

Chapter 2

Savaging the Land

The origin of the Taliban as an Islamic reform movement can be traced to the widespread anarchy that prevailed in many provinces in Afghanistan since the beginning of the civil war in the year 1992. The worst affected in the baffling array of cahoots, deceptions and bloodshed was Kandahar, a Pashtun stronghold in south Afghanistan. Years of war had resulted in the complete breakdown of its strong tribal structure and economy. Petty mujahidin warlords were a menace to the society as they plundered the population, looted homes, blocked trade routes to collect unauthorized taxes, kidnapped and molested young girls and boys, and sold off whatever they could to the traders across the border.

The appalling social and political conditions in Kandahar and the terrible plight of the people who had to put up with the vagaries of the rapacious warlords were disgusting for the *ulema* and the mullahs in Kandahar. They gathered around Mullah Omar, a Pashtun from south Afghanistan who was known for his piety and staunch belief in Islam, and chalked out a plan to reinstate peace by disarming the population and to safeguard the Islamic character of Afghanistan by reinforcing Sharia law. They enlisted the help of the students in their madrasas to initiate a reform

movement which eventually came to be known as the Taliban. The novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil* illumine the reader on the meteoric rise of the Taliban from a humble religious movement to a terrorist outfit that was powerful enough to bring about drastic social changes through clever manipulation of a misinterpreted religious ideology.

The Taliban's sole purpose in its infancy was to cleanse the society rather than grab power. Ahmed Rashid observes:

They saw themselves as the cleansers and purifiers of a guerrilla war gone astray, a social system gone wrong and an Islamic way of life that had been compromised by corruption and excess. Many of them had been born in Pakistani refugee camps, educated in Pakistani *madrassas* and had learned their fighting skills from Mujaheddin parties based in Pakistan. As such the younger Taliban barely knew their country or history, but from their *madrassas* they learnt about the ideal Islamic society created by the Prophet Mohammed 1400 years ago and this is what they wanted to emulate. (23)

In the first phase of the movement, the Taliban, in spite of being limited in number, captured the city of Kandahar in November 1994. It was made clear from the outset that their mission was to fulfil the aims of the

Afghan Jihad, restore peace and create a society that was in accord with Islam. To put their belief into practice the Taliban implemented the strictest interpretation of the Sharia law ever seen in the Islamic world upon the Kandaharis by issuing decrees that controlled people in all aspects of their lives. Men were asked to wear salwar kamees, grow beard and cover their hair with a turban. Praying five times a day became mandatory. Women were prohibited from working outside and girls were banned from attending schools. The Taliban disarmed the mujahidin warlords, opened trade routes, and restored peace and order in Kandahar. Their reputation as peace makers helped them to make easy inroads to other troubled regions in the south. In a few months, the Taliban brought most of the chaotic and anarchic southern provinces under its control. “The Taliban had won over the unruly Pashtun south because the exhausted, war-weary population saw them as saviors and peace makers, if not as a potential force to revive Pashtun power which had been humiliated by the Tajiks and Uzbeks” (Rashid 35).

It is to be noted in this context that the reforms introduced by the Taliban did not create much furor in the Pashtun south mainly due to the fact that the Taliban’s version of Sharia was very much influenced by Pashtunwali, a legal and moral code that determined a Pashtun’s social and personal responsibility. Raj Mohan Gandhi in his *Ghaffar Khan: Nonviolent Badshah of the Pakhtuns* observes:

Pathans may or may not have some common ethnic characteristics; they may all be Muslims; they may all speak a Pashto variant; they may inhabit a common terrain; but the final definition of a Pakhtun, no matter what is his tribe, or his clan within that tribe, is that he lives by the code of Pakhtunwali.

(18)

Pashtunwali is a code of conduct deeply ingrained in a Pashtun's character. The Taliban's attitude to women was more or less determined by Pashtunwali than Sharia law. The edict that a woman should be accompanied by a male relative when she goes out amply demonstrates what Geoffrey Moorhouse expounds in *To the Frontier: A Journey to the Khyber Pass*: "No women in the world can be more jealously possessed by their menfolk than the women of the Pathans, and it is both rare and dangerous for a male outside her family so much as to look upon a Pathan woman's face" (236). When the Taliban made burqa mandatory for women wherever they established their control, they were to a great extent enforcing the rigidness of the Pashtun tribal practices and customs upon an ethnically heterogeneous population.

Kandahar as a testing ground for implementing the Taliban model reforms proved a success. The taste of victory propelled the new reformers to expand their religious ideology to other parts of the country. As the movement gathered momentum, thousands of youngsters from madrasas along the

Pakistan border and refugee camps in Pakistan reached Kandahar to join Mullah Omar who had by now become the undisputed leader of the Taliban. These boys were mostly “the orphans of the war, the rootless and the restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge” (Rashid 32). Unlike the mujahidin who plunged into the jihad against the Soviets, these boys had no knowledge of their country’s unique culture and heritage. What they had imbibed from their mullahs was a narrow circumscribed version of Islam and Islamic law. Nadeem Aslam portrays the rigidness of the education imparted to students in madrasas in *The Wasted Vigil*:

At the start they would recite a few verses of the Koran to signify that both the speaker and the listener were in the realm of the sacred, but what followed was, in fact, history—a lament for Islam’s lost glory and power, a once-proud civilization brought low by the underhandedness of others, yes, but mainly by the loss of faith among the Muslims themselves, the men decadent, the women disobedient. (162)

The indoctrination had a tremendous impact on young minds and filled in them an urge to regain the lost glory of Islam at any cost. For that, it became imperative to alienate themselves from the world of women. By the time Casa and his friends at the madrassa were twelve they “hadn’t seen a woman for five years” (162).

A common factor that bound the boys who joined the Taliban together was their aversion towards women. Most of them had never known the company of women as they had led a highly segregated life in madrassas and refugee camps. Their mullahs had taught them that the company of women had to be abhorred as they were distractions in the path of service to Allah. Casa reminisces:

The madrassa teachers had told the children that women's guile was immense, their mischief noxious, that they were evil and mean spirited, that all the trials and misfortunes and woes that befell men came from women, that Muhammad, peace be upon him, had said when a woman steps out of the house, Satan is delighted. (163)

So the Taliban did not find anything wrong in the decrees that put constraints on women. They believed that they were putting into practice what they had been taught by their mullahs. They considered subjugation of women the mark of a true believer. "Vulnerable and easy to control, it didn't take much effort to work them up into frenzy over what they had been taught to believe as religious truth, and the domination over women was a simple way to organise and embolden them" (178).

