prayers. The expropriated lands and the mills were returned. His brother has become a minister, and they even have a deputy commissioner of their

choice" (Aslam 85). This passage reveals how power operates through networks of patronage, restoring privileges and consolidating the authority of local elites. In this context, the recovered letters acquire a subversive potential because they may contain traces of the very transactions, relations, and abuses that sustain this political order. This sudden reappearance threatens to expose what the elite class seeks to conceal.

The event of the train crash is also significant and metaphorical in nature. The crash that buried the mailbag occurred in 1971, the year of Pakistan's civil war and the event of the second partition, the creation of Bangladesh, a trauma that state narratives have systemically suppressed, minimised, or distorted. Through this choice of setting, Aslam implicitly links the suppression of personal correspondence to the suppression of national trauma. The mailbag becomes a metaphor for a fragmented collective past. That recovery therefore threatens the official narratives of a selective archive, a fabrication designed to preserve elite interests and myths. Having remained buried for nearly two decades, the letters symbolise the relationships, histories and experiences that have escaped incorporation into official records. Their unexpected recovery threatens the elite class's control over memory through which they preserve their interests while suppressing inconvenient truths. Mbembe argues:

> The very existence of the archive constitutes a constant threat to the state. The reason is simple. More than on its ability to recall, the power of the state rests on its ability to consume time, that is, to abolish the archive and anaesthetise the past. The act that creates the state is an act of 'chronophagy'. It is a radical act because consuming the past makes it possible to be free from all debt (23).

The letters' return to circulation disrupts the state's capacity to control historical memory and regulate what can be known about the past. This dynamic resonates with Mbembe's conception of the archive as a site of political struggle. Mbembe argues that the very existence of the archive constitutes a constant threat to the state because state power depends not only on coercion but also on its ability to consume memory and history. In *Season of the Rainbirds*, the lost mailbag disrupts this chronophagic logic. The mailbag reanimates the past that had been effectively erased from collective consciousness.

Archival Anxiety: The Fear of Returning Truths

This sudden reappearance of the lost letters produces archival anxiety among the ruling elite. They feel anxiety, fear that this suppressed, forgotten and lost knowledge will undermine their control and power. It is most evident in the character of Mujeeb Ali, a wealthy landowner and politician whose family has inherited land, power, and wealth and controlled the region for generations. The novel states that Mujeeb Ali's family received lands from the British Raj for their loyalty and services to the crown, and now they own mills, and his brother has become a minister. The text states: "Before independence, Sher Bahadur Ali was made an honorary magistrate by the British. Sometime in the previous century, the British had also awarded large tracts of Crown land to the Alis; Mujeeb Ali's great-grandfather was awarded the title 'Khan-bahadar'" (Aslam 67).

As the above passage indicates, the socio-political power of the Ali family is rooted in privileges conferred by the colonial administration. They are direct beneficiaries and inheritors of the colonial power structure. His ancestors' collaboration with British imperialism transitioned into the postcolonial elite, replicating the colonial matrix of power and controlling the land

economy and political structure. Mujeeb Ali feels alarmed and restless when he hears the news of the recovered mailbag. He immediately summons the local cleric, Maulana Hafeez, and speaks with panic: "Those letters, Maulana ji…They cannot be allowed to go unexamined now" (Aslam 68). The expression "go unexamined" shows his anxiety and fear that he does not want the letters received by the public; he wants them examined and filtered before any potentially damaging information reaches the common masses of the town. He sends Maulana Hafeez to talk to the postmaster and screen the mail, to prevent "another tragedy" (Aslam 85). Maulana Hafeez's argument and advocacy reveal the complicity of the religious clergy in the suppression of truth and oppression of the common people.

Aslam portrays the ruling elite's anxiety through a series of exchanges. One character says: "I have heard a journalist is coming from the capital in a day or two to write up the story of those letters" (Aslam 37). The prospect of scrutiny and the spread of the suppressed truths terrify Mujeeb Ali and his allies. Another scene shows the panic in dismissive language: "What a mess, and all because of some silly letters" (Aslam 137). The word "silly" shows the elite's contempt for the subaltern archive. The powerful declare that what threatens them is in fact beneath notice, but in reality, they panic and feel archival anxiety.

