



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Tales of Madness and War: A Brief Literary History of Afghanistan

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Abstract

Quite often viewed as a war torn world, Afghanistan, with over sixty million speakers of Pashto and Dari, the official languages of the nation, has to it a rich legacy of literary tradition, both oral and written. In considering the literature of the country, it is visible that a major portion of writing on Afghanistan originates in the West, which mainly comprises of diasporic writers. Though writing of all genres have been produced in the native languages, fiction, short story and poetry remain the three principal genres of composition in English Afghan literature (a wide range of literature which includes writings from Afghanistan, about Afghanistan and works translated into English). As a Muslim nation, the country has witnessed numerous social, political and cultural changes leading to different literary productions over the centuries, which have been traced here.

Keywords

Afghanistan; Courage; Freedom; Transformation; Trauma; War.

Inspired by the exploits of James Brooke and Josiah Harlan, Rudyard Kipling's brings Afghanistan into the forefront as early as 1888 with his *The Man Who Would Be King*. One of the earliest English writing on Afghanistan, the story centres around two adventurers, Daniel Dravot and Peachey Carnehan who set off to make themselves Kings of Kafiristan in the mountains of Afghanistan. A tale of quest, adventure and nation building, the novel seems to foreground colonialism and power. With much emphasis on travel and exploration, the novel does not delve deep into the cultural and social environment of the then Afghanistan rather concentrates more on class hierarchy and imperialism.

Over the next century, i.e. the twentieth century, there emerged a great collection of autobiographies, memoirs and travel writings which focused on Afghanistan and its political turbulences. Subsequently, a sudden proliferation on Afghan writing in English occurred in the twenty first century with the occupation of the Taliban regime. Pangs of war and turmoil demanded that the voices of the victims be heard, thus resulting in the growth of certain writers like Deborah Ellis, Yasmina Khadra, Siba Shakib, Atiq Rahimi, Khaled Hosseini and Nadeem Aslam. Each of these authors have captured the effects of the disastrous war, digressing into the lives of the Afghan people, their political, social and cultural transformations.

Deborah Ellis, having travelled to the refugee camps of Afghanistan in 1997 wrote the three part series which includes *The Breadwinner*, a captivating novel about a girl named Parvana; *Parvana's Journey*, its sequel and *Mudcity*, the last one of the trilogy. Inspired by the story of a mother in the refugee camp, the trilogy explores how children survived in a war affected country.

First published in April 2001, *The Breadwinner*, set in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime before the happenings of 9/11 tells the story of an eleven year old girl, Parvana who disguises herself as her dead brother in order to become the “breadwinner” of the family. Being denied the right to attend school, Parvana, resorts to selling cigarettes in the market along with her friend, Shauzia. *Parvana's Journey* (2003), the second in the trilogy continues with Parvana's search for her missing family who have been scattered. Still masquerading as a boy, thirteen now, Parvana is accompanied by other orphaned children who set out in search for food and shelter. As refugees of war, these children survive on their courage, taking up the challenges of life on their own, destined to meet happy endings. Ellis brings to light the plight of children under the Taliban regime, especially young women, who were not restricted to their homes, clad in their burqas. In *Mudcity* (2004), the third of the trilogy, the attention shifts to Shauzia, Parvana's best friend. Also cross dressed as a “tea boy”, Shauzia's dream is to flee Afghanistan and to reach France. A folded map of France, being her favourite possession, gives Shauzia the freedom to dream and chose her way to the dreamland. Escaping her life in Afghanistan, she ends up in a refugee camp in Pakistan, where she is destined on her new journey along with her dog Jasper. Although her dream seems to be a never ending challenge, the novel depicts Shauzia as a remarkable survivor. Employing a wide imaginative technique and memorable characters, Deborah Ellis, explicates the human cost of war in a country like Afghanistan.

Along the same time, in a different continent, Yasmina Khadra (the pen name of Mohammed Moulessehou), a former Algerian army officer, narrates the parallel lives of two couples under the rule of Taliban. As his fourth work in English, *The Swallows of Kabul*, provides an insight into the complexities of the Muslim world. The world of Mohsen, a member of a wealthy family of shopkeepers whose possessions have been destroyed by the Talibans; and his wife, Zunaira who is not allowed to step out of her home any longer without

covering her face intersects with that of Atiq, a prison keeper who struggles to keep his loyalty to the ideology of Taliban and his wife, Mussarat, dying of illness and despair. Set in Kabul, the story depicts a land which is decaying, under immense misery and decadence. Khadra lays importance to self-sacrifice and love for humanity in a land which is otherwise torn apart by war and death.