The Taliban's ideological make-up was shaped by the Jamiat-Ulema-i-Islamic (JUI) which ran a network of madrasas along the Pakistan border. The

JUI which was ideologically connected to the Muslim theological school in Deoband in Central India was noted for its fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. “The education they offered was narrowly circumscribed, often consisting of little more than the Koran, the elements of Islamic law and the sayings of Prophet Mohammed” (Ewans 265). This was far removed from the original reformist ideology of the Deobandi school. “The Deobandi’s arose in British India, not as reactionary but a forward-looking movement that would reform and unite Muslim society as it struggled to live within the confines of a colonial state ruled by non-Muslims” (Rashid 88). Though it envisioned an integration of intellectual pursuits with spiritual enlightenment, and interpretation of Sharia in the context of everyday life, it “took a restrictive view of the role of women, opposed all forms of hierarchy in the Muslim community and rejected the Shia” (88). The Taliban’s atrocities against women, secrecy that shrouded its functioning, and hostility towards Hazaras throw light on its Deobandi roots. However, the Taliban, as Rashid points out, had denigrated the “Deobandi tradition of learning and reform” as it was opposed to modernism and wanted to take the country back to the times of Prophet Mohammed (93). They remained oblivious of the fact that the Prophet was a great social reformer, and brought about social and ethical changes in pursuance of creating a singular culture grounded on faith and piety, and wanted to build a civilization that would pass Islamic mores and traditions to generations to come. The Taliban’s lack of knowledge of the Islamic history

as well as the Afghan history combined with its misinterpretation of Sharia on the basis of Pashtunwali generated a highly volatile situation in the country.

The Taliban's growth from an Islamic reform movement to a militant organization with its eyes set on bringing the whole of Afghanistan under its control resulted in the overthrowing of Ismail Khan, the Governor of Herat, a city that was once "the cradle of Persian culture, the home of the writers, painters and Sufis" (ATSS 4). Herat was one of the few provinces in Afghanistan that had known relative peace during the time of the civil war. Naturally, there was resistance from the local population when the Taliban enforced its tyrannical laws ruthlessly upon people in Herat. The city was treated like an occupied territory and was guarded by diehard Pashtun Taliban from Kandahar who could not understand the culture of Herat.

The fall of Herat to the military power of the Taliban heralded the collapse of the Rabbani government in Kabul. Prolonged fighting among the warring Mujahidin factions led by major warlords had already weakened the military prowess of the Defense Minister Ahmad Shah Massoud and his troops. This made the Taliban's journey to Kabul, the seat of power, a rather easy one. Khaled Hosseini records the Taliban's march towards Kabul:

For two years now, the Taliban had been making their way toward Kabul, taking cities from the Mujahideen, ending factional wars wherever they'd settled. They had captured the

Hazara commander Abdul Ali Mazari and executed him. For months, they'd settled in the southern outskirts of Kabul, firing on the city, exchanging rockets with Ahmad Shah Massoud. Earlier in that September of 1996, they had captured the cities of Jalalabad and Sarobi. (ATSS 245)

Hosseini's endeavour to narrate the growth of the Taliban from a religious to a military movement and its success in capturing many strategically located places in Afghanistan finds success here. To conquer Kabul was the next step in the military agenda of the Taliban.

Aslam vividly describes the messianic zeal with which "fourteen year old Casa and one thousand others had been sent from his madrassa in Pakistan in 1996" to conquer Kabul from the warring factions in the name of Allah, to take it "in the name of one true God". Casa and his friends had been told that history is "Allah working through man". So they felt that they were warriors "tightening their clothes to themselves in order to fight unhindered, a continuation of a long line from Muhammad onwards, kings of tomorrow, who hated the carnage they must cause but cause it they must" (TWV 173).

The fall of Kabul on 27 September 1996 was the biggest political and military setback the Rabbani government had suffered since its inception in 1992. When the Taliban's "Datsun trucks with heavy .50 calibre machine guns, cannons, anti-aircraft guns and multiple-barrelled rocket launchers

mounted in the beds—all supplied by Saudi Arabia and the ISI, the lovers of Allah—had swept into Kabul,” people thronged the streets of the war-torn city to hail their new world, their new masters (TWV 173). Rasheed, the protagonist in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* jubilantly remarks: “ ‘At least the Taliban are pure and incorruptible. At least they’re decent Muslim boys. *Wallah*, when they come, they will clean up this place. They will bring peace and order. People won’t get shot anymore going out for milk. No more rockets’ ” (245). The innocent Afghans enthusiastically received the Taliban without knowing the hazards that would befall upon them. Their joy knew no bounds as they welcomed their new messiah, the Taliban, who would free them from the bondage of “greedy, Mujahideen commanders, armed to their teeth, rich of heroin, declaring jihad on one another and killing everyone in between” (245). But Hassan, a Hazara, could not take part in the celebrations. His words “ ‘God help the Hazaras now’ ” foresaw a future wrought with pain for the Hazaras under the Pashtun Taliban (TKR 186). Through the words of Hassan, Hosseini has succeeded in capturing the apprehensions the Hazaras had while Kabul was overrun by the Taliban.

Immediately after capturing the city, five Taliban entered the UN compound where the former communist president Najibullah had taken shelter and caught hold of him and his brother who had been visiting him. Nadeem Aslam’s narrates what happened next:

Beating the president and his brother until they were senseless, bundled the pair into a pickup and drove to the darkened Presidential Palace. There they castrated him and dragged his body behind a jeep for several rounds of the Palace, and then they shot him dead. The brother was similarly tortured and throttled to death. (TWV 173)

While Aslam's narration brings to fore the horror of the incident, Hosseini's description of what followed next clearly suggests the presence of a virulent ideology that coursed through the political entity called the Taliban. Hosseini writes that at Pashtunistan Square, near the old Khyber Restaurant, Mariam took notice of a bearded young man who wore a black turban. Pointing at the two corpses hanging from ropes tied to traffic posts, the young talib shouted: "His crimes are known to everybody. He was a communist and a Kafir. This is what we do with infidels who commit crimes against Islam" (ATSS 247). The battered, bloodied corpses were that of Najibullah, the Soviet installed communist President of Afghanistan and his brother. The atrocious display of "the two swollen and bloodied cadavers" was meant to "terrorize the inhabitants of the city into submission" (TWV 174).