Mbembe argues that the archive is always haunted by the possibility of its own incompleteness, by the traces of what has been excluded ("Power of the Archive" 25). The sudden appearance of the letters literalises this haunting. It is the return of the repressed, not in the Freudian sense of an individual psychological wound but in the decolonial sense of suppressed collective truths reemerging to disrupt the hegemony of official narrative. The anxiety and fear experienced by Maulana Hafeez and Mujeeb Ali are about the exposure of truth

because their power lies on the foundation of myths, and those letters may bring that foundation down.

Epistemic Violence: The Institutional Suppression of Truth

Season of the Rainbirds meticulously shows how the postcolonial state and its inherited institutions, such as the police, judiciary, religious authorities, and bureaucracy, deploy epistemic violence to control history, memory, and the representation of reality. The postcolonial state inherits a colonial apparatus that functions not to serve the poor but to maintain the colonial matrix of power. Aslam portrays General Zia-ul-Haq's regime in a similar way, and it shows that the textures of oppression and repression permeate every aspect of life in the town. The police are depicted not as protectors of the poor masses, but as enforcers of elite interests. When the postmaster resisted and denied the authority to screen the letters, Mujeeb Ali dispatched his private goons to intimidate him. The text notes that "Mujeeb Ali and both his brothers had inherited the powerful shoulders and arms of their father" (Aslam 36); their physical description encodes their capacity for destruction, control and violence. They patrol the streets and monitor the post office, but the state police are far from interfering and show complicity. This mirrors the colonial practice of using local proxies to maintain power and control.

The judicial system is also compromised as a judge is murdered and an investigation is conducted not to find the truth but to hide it. The legal system is complicit and becomes an instrument of epistemic violence. As Mbembe suggests, to keep an archive is to legitimise certain voices while consigning others to silence. The judicial archive in the novel functions precisely in this selective manner. The powerful elite are never held accountable, and the marginalised are never heard.

The novel also exposes the complicity of the religious authorities in perpetuating archival violence. Maulana Hafeez, the cleric, is presented as a man fixated on narrow punitive morality while remaining oblivious to the corruption of Judges, the extortion of landlords, and the political tyranny of the military regime. When he is asked to screen the letters, he obeys as his moral duty: “It will benefit the whole town if those letters were examined before being sent out. We must do whatever we can to prevent another tragedy" (Aslam 85). The clergy becomes a tool of epistemic violence, employing religious language to legitimise the suppression of truth, co-opted to sustain hierarchies of knowledge and control.

The most significant moment occurs when the postmaster confronts Maulana Hafeez: “It’s not the whole town, Maulana-ji. It’s just the rich people who seem worried. If Mujeeb Ali has sent you here, then does that mean he’s confessing at least to the crimes he committed nineteen years ago?’ (Aslam 85). The postmaster refuses to accept the cleric’s framing of the mailbag as a potential source of tragedy; instead, he reframes it as potential evidence of existing crimes, crimes committed by the powerful elite and never punished. His questions disrupt the hegemonic discourse and the clergy’s complicity in maintaining that in postcolonial society. The scene fictionalises Mbembe’s notion that the archive is a site of contestation, rather than a passive repository.