Deeply shaken by the plight of helpless, discriminated women in Afghanistan, Siba Shakib, an Iranian/German film-maker writes *Samira and Samir*, an account of the identity crisis of women who are forced to go behind the veil, masking themselves from the outside reality. In ways similar to Deborah Ellis, Shakib draws attention the struggles of being a women under Taliban. As a story of courage and freedom, the novel introduces to the readers a remarkable woman, Samira who finds her own path in life. When Samira is born, her father, the commander fighting in the mountains of Afghanistan decides to raise her as a boy, Samir. Experiencing the ravages of war, Samir is eventually forced to forget “his” true identity. Learning to fight, ride and shoot, she becomes the head of the family when her father dies. However, her love for a childhood friend compels her to confess her desire to be a Bashir's wife; consequently revealing her true identity and giving up her erstwhile freedom. Despising the veil and finding it hard to live in a repressed society, Samira finds her own way and takes charge of her life. Shakib, through this heart rendering fiction brings out the voices behind the veil.

Continuing with the tales of human perseverance in a time of madness and war, diasporic writers of Afghanistan have also been narrating tales of distress and survival. Atiq Rahimi is one such author who fled to France during the Soviet invasion. His first writing project, *Earth and Ashes* 2007, is a novella about an Afghan man, a grandfather named Dastaguir who urgently seeks to find his son, Murad after his village has been bombed. The entire family except for Murad's son, Yassin has been killed and the blast leaves Yassin deaf.

Set during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980s, the story paints a picture of devastation, loss and hope. Though Dastaguir never finds his son, Murad, the allegory here represents the hope offered to Afghanistan, for its rebuilding and reunification. The very next year, Rahimi's *The Patience Stone*, brings a daring woman to the centre stage as opposed to *Earth and Ashes* where women were off stage. The novel is a devastating exploration into the inner torment of a woman's life. The unnamed heroine of the tale, the wife of an injured soldier, cares for her husband, while unburdening herself about her feelings for her husband. He becomes her Syngue Sabour, the mythical stone that absorbs the pain of those who confide in it. She thus confesses, without restraint about sex and love, thus unveiling her darkest and deepest secrets. The story reveals the anxieties and desperations of women in a male-dominated society.

Perhaps the most well-known of the Afghan diasporic writers, Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan born American novelist etches out the struggles and experiences in Soviet-era Afghanistan through his fiction. Set in Afghanistan, his first novel, *The Kite Runner* traces the fall of the monarchy until the collapse of the Taliban regime. Ethnic tensions being one among the many issues addressed in the novel, Hosseini draws a vehement notion of the ongoing battles among the different communities. Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, in ways similar to that of his debut novel, illustrates the journey of subaltern characters that are subdued, denied speech and struggle with the little agency they seem to exhibit. The unique cultural and social milieu in Afghanistan over a span of thirty years becomes the background for Hosseini's novels wherein the characters belonging to the ethnic minorities remain subjugated. The novels give an account of the world of war and chaos which they have no control over. Not only are they over ridden by this complex scenario of turmoil and destruction, the different communal groups face subversion arising from mutual jealousy. Hassan and his father