The murder of Najibullah was the first symptomatic, barbarous act committed by the Taliban in Kabul. What the Taliban wanted to achieve immediately after conquering Kabul was to make everyone aware through the

battered body of Najibullah, the unbridled presence that it wanted to exercise in the lives of people. “Its ruthlessness, its spectacle, its physical violence, its unbalanced play of forces, its meticulous ceremonial, its entire apparatus were inscribed in the political functioning” of the public display of the disfigured body of Najibullah. It also “reactivated power” of Pashtun nationalism that had suffered political setbacks since the beginning of the anti-Soviet war in 1979 (Foucault, *Discipline* 49).

Denying the former communist leader a fair litigation before murdering him and the way his mutilated body was hung from a traffic post for public display, invited widespread international disapprobation. Even the Muslim world did not shy away from condemning the Taliban for committing such crimes in the name of Islam. But the Taliban leadership, comprised of mullahs and maulavis did not have the time or patience to pay heed to criticism. They were in a hurry to consolidate their power in Kabul, to bring the terrestrial totality known as Afghanistan under their control by imposing a religious ideology that was quite alien to an ethnically diverse population. Antony Davis, a specialist in Afghan affairs, comments:

From an essentially provincial force that had successfully imposed peace and security on the anarchy of Kandahar, it had now become a crusade committed to establishing Sharia law

and disarming of Mujahideen ‘criminals’ across the country.

Abruptly all Afghanistan was in its sight. (52)

However, the Taliban’s lack of a clear political strategy in matters of administration culminated in the unleashing of a reign of terror in Kabul in the name of Islam. It heralded a new order that would yet again tear the already fragile physical and mental landscape of the nation.

Hosseini in his *A Thousand Splendid Suns* narrates how Kabul was infested by trucks from which loudspeakers blared announcements in Farsi and Pashto. “The same message played from loudspeakers perched atop mosques and on the radio, which was known as the Voice of Sharia” (247). The name of the country was changed to Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan with a new set of laws based on Sharia. The laws forbade people from indulging in every imaginable form of entertainment like singing, dancing, playing cards, playing chess, kite flying, writing books, watching film, and painting pictures. The Taliban “nailed a singer of devotional music to the mulberry tree in front of the mosque, for not revealing where he had buried his instruments” (TWV 177). With regard to religious practices, it became mandatory for all citizens to pray five times a day. Even shops were ordered to close at prayer time. The edict that forced the men in Kabul to grow their beards put severe constraints on Hazara men who had limited hair growth and made them vulnerable to harsh punishments. The Taliban foot soldiers “stood on the sides of the roads

arresting men who didn't have beards, taking them to jail until the beards had grown" (177). How important it was for men to have a beard during the reign of the Taliban could be seen in a few items that Amir bought before he embarked on his journey to Kabul in search of Sohrab: "an artificial beard, black and chest length, *Sharia*-friendly—or at least the Taliban version of *Sharia*" (TKR 202). Even boys were not spared. All boys had to wear turbans and Islamic cloths. The law considered theft as a serious offense leading to the cutting off of the hand at the wrist.

The Taliban's misogynistic attitude to women could be understood from the prohibitions imposed on women. Khaled Hosseini divulges the details:

Attention women:

You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home.

You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten. (ATSS 249)

Women were prohibited from using cosmetics, charming clothes, making eye contact with men and painting nails. Girls were forbidden from attending schools and women from working. It was also made clear that adulterous liaisons would lead to death. Nancy Hatch Dupree who had spent a considerable part of her life in Afghanistan in her scholarly article “Afghan Women Under the Taliban” observes that it was with the intention of creating a “secure environment where the chasteness and dignity of women may once again be sacrosanct,” the Taliban imposed its draconian laws upon the hapless citizens of Kabul (145). But it brought the city to a standstill. The world woke up to the reality of terror in Afghanistan only when Kabul came under the vicious grip of the Taliban. Aslam has succeeded in transmitting the catastrophe that had struck the nation into words: “Afghanistan became a land whose geology was fear instead of rock, where you breathed terror not air” (TWV 178).

From the edicts of the Taliban, it is very evident that for them Islam is not simply a matter of personal belief but a way of life that encompasses all aspects of life including “individual behaviour and the relationship of the individual to both society and state” (Marsden 69). The state is not perceived as a secular entity where religion is a matter of private affair. “The state is seen as the embodiment of the Islamic values espoused by society, and its continued existence is dependent on the commitment of citizens to uphold and

defend these values” (69). Here lies the importance of the Taliban’s interpretation of Sharia laws as a legal code that governs the working of both the individual and the state. For the Taliban, the Sharia was the fount of law in all aspects of life—religious, political, social and economic. Strict implementation of Sharia was considered as the only remedy to cure the country of all perilous influences. However, the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam and Islamic law was quite unprecedented in the history of Islam.

It is worthy to note that what the Taliban did in Kabul was not different from what it did in Kandahar, Herat and other captured places. But because of the presence of several western agencies and NGO’s in Kabul, the Taliban’s acrimonious activities got wide international coverage and media attention. Nevertheless, the fact that they were overzealous in their enforcement of rules upon hapless citizens of Kabul cannot be denied. To the rank and file of the Taliban who had their base in the highly conservative south of Afghanistan, Kabul was corrupt and immoral, a place that gave women great visibility. In Kabul, women could be seen everywhere: in schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, offices, on television channels. Visibility of women in public places was anathema to the young zealots’ notion of modesty. For them, a woman was not to be seen. Her place was in the family where she had to impart to her children an ideal religious education which was purely Islamic in character and steeped in Sharia. Kabul, with its overwhelming presence of unveiled

women in public places, posed a threat to the Taliban's religious ideology.