The Postmaster and Subaltern Resistance

Aslam’s novel also stages a moment of resistance that reveals the emancipatory potential of counter-archives. The most obvious resistance is shown through the Postmaster’s actions and questions. Though he is an employee of the state, his loyalty is to the townspeople and the truth. He refuses to surrender to the pressure of Mujeeb Ali’s men. The novel demonstrates his

defiance: the postmaster sat behind his desk, the three sacks of letters piled beside him like a fortress wall. The counter archive is conceptualised through the metaphor of the fortress, a defensive structure against the assault of power. The postmaster's resistance is not heroic in the traditional way; he does not deliver a great speech or lead people to revolution. Instead, he performs the small but persistent act of refusing to surrender to the wishes of the powerful elite. He prepares the letters for delivery, and each letter he handles is an affirmation that the people have a right to their past, the truth, and history. This is what Mbembe described as the archives' emancipatory possibilities ("Power of the Archive" 26). While power seeks to regulate memory, the archive possesses the capacity to reactivate suppressed histories and generate alternative forms of knowledge. For Mbembe, the archive is not merely a repository of documents but a space in which forgotten truths reenter the public collective consciousness. By refusing power, the postmaster enacts this possibility, thereby disrupting the control and power of those who benefit from silence and forgetting.

Another striking instance of resistance comes from Zafri, a marginalised character who speaks with bitter humour. When he hears about the letters, he says, "Right under the noses of Mujeeb Ali's men who were patrolling the streets" (Aslam 100). He further says, "I myself would have gone one step further, I would have written some letters myself, not to each person in town, listing the crimes the rich have committed against us since the beginning of time" (100). Zafri wants to create new letters to produce a counter-archive. The expression "since the beginning of time" evokes a deep history of colonial and postcolonial exploitation, stretching back to the British Raj and even beyond. Zafri imagines mail as a form of subaltern history, a people's archive, and through his gesture of "beating out the rhythm of the ballad" (100) links the lost letters to the oral tradition, the folk culture that is marginalised and yet has always

carried the history, feelings and memories of the oppressed in South Asia. Zafri speaks with "relish", with an eventful pleasure in the prospect of exposure. The counter-archive carries the weight of resentment, anger, and the wish for reckoning. Aslam's text does not portray the discovered letters as unproblematic pure truth; rather, they are partial, fragmented, and their return suggests not only justice but also chaos. The title of the novel, *Season of the Rainbirds,* suggests a cyclical natural phenomenon: the arrival of migratory birds that bring rain, and rain can either nourish or destroy; the return of the archive is similarly ambivalent.

The Failure of Archival Containment

Despite the powerful elite's efforts to control the letters, the text suggests that complete archival containment is not possible. News travels, the journalist from the capital is coming, the town grows anxious, the clergy fail to screen the letters, and Mujeeb Ali fails to prevent the truth from leaking. The irony of the situation is that the letters have been buried for nineteen years, and yet time has not erased their significance; it has amplified it. This is the paradox of the archive: oppression and suppression do not destroy truth but bury it where it grows and eventually erupts with greater force. The elite's anxiety is reflected in the text, which shows that they understand intuitively what Mbembe argues, that the archive is not a question of the past. It is a question of the future (23). The letters have the potential to create new configurations of knowledge, new stories among the marginalised, and new possibilities for resistance and existence.

Aslam does not offer a clear-cut resolution as the readers do not know what the letters contain; some are delivered, and some are not. The journalist arrives, but the full story remains elusive. This indeterminacy is not a flaw but a deliberate strategy. Aslam portrays the counter-archive as partially contested and always in process. What matters is the rupture itself;

the moment when the buried emerges, when the silenced voices, when the powerful tremble. That rupture, the text suggests, is enough to change the texture of social reality.

Discussion and Findings

The novel is set in a fictional Pakistani town during the repressive regime of General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, an era of darkness in which the postcolonial state intensifies its control over knowledge, memory and public consciousness. The event at the heart of the story, the accidental discovery of the lost mailbag from a train crash nineteen years earlier, becomes a catalyst for exploring how power operates through suppression and selective truths**.** The decolonial reading of *Season of the Railbirds* shows the narrative's engagement with archival power, epistemic violence and the politics of memory in postcolonial society. The study finds that the lost letters buried for nineteen years after a train crash function as a counter-archive in Mbembe's sense. Unlike official archives, the mailbag contains unmediated fragments of ordinary lives: love letters, personal correspondence, business records and potentially incriminating evidence. Its return produces rupture in the town's epistemological order, exposing the official narratives as partially contingent and built on exclusion.