Ali, in *The Kite Runner* belong to the Shia Hazara community while Amir and his father belong to the Sunni Pashtun community. Occupying only nine percent of the total population of Afghanistan, the Hazaras form an ethnic minority while the Pashtuns are the ruling majority. With respect to the difference in their culture, economy and religion, the two groups undergo a social division which renders a psychological drift among the characters. The complexities, anxieties and contradictions Amir and Hassan confront result from their sense of belonging; to the concerned communities, the communities which contribute to their made identity. On the other hand, Hosseini also illustrates an Afghanistan beyond the terrorist camps to show a country where children fly kites. Portraying the lives of Mariam and Laila, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* underscores the life of two women who are foiled and frustrated by the pangs of war and patriarchy. There is always the power dynamic which plays its role in such instances. Doubly victimised, the women's voices are allowed to occupy the narrative mode with a representation of the subaltern's plight. Age, class and culture fail to disintegrate the two women rather giving them the opportunity to fight back against the atrocities, and thus taking revenge on Rasheed. Mariam's bold move in killing Rasheed occupies the same space as Amir did in rescuing Sohrab. Exploring issues of gender equality, gender stereotypes and domestic abuse, Hosseini captures the spirit of the Tajik minority in this novel. Brought together by the tragic sweep of war, most often the communities disregard their differences conveying a sense of harmony. Quite different from these two masterpieces, *And the Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini's most recent fiction, he moves beyond the Taliban to digress a web of family connections across Kabul, San Francisco and Paris. Though the story revolves around the close-knit relationship between Abdullah and his sister, Pari who are cruelly torn apart; Hosseini brings in to picture a number of characters across the globe. The tragedy of war-torn Afghanistan only appears in the background of the story. Nila Wahtadi, the stepmother of Pari

represents women who have outlived the times of war in Afghanistan to make their own choices in life. With a multi layered narrative, that run through generations, the novel explores the relationship of Afghanistan to the outer world and its consequent trauma on people around the world and to those who come to rediscover their place of belonging.

Inspired by stories of Afghanistan, the Pakistani writer Nadeem Aslam has recently produced two fictions which follow several characters in contemporary Afghanistan. Through the lives of five people, Marcus, David, Lara, Casa and James who come together by chance in post 9/11 Afghanistan *The Wasted Vigil*, uncovers the complex ties of love, pain and salvation. Aslam weaves in key moments in Afghan history which bring together the lives of these characters, their anxieties and troubles; whose linked past are revealed in patches. Like the other Afghan novels of the time, *The Wasted Vigil* also concerns the silencing of women under the Taliban. Aslam's second and the most recent fiction, *The Blind Man's Garden* though largely set in Pakistan also recalls the life of two brothers Jeo and Mikal who sneak across the border from Pakistan into Afghanistan to assist wounded civilians.

The twenty first century has therefore witnessed a large arena of Afghan English fiction. Even after a decade of conflict in Afghanistan, there has been a surge of stories of Afghan lives mainly in the fictional form, which were the products of the imaginative minds of not only the native writers but also others from within and away from the subcontinent.

Afghanistan has a wide range of authors who have contributed to the writing of short stories in Pashto, Dari and Persian. Unlike novels, the number of authors writing English short stories set in Afghanistan is very few; most often being translated into English. War and terror again continue to be the recurring themes in these short stories. Asef Soltandezah, an Afghan writer who takes refuge in Iran publishes five short story collections between 2001 and 2008. Like a poet, Soltandezah provides an imaginative perspective on the

political, social and cultural realities during a time when writers were imprisoned. *We Disappear in Flight*, *New year's Day is Delightful Only in Kabul*, *The Deserter* and *You Who are Here, this Is Not your Land* are his short story collections which are set in Afghanistan. *We Disappear in Flight* remains to be the only completely translated work in English. An Afghan immigrant living in Tehran, the protagonist in the story, lives in Tehran with his brother and learns that his mother has been killed in bomb blast in Afghanistan. Devastated, he does not wish to return to his homeland and instead chooses to stay back in Iran where he lives in fright. Soltandezah unfolds the stories of Afghan refugees who live in dismay and constant fear.

Another collection of short stories which have been translated into English from Dari is by Akram Osman, one of the contemporary authors who “combined indigenous and Western traditions in an artistic manner.” *Real Men Keep Their Word* is one of his collections translated by Arley Loewen. Helping readers understand the traditional Kabul culture, the stories cover a range of themes including love, honour and financial difficulties faced by people in the society. Class based hypocrisy of the rulers and oppression of the ordinary people become a matter of concern for Osman in his short stories. Broadly divided into political shorts stories, satirical short stories, stories of manner and diaspora stories, they bring to life the popular folk culture of urban Kabul during the mid-twentieth century. “The Secret Unleashed”, “The Moderate Politician”, “A Free Coffin”, “The Blind Eagle” and “A Crack in the Wall” are some of the stories in the collection *Fifty Million: Short Stories* by the celebrated Afghan writer, Abdul Wakil 'Sulamal' Shinwari who addresses the issues of shifting identities in Afghan 'returnees' is another collection in this genre which focuses on the culture and the afflictions of the people of his homeland. He reveals through these short stories how the men and women in Afghanistan suffer under warlords and militants, depriving them of their basic human rights. Apart from depicting the cultural practises of the country, these short

stories also give an account of the psyche of the Afghans, who battle with their own morality. Afghan being in focus for the past decades, these short stories help others comprehend the nation's plight. Some of the notable stories included in the collection are "A Noble Deed", "Bells and Assumptions", "The Sedan", "Daughter" and "Statues and Records".