Dupree's observation on this issue deserves mentioning:

Schooled in the belief that unveiled women in public must by nature be morally suspect, they arrive in Kabul fervently imbued with the conviction that as instruments and arbiters of Islamic rectitude their task is to rid the city of its sinful ways, personified by cosmopolitan Kabuli women. (150)

To rid the city of its sinful ways was also considered as a necessity to strengthen the patriarchal nature of the Afghan society. For this, what the Taliban envisaged for the country in general, and Kabul in particular, was a transition from the influences of western "cultural encroachments" that gave women great visibility to confining them in *purdah* (158). When Laila comments that they "can't make half the population stay home and do nothing," (ATSS 249) Rasheed retorts:

"You think this is some new, radical idea the Taliban are bringing? Have you ever lived outside of your precious little shell in Kabul, my *gul*? Ever cared to visit the *real* Afghanistan, the south, the east, along the tribal borders with Pakistan? No? I have. And I can tell you that there are many places in this country that have always lived this way, or close enough anyhow." (249)

Rasheed's observation with regard to how life is lived in some regions in Afghanistan is true to a great extent. His words also reveal that deep in his heart he admires the Taliban and is "all praise for their strict codes because his own patriarchal authority gets reinforced through their rigid dictums" (Shameem 65). But to transfer the milieu of Kandahar to Kabul where women had tasted freedom was a move that made the Taliban the enemies of people.

Kabul had a few other demerits in the puritanical eyes of the Taliban. The city was seen as the birthplace of a politically radical socialist ideology and various Islamist movements which the Taliban felt had ruined Afghanistan. It was as a part of its mission to cleanse Kabul of all remnants of incongruous cultures and ideologies, it vociferously imposed its religious ideology in Kabul. Moreover, the setting up of the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, "an apparatus that must be coextensive with the entire social body" (Foucault, *Discipline* 213) for the enforcement of regulations clearly endorsed the Taliban leadership's resolve not weaken the spirit of their foot soldiers "on whom they depend to achieve their ambition of bringing Afghanistan under their control" (Marsden 73). It also meant that there would not be any slackening of laws on matters regarding women's issues as it would threaten the movement's Islamic legitimacy.

The edicts issued by the Taliban formed a cleverly crafted construct that restricted people in all areas of life. The Religious Police Force, an offshoot of the Department for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, roamed through the city on the lookout for the “indiscreet laugh, the unveiled face” (TKR 290). The mere presence of the Taliban was fear inducing. Amir experienced “unadulterated naked fear” when he saw the Taliban, a handful of harsh faced young men with Kalashnikovs casually hanging down on their shoulders (216). For the first time, Kabul came under the grip of fear. In a letter written to Amir, Hassan narrates how Kabul has changed since the arrival of the Taliban: “In Kabul, fear is everywhere, in the streets, in the stadium, in the markets, it is a part of our lives here, Amir Agha. The savages who rule our *watan* don’t care about human decency” (189-190). He narrates how his wife was assaulted by a young talib for speaking loudly at the market. He screamed at her saying that “the Ministry of Vice and Virtue does not allow women to speak loudly” (190). Here the reader sees the Taliban’s disciplinary mechanism at work. The intent was to discipline women, and thereby, instill self-regulation.

To bear the brunt of talibanisation was traumatic for most women. They were mercilessly beaten by the Religious Police if they ventured out of home without a close male relative or if any part of their body was exposed. Dupree remarks that rarely “do women suffer extensive physical injuries from

these beatings. The intent is to humiliate. This, of course, causes considerable psychological damage” (152). The fear that gripped the city had its external manifestations. Women in Kabul started wearing chadari, “a voluminous head to toe pleated covering, also referred to by the Arabic term burqa. This garment totally encompasses the body, leaving only a mesh square covering the eyes to permit minimal vision” (151). When Laila wore the burqa for the first time, she “walked in perpetual fear of tripping and falling, of breaking an ankle stepping into a pothole” (ATSS 208). This was true in the case of most Afghan women who had to quickly adapt to the new Taliban dress code out of fear of consequences. It is interesting to note what Foucault says about the role the police personnel in enforcing discipline in a society: “They were in a sense technicians of behaviour: engineers of conduct, orthopaedists of individuality. Their task was to produce bodies that were both docile and capable” (*Discipline* 294). The way women in Kabul complied to the Taliban dictates, though reluctantly and out of fear, was due to the effective policing of the Religious Police. Marsden comments on the impact exerted by the police:

The periodic practice by some elements within the Taliban, particularly the religious police, of beating women with sticks in the street if they do not comply has had an enormous impact on the mobility of the female population. There has, very evidently, been a climate of fear and this has inhibited women

from leaving their homes unless it has been absolutely necessary. (89)

Here one sees the victory of the Taliban's 'docility project' achieved through decrees that could be considered as coercive measures aimed at working at the body of the people. Though 'docility' could be achieved in women to a great extent, capability suffered a setback. The notion that Kabul was cosmopolitan in outlook cloaked the poverty experienced by many families where women were the sole bread winners. There were thousands of women in Kabul who did not have a burqa. Since it was expensive, these women could not afford to buy it and often found themselves at the mercy of those who had it when they had to go out. The Taliban dress code incapacitated women greatly.

Veiling of Muslim women becomes a matter of dispute in a society when the personal becomes the political. Though veiling is widespread in Muslim countries, it does not usually infringe on a woman's rights and freedom. But for the Taliban, making the burqa mandatory was a religious as well as a political necessity to debilitate half of the population they wanted to isolate; a means to coerce women into subjugation. When the Taliban insisted that women should not under any circumstance expose their faces or any part of their bodies, the body of the women became a battlefield where the

narcissist political agenda of a fundamentalist regime waged a war for the seclusion of women within the confines of their homes.