The study identifies what can be termed archival anxiety among the powerful class. Mujeeb Ali and his allies, along with the clergy, showed panic, dismissiveness and violent intervention because their authority and power rest on control over what is remembered, forgotten and known. Resurfaced letters threaten to reveal their hypocrisy, crimes and illegitimacy. The novel also suggests that archival anxiety is a defining feature of a postcolonial society, and suppressed truths can always return. Moreover, the textual analysis reveals that epistemic violence operates as a coordinated institutional structure. The police are shown

enforcing the elite's interest rather than justice; the judiciary produces legal archives that exclude subalterns. Most significantly, the text exposes the clergy's complicity with power.

The novel stages resistance despite the overwhelming power of the ruling elite and the clergy's complicity. The postmaster's quiet determination exemplifies what Mbembe argues as the emancipatory potential of archives. Archives have "the capacity to function as an instituting imaginary" (Mbembe 22). Zafri boldly declared that he would "write some letters myself, one to each person in town, listing the crimes the rich have committed against us since the beginning of time" (Aslam 100). This imagined counter-archiving transcends the recovery of existing mailbags to epistemic violence, the courage to disseminate suppressed and confined knowledge. Aslam's fiction itself is a symbol of that resistance, offering a fictional counter-archive that critiques the colonial matrix of power.

In *Season of the Rainbirds*, the lost mailbag functions as a diegetic counter-archive, a set of buried letters that resurface and threaten the established order. But the novel itself is also a counter-archive; a narrative that stages the aim of archival anxiety and epistemic violence while simultaneously enacting, through its very form, the recovery of suppressed truths. The resurfaced letters are not merely a plot device: they are a metaphor for the novel's own operation as a space where buried truths are unearthed and where the politics of memory is subjected to rigorous critique.

Conclusion

The study has explored archival anxiety and the politics of memory in Aslam's *Season of the Rainbirds* through Mbembe's decolonial lens. The study reads the central event of the sudden discovery of the nineteen-year-old lost mailbag as counter-archive. The reading demonstrated

how Aslam's fictional text dramatises the suppression, oppression, recovery and contestation of truth in a postcolonial society haunted by the legacies of colonialism. The novel is set against the turbulent socio-political climate in Pakistan during General Zia-ul-Haq's repressive regime, a period in which the state intensified its control over knowledge, collective memory, and public narrative. Aslam's fictional town becomes a microcosm of the postcolonial condition, where the ruling elite, having inherited colonial methods and colonial logic, deploy epistemic violence to maintain their dominance. The missing mailbag lost in a train crash in 1971, the year of the traumatic Pakistani civil war and the second partition, serves as a metaphor for all that official history has buried. Its accidental recovery becomes a rupture, a moment of archival fever that throws the town into chaos and crisis. The novel demonstrates a powerful elite in postcolonial conditions that legitimates certain voices while consigning others to silence, and their efforts to prevent truth from entering public consciousness. The novel is also the story of resistance, reflected in the postmaster's quiet defiance, Zafri's bitter humour and imagined corner-archive, and the town's hunger for the truth: these elements collectively stage what Mbembe calls the "emancipatory possibilities" of the archive. The content of the letters frames unknowing, while their symbolic power transforms the social landscape. The margin is no longer silent, the powerful elite are no longer safe and secure, and memory has escaped the cage of official control.

The study contributes to the growing decolonial criticism by showing how South Asian Anglophone fiction can function as a counter-archive in its own right. The study speaks to the ongoing global debates about truth, memory and fiction, from the destruction of colonial archives in Africa to the contested histories of partition in South Asia, from the politics of memorisation in settler colonial states to the suppression of indigenous knowledge worldwide.

The questions Aslam's text raises are contemporary and urgent: who speaks, who is silenced, who remembers, who forgets? The title shows that migratory birds, whose arrival signals the monsoon, appear as a metaphor for the recovered letters. Like the rain birds, the letters come from elsewhere bearing the promise of renewal but also the threat of storm and chaos.

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