As one of the strongest forces of culture, poetry in Afghanistan has always been a way of life; serving as an entrance to the understanding of the ongoing conflict in and around the country. Having an ancient tradition of epic poetry, their poems were those of memory, death, trauma, struggle and identity. Most of the poems echo the anxieties and realities of a post war society. Poetry has thus become the most widely practised art form in Afghanistan, taking its place alongside the Classical Persian verse, reinforcing the importance of the oral tradition in a country like Afghanistan. Most often, the poems being written in Pashto, very few are available today in English, either translated by the poets themselves or others. Raziq Fani, Wali Shaaker, Wasef Bakhtari, Parween Pazhwak, Nadia Anjuman and Zohra Saed are among the most notable poets writing on/about Afghanistan.

The Messenger of Rain: A Selection of Poetry is one of the earliest collection, composed by Raziq Fani in the year 1986. Quite often described as mystical, compassionate and patriotic his poems reflect his love for his country along with the sufferings of his people under war and exile. Another prominent poet of the period is Wasef Bakhtari, an Afghan-American who has his own unique style of Persian poetry. He was one of the first poets to introduce what is known as "Nimaic poetry". *A Prologue to the End of Times* is one of his collection of poems from which a substantially low number of poems have been translated into English. "Calamity" is a notable piece in the collection. Wali Shaaker, also an Afghan-American is known for "The Evening of Separation", a collection published in the year 1997 which harrows the troubles and anguish of migrants like himself who was forced to migrate from Afghanistan to

Pakistan and then to America. *Galaxy of Fantasy* is his second collection of Dari poems of which very few have been translated into English. With an ardour to keep the literature of their nation alive, poets like Shaaker has given value to preserving art in their own language.

Creating an identity of their own, most often the poetry of Afghan women stand apart. Their work aims at healing the war-stricken world, revealing resentment of dogma and staunch religious practises which curtail their freedom. The poetry of Afghan women, put forward a profound account of the lives in an attempt to negotiate their multiple identities and counter the power of generations of oppression. Their poetry was always accompanied by genuine hope and devotion to the reconstruction of a more free and just Afghanistan. Notable Afghan women poets who have made their voices heard are Bahar Saeed, Parween Pazhwak, Khaledah Forugh, Nadia Anjuman and Zohra Saed. As a practitioner of free verse, Bahar Saeed's poetry is characterized by penetrating sentiments, a sincere tone, and colloquial phraseology. "The Veil" is her most famous translated verse. Depicting Afghanistan's dark days, Pazhwak versifies events that led to the dispossession of Afghan women, and echo a sense of belonging in an endeavour to identify themselves. Forugh evokes elements of Persian mythology to create a dialogue between Afghanistan's past and its present and to challenge the status of women in contemporary society in *Five in the Evening and Other Poems*. Narrated in the first person, Nadia Anjuman's poetry leads one into a world of repression and resilience, mobility and immobility, passive silence and deafening rage. *Gol-e Dudi* (Black Flower) is her sole published collection of poetry. Through her poetry, Nadia achieved fame and mobility, traditionally deemed male prerogatives, thus violating long-unchallenged cultural boundaries. As an Afghan-American poet, Zohra Saed believes in restoring memories of her land through her verses. For her, her poetry is of displacement and rebuilding with promises of healing. "What the

Scar Revealed,” “Nomad's Market: Flushing Queens,” “Voices: Archive of Spines” are her famous poems.

The interest in Afghanistan is still growing each day leading to more works of literature.

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Sam, Dona Elizabeth. “Tales of Madness and War: A Brief Literary History of Afghanistan.” *Literary Quest* 2.2 (2015): 30-40. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.