The practice of veiling associated with Islam draws its inspiration from a passage in the Quran: “And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (for looking at prohibited things) and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts) and not to show their adornments except which is apparent, and draw a veil all over their adornments except to their husbands. . . .” (*The Easy Quran*, Surah An-Nur 24:31). The Quran also exhorts men: “Tell the believing men to lower their gaze (or sights) and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual activities)” (24:30). The Quran reminds believers that modesty is a virtue that has to be practised by both men and women. But in a highly patriarchal society like Afghanistan where women are meant to be subjugated, modesty in men is never considered a virtue. Moreover, men wield the power to pronounce judgments on a woman’s attire though a dress code for women is not insisted anywhere in the Quran. In the novel *The Wasted Vigil* Nadeem Aslam presents before the reader an incident that happened in 1959 when Daoud was the Prime Minister. Aslam writes that a revolt was about to break out in Kandahar when the *ulema* and the mullahs came to know that Daoud had let his daughters appear unveiled in public at the Independence Day celebrations. Daoud was forced to send a delegation of Muslim scholars to Kandahar “to debate the issue with the mullahs of the city, asking them to

point out where exactly in the Holy Book it said that women must hide their faces” (236). Though the clerics in Kandahar failed to do so, they campaigned against Daoud, expressing their anguish at the penetration of alien ideologies that might undermine Islam. Unlike King Amanullah who had to flee the country for introducing measures meant to liberate women from gender specific oppressive practices, Daoud could safeguard his position with the help of a strong army.

The Taliban’s narrow provincialism finds its true proponent in Rasheed who took pride in being a Pashtun from Kandahar where men lived by tribal laws, “where women were rarely seen on the streets and only then in burqa and accompanied by men” (ATSS 121). In the early days of his marriage to Mariam, he laid bare the misogynist attitude that was deeply rooted in the character of a Pashtun from the south: “ ‘Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman’s face is her husband’s business only’ ” (ATSS 63). Ahmed Rashid’s journalistic observation that the Taliban was trying to “transpose their own milieu, their own experience, or lack of it, with women to the entire country and justified their policies through the Koran” strikes true in this context (110).

The gender policies of the Taliban pushed women further to the periphery of social, cultural and political spheres. Disciplinary actions taken

by the Taliban like beating women or punishing men for not having long beards were meant to produce docile bodies that could be controlled in terms of time and space. It is the manifestation of power that “shows itself on a subject’s body because various events or happenings are ‘written’ on the body—they shape the way we perform, or act out, our bodily selves (Danaher, Schirato, and Webb 50). At the social level, the fear of being watched forced the public, especially women, to regulate their behaviour. The Taliban’s strategic move to regulate social behaviour through ceaseless inspection made women vanish from the public sphere. The functioning of the disciplinary mechanism of the Taliban found its most expressive manifestation in the enshrouded segmented space of a home. The decree that ordered “all windows to be painted black so no one would catch a glimpse of a woman” acquiesced women to patriarchal constraints and let her operate her agency within the bounds of the narrow secluded space of her home (TWV 178). In a country where women have donned the role of biological as well as cultural generators of the nation since time immemorial, often being assigned the task of the defenders of culture who are obliged to transmit it to their children, the enclosed space of a home becomes a veritable prison. During the Taliban reign, it became an extended miniscule of the state where the “gaze is alert everywhere” (*Discipline* 195), where “the slightest movements are supervised” and where “power is exercised without division” (*Discipline* 197).

The gender specific practices of the Taliban swathed in the mantle of Islam was supported by the patriarchal norms that prevailed in Afghanistan where it was often considered as the duty of males to control the female members of their families. Dupree comments:

By imposing strict restraints directly on women, the society's sensitive component symbolising male honour, the regime sends a message of its intent to subordinate the personal autonomy of every individual, thereby strengthening the impression that it is capable of exercising control over all aspects of social behaviour, male and female. (151)

Violations committed by females often made males vulnerable to harsh punishments. Female behaviour thus determined a male's success as well as his social standing within his community and compliance in women could be achieved, as Foucault notes, only by "the penetration of regulation even into the smallest details of everyday life" (*Discipline* 198). The Taliban's long list of regulations can be better understood in this social context. The panopticon effect of a home induces in the inmates "a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). Thus the privacy of a home turns into a disciplinary mechanism where the "capillary functioning of power" is experienced by all members, especially female members (198).

Ehsan M. Entezar in his book *Afghanistan 101: Understanding Afghan Culture* elaborates on the role of the family in an Afghan's life. For all Afghans, irrespective of the fact of being rural or urban, the family as a social institution plays a pivotal role as its members conform to certain socially accepted behavioural patterns. It also ensures the effective functioning of patriarchy. Huma Ahmed-Ghosh too emphasizes the link between family and patriarchy. She observes: "To ensure that patriarchy is maintained, family is reinforced along gender hierarchies to ensure the transmission of religion, culture and family values from mothers to children" (8). It is considered as the duty of the mother and other female members to inculcate moral and ethical values in children from an early age. "Teaching children what to recite and how to pray is usually the mother's and other adult female's responsibility" (Entezar 129). In the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* one comes across Mariam who took great delight in teaching Aziza verses from the Quran. "Aziza could already recite by heart the surah of *ikhlas*, the surah of *fatihah* and already knew how to perform the four *ruqats* of morning prayer" (265). But the novels under study poignantly reveal that mere idealization, as Ahmed-Ghosh says, "does nothing to improve women's material status since the concept of motherhood is glorified and not the actual mother" (8). Entezar's remark that in most Afghan families, the father is the supreme ruler who punishes disobedience "verbally, physically, and in every way possible depending on its nature and seriousness" confirms Ghosh's opinion (127).

This is particularly true in the case of Pashtuns whose course of life is more or less determined by Pashtunwali.

Rasheed's family in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* represents millions of families across Afghanistan where domestic violence is an accepted norm. During the Taliban rule, Rasheed's home metamorphosed into a cell in a prison where "coercive force of disciplinary power could be used in a direct and overt way" (Danaher, Schirato, and Webb 52). What Rashid wanted from his two wives, Mariam and Laila, was obedience and meek submission to his authority. When he came to know that his wives had made an attempt to escape to Pakistan, his wrath had no limit and beat them up mercilessly. "Hair was ripped from Laila's scalp, and her eyes watered with pain" (ATSS 240). Then they were confined to darkness that "was total, impenetrable and constant, without layer or texture" (241). For two days Mariam, Laila and her child Aziza remained in darkness without food or water. In between she pleaded with Rasheed: " 'Just one glass, Rasheed. Not for me. Do it for her. You don't want her blood on your hands' " (242). Laila's pleading fell on deaf ears. The women in the family became prisoner's at the mercy of Rasheed who transformed himself into a jailor on perpetual alert. The room where they remained in confinement became a prison cell—an isolation chamber that deprived them off all sensory experiences. Rasheed's act of violence was meant for disciplining Laila and Mariam, to prevent them from challenging his

male supremacy, to make them docile bodies “upon which the disciplinary forces of society could be imposed” (Danaher, Schirato, and Webb 52).

A similar viewpoint is found in the arguments raised by Anne Schwan in her authoritative study “Disciplining Female Bodies: Women’s Imprisonment and Foucault.” She argues that the family as a “panoptical institution for women in particular implicitly provides a model of the “perfect” *patriarchal* society because it trains women to subject [sic] to the constant surveillance by an (invisible) patriarchal ‘eye’ in society at large . . . thus executing social control over all women (9). To a great extent, this is what the Taliban wanted to create anew in the country—docile bodies “that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” to fulfill its political agenda of transforming the country into a purely Islamic state (*Discipline* 136). But it was not for the first time the body had become the object of such tyranny in a country like Afghanistan. Except for a few relatively peaceful periods in the history of the country, the body, particularly the body of the woman, “was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations” (136). Phyllis Chester, in her autobiography *An American Bride in Kabul* recounts her experiences in Kabul as a young American bride married to a western educated young Afghan. Contrary to her expectations, she found life in Kabul of the early 1960’s shrouded in patriarchal customs and traditions quiet medieval. This is despite the fact that Kabul of the 1960’s

was considered by some as the Paris of Asia. The Taliban injunction that prevented women from venturing out without a male companion was an accepted norm of behaviour even in those days. So was the case with burqa and veiling. When revolutionary ideas that swept through the corridors of power in the late 1960's and 1970's liberated women from the bondage of slavery, they started working "in office buildings, behind desks of their own, where they typed and smoked and made important telephone calls to important people" (ATSS 68). This phase of life for women in Kabul continued during the Soviet occupation and the most troublesome civil war period. The arrival of the Taliban once again forced women to enter the burqa, the "airless, claustrophobic, movable prison (or sensory deprivation chamber)" that imposed on her restrictions and prohibitions (Chesler 69). What was so new about the Taliban technique was the use of various disciplinary mechanisms like patriarchy, religion, family and education that worked in unison to induce self-regulation among people on the whole and seclusion and segregation of women in particular. Ahmed Rashid furnishes an argument put forward by Maulavi Qalamuddin who headed the Department of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice to justify the Taliban injunction on women from working and going to school:

"There are security problems. There are no provisions for separate transport, separate school buildings and facilities to

educate women for the moment. Women must be completely segregated from men. And within us we have men who cannot behave properly with women. We lost two million people in the war against the Soviets because we had no Sharia law. We fought for the Sharia and now this is the organization that will implement it. I will implement it come what may.” (106)

Though Maulavi Qalamuddin’s argument that the losses suffered in the war against the Soviets was due to the absence of Sharia laws is a matter of contention, it sets the backdrop for the Maulavi to passionately pursue his task of regulating the behaviour of people. It was also widely perceived that the Taliban was using Islam and Islamic laws in order to terrorise women into meek submission.

The Taliban injunction that prohibited women from working outside had its immediate adverse impact on the health sector. Very few female doctors could offer their services to patients. Since the law forbade female patients from seeing male physicians, women became highly vulnerable to diseases. Aslam writes about a woman who “bled to death in front of Marcus’s clinic because—being male—he was not allowed to administer to her” (TWV 178). The smallest of illnesses petrified women. Regardless of the nightmarish conditions that prevailed, Qatrina and Marcus offered their help to “patients of either gender in secret whenever they could” (178). In *A Thousand Splendid*

Suns Hosseini writes about the hardships to which people were subjected because of the Taliban's policies of segregation in public places. Mariam could not believe her ears when she heard that the Taliban had enforced its decision to discharge all female staff from hospitals in Kabul "to work in one central facility" (ATSS 254). Laila who was in her last stage of pregnancy was taken to Rabia Balkhi hospital where she was examined by a doctor in a dark blue burqa. The doctor spoke to Mariam in a highly exasperated tone: " 'What do you want me to do? They won't give me what I need. I have no X-ray either, no suction, no oxygen, not even simple antibiotics. When NGOs offer money, the Taliban turn them away. Or they funnel the money to the places that cater to men' " (258). Laila was operated upon with no anesthesia to mitigate her pain. The novelist writes that Mariam who was a witness to such a barbarous caesarian section was filled with admiration for Laila. To the discerning reader the hospital symbolizes a country bereft of humanity. A religion that denies people basic facilities like care and nurture can never be called a religion. Each and every action of the Taliban done in the name of religion reveals the hypocrisy of a movement that had deviated from its original purpose—to restore peace. This can be better understood in the light of the Taliban edicts that destroyed the peace and harmony of most households.

Seclusion of women had a very adverse effect on most families where women were the sole bread winners. Poverty became a reality. In *The Kite*

Runner and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, there are innumerable heart-rending occasions where the reader gets an opportunity to experience what life was like in Afghanistan due to the hegemonic imposition of the Taliban way of life. When Amir visited Afghanistan after years of sojourn in America, he felt like a tourist in his own country. All through his journey from Jalalabad to Kabul though the “cratered road,” (TKR 213) Amir could see the overbearing presence of an imperialist force in the grim reminders it had left: “burned carcasses of old soviet tanks, overturned military trucks gone to rust, a crushed Russian jeep that had plunged over the mountain side” (213). In Kabul, he saw streets infested with beggars.

Rubble and beggars. Everywhere I looked that was what I saw. . . they squatted at every street corner, dressed in shredded burlap rags, mud-caked hands held out for a coin. And the beggars were mostly children now, thin and grim-faced, some no older than five or six. They sat in the lap of their *burqa*-clad mothers alongside gutters at busy street corners and chanted “*Baksheesh, baksheesh!*” And something else, something I hadn’t noticed right away: Hardly any of them sat with an adult male. (214-215)

In fact, the wars had made ‘fathers’ disappear from the lives of the children and reduced the status of women to mere beggars.

Hosseini's observation with regard to the plight of women and children in a war torn country like Afghanistan is very true. The harsh reality of familial depravity experienced in the absence of a father figure aggravates the emotional loss that the children suffer. The intensity of this suffering can be alleviated if mothers have the opportunity to earn at least a meagre income to sustain the family. But earning a living was "declared inappropriate conduct for females, resulting in arrest for resulting in arrest for insubordination against Allah's will" (TWV178). It is a sad fact that the Taliban's ban on female employment put an impediment on a woman's right to earn her livelihood through a gainful employment.

Most of the burqa-clad beggars Amir saw in the streets were war widows who had to face the bitter consequences of the Taliban's ban on employment. As they did not have a male member to accompany them whenever they went out, they took to streets. Saira Shah, a London-based journalist, through the films *Beneath the Veil* and *Unholy Wars* throws light on horrendous living conditions of the Afghans during the rule of the Taliban militia. "The first thing you notice when you come into Kabul is the ghost-like figures in their blue shroud—like burqas, begging in the streets," she told the BBC. "In Kabul alone, she said, there are over 40,000 windows as a result of the war. Because the Taliban forbid women from working, they are

forced into begging—and sometimes prostitution—in order to support themselves and their families.”

Amir was overwhelmed by what he had seen in Kabul. “Returning to Kabul was like running into an old, forgotten friend and seeing that life hadn’t been good to him, that he’d become homeless and destitute” (TKR 216). It was the plight of the children that shook him the most. He was reminded of what Rahim Khan had told him: “Kabul is already full of broken children and I don’t want Sohrab to become another” (193). Wherever he looked he could see “children playing in the ruins of a windowless building amid jagged stamps of brick and stone” (215). This provides a sharp contrast to Hosseini’s depiction of kite flying as one of the favourite pastimes of children in Kabul before the Taliban banned this popular entertainment. The ban on kite flying deprived children the pleasure of seeing their kites “rocketing to the sky. . . like a paper bird flapping its wings” (55). Little childhood was left in the children who did odd jobs to sustain themselves and their ill-fated families. This could be understood by the way Amir was implored by a scrawny boy with “his eyes darting side to side” to buy some sexy pictures (234). He knew that if got caught, he would be flogged mercilessly by the Religious Police. The presence of a large number of children on the streets was the direct impact of the edicts that prohibited women from working and the subsequent closing down of schools. In most schools in Kabul, majority of the teachers were

women. Ban on female employment naturally led to the closing down of boys' schools too due to the shortage of teachers. The Taliban's policies of segregation and seclusion of women denied education to an entire generation of Afghan children.

Both the novelists write in detail about the Taliban's apathy towards books and learning. Hosseini writes how Kabul University had been rampaged by the Taliban:

The university was shut down and its students sent home. Paintings were ripped from walls, shredded with blades. Television screens were kicked in. Books, except the Koran, were burned in heaps, the stores that sold them closed down. The poems of Khalili, Pajwak, Ansari, Haji Dehqan, Ashraqi, Beytaab, Hafez, Jami, Nizami, Rumi, Khayyam, Beydel, and more went up in smoke. (ATSS 250)

The Religious Police comprised of youngsters who had imbibed only misinterpreted Islamic values from the semi-literate mullahs in the madrassas along the border and refugee camps in Pakistan could not understand the worth of knowledge encapsulated in books. On one of his journeys to a city in the south of the country during the Taliban regime, Marcus "saw an abandoned and locked-up school for girls into which, he was told, every book to be found in the city had been thrown on Taliban orders" (TWV 15). An

interesting twist to the Taliban's tale of destruction was Katrina's rude manner of preserving her precious books by nailing them to the ceiling of her house. "A spike driven through the pages of history, a spike through the pages of love, a spike through the sacred" (10). Katrina knew that "[o]riginal thought was heresy to the Taliban (9).

However, in Usha, there were parents who were courageous enough to bring their children to Marcus with a request to help them in their studies, "to equip their son and daughters for the possibilities of the world, rebelling against the Taliban's insistence that the wings be torn off the children" (193). One is reminded of the historic acceptance speech made by Malalai Yousafai after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize which she shared with Kailash Satyarthi. In her speech she thanked her father Mr. Yousafzai for not clipping her wings, for letting her fly. The fact that Marcus' perfume factory gradually got converted to a school with forty children on roll in two sessions clearly shows that there were umpteen number of Yousafzais who wanted to provide education to their children. Though done discreetly, the functioning of the home school reached the ears of the Religious Police. In no time, the perfume factory got flooded with men, all with guns. In the mayhem that followed, Marcus and Katrina were brutally beaten for teaching the children "things other than the Koran" (TWV 194). The children were asked to go back to their homes. " 'Children—leave now and if you ever come back we'll burn you

alive' ” (195). In the eyes of the Taliban, getting educated was a crime rather than a right. Outside the house there was a fleet of Datsun pickups with raised machine guns. Both Marcus and Qatrina were hurled into two separate pickups. For them Qatrina was a “[d]irty prostitute. Innovator. Living without marriage with an infidel” (195). Marcus, though saved from death, had to pay a heavy price for imparting knowledge to eager young minds—his wife’s bloody execution at hands of the Taliban. Qatrina’s crime was graver in the eyes of the Taliban. Educated and brave, Qatrina epitomized everything that the Taliban abhorred in a woman.

Being a teacher was considered a dangerous profession during the Taliban regime. Dunia’s “father had tried to talk her out of becoming a school teacher, saying it was too dangerous” (213). But she could win him over by a thought provoking statement: “ ‘The bullet that has hit us Muslims today left the gun centuries ago, when we let the clergy decide that knowledge and education were not important’ ”(213). This statement can be considered as a direct attack “on the traditional power brokers, the tribal and religious leaders” who have always vehemently opposed reforms on issues regarding education, especially higher education of women (Ewans 129). This reminds the reader of King Amanullah who ruled Afghanistan from 1919 to 1929. Amanullah introduced measures to modernize the country through education since he believed that education would free people from the bondage of time-worn

customs and antiquated ideas, and equip them to face the challenges of the current world. Amanullah had to face stiff resistance from the ulema and the mullahs who felt that such measures would undermine the role of Islam in the lives of people which would gradually pave way for the incursion of western ideas. Resistance initiated by the religious leaders finally led to the king's resignation.

Against such a backdrop, it is worthy to note what the Human Rights Watch has written about the benefits of education in an article titled "The Education Deficit":

Education empowers children to be full and active participants in society, able to exercise their rights and engage in civil and political life. Education is also a powerful protection factor: children who are in school are less likely to come into conflict with the law and much less vulnerable to rampant forms of child exploitation, including child labour, trafficking, and recruitment into armed groups and forces.

This observation is true in the case of all war torn countries like Afghanistan where children have seen and experienced the worst tragedies in their lives and have been denied the benefits of education. The youngsters whom Amir saw walking through the streets of Kabul with kalashinkovs on their shoulders were the products of a jihad that had brought only pain and

misery in their lives. They were the ones who had been ripped apart from their families at a very young age, denied the value of a stable and secure education, and forced to live in atrocious living conditions, enduring all kinds of assaults on their bodies by men or stronger boys. Lack of proper education had instilled in them wrong notions about life. At the very core of their heart, they believed that “human beings had little to offer beyond cruelty and danger” (TWV 163). The Taliban Amir saw in the streets were mostly comprised of these youngsters who believed that “the only way to feel any control was to distress or wound others” (163). Aslam offers a glimpse into Casa’s vulnerability in the presence of women of his mother’s age. Casa was often filled with a faint tinge of envy whenever he saw a boy walking beside his mother. Parental figures often stirred in his god intoxicated soul feelings of tenderness which he often wished to prolong. This observation made by the novelist points to the fact that the jihadi training camps he had attended as a part of his training had not completely quenched his thirst for love and affection. But he diligently practised what he had been taught.

Amir’s search for Sohrab, his nephew, took him to an orphanage in Karteh-seh, one of the “most war-ravaged neighborhoods in Kabul” (TKR 220). There he met Zaman, the director of the orphanage. From him, Amir learned that not all children in the orphanage are *yateem*. “ ‘Many of them have lost their fathers in the war, and their mothers can’t feed them because

the Taliban don't allow them to work. So they bring their children here' ” (222). The man's contempt for the Taliban was evident in each word he uttered. “ ‘I've asked the Taliban for money to dig a well more times than I remember and they just twirl their rosaries and tell me there is no money. No money' ” (222). What he had in ample supply were children who had lost their childhood. When asked about the whereabouts of Sohrab, the old man mumbled that Sohrab had been taken away by a talib official who visited the orphanage occasionally. It was not something Farid, Amir's companion, could accept. He fell on the oldman and held him down to the floor. It was an attack Zaman least expected. A sense of betrayal enveloped him momentarily. The presence of Amir who had left the country before the war began augmented the pain he felt. Zaman's commitment to the poor children in his care was revealed when he said that he had sold everything he had to run “this godforsaken place” (225). Amir's mission to rescue a single child is juxtaposed with Zaman's humanity that transcends all narrow domestic boundaries. How life was tragic during the reign of the Taliban militia finds expression in his words: “ ‘If I deny him one child, he takes ten. So I let him take one and leave the judging to Allah. I swallow my pride and take his goddam filthy . . . dirty money. Then I go to the bazaar and buy food for children' ” (225). Zaman knew that the money with which he had bought food for the children was the pittance thrown at him for the child who had been taken away. But as a devout Muslim, he took solace in the mercy of Allah.

Khaled Hosseini portrays Zaman as a character who embodies love and compassion. In the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Zaman offers comfort to Laila when she brings Aziza to the orphanage. Factors that prompted Laila to put her child in an orphanage deserve mentioning. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini writes about the summer of 2000 when the drought reached its third year. Moreover, the sanctions imposed by the UN on the Taliban for not extraditing bin Laden from the Afghan soil worsened the economic conditions which resulted in a humanitarian tragedy. It was also the time when ‘Titanic’ fever gripped Kabul. Every item in the market was named after Titanic. “There was *Titanic* deodorant, *Titanic* toothpaste, *Titanic* perfume, *Titanic* pakora, even *Titanic* burqas” (ATSS 270). As the Titanic fever spread, everybody in the “ ‘Titanic City’ ” wanted Jack to save them from the impending disaster (270). But no movie could bring a permanent relief to people in a poverty stricken country where only the Taliban could afford food. The Taliban’s scant regard for Islam’s commitment to social justice can be seen here. The measures taken with the intention of transforming Afghanistan into an Islamic Eden brought only disaster in the lives of poor Afghans. This has to be understood in the context of mass exodus that took place intermittently since the arrival of the Soviets. The wealthy and the affluent, and even those who could manage a little money, escaped the hell the country had become over the years. Those who remained were the ones who had to experience the brutality of armed conflicts, violence and poverty. The Taliban

leadership was well aware of the extent of poverty that prevailed in many parts of the country towards the end of the century because of the breakdown of various government services and the blockade of external aid. As they considered themselves as the rulers of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, it was their duty to uphold the Islamic values of taking care of the needy, especially the widows, the orphans, and the dispossessed. The failure of the Taliban in this aspect was the failure of their political ideology which had its base in a distorted version of Islam. Afghanistan turned into a failed state that catered to the needs of extremist organisations such as al-Qaeda. It was also the failure of the Taliban's jihad which was supposed to bring peace and prosperity to war weary population.

Death from poverty loomed large in the lives of many ordinary Afghans. Some chose not to wait for it. "Mariam heard of a neighborhood widow who had ground some dried bread, laced it with rat poison, and fed it to all of her seven children. She had saved the biggest portion for herself" (ATSS 273). Nadeem Aslam writes about a little boy who had told Marcus that "his widowed mother, forced now to beg, beat him and his siblings when they asked for food, threatening to kill them and herself" (TWV 194). How traumatic life was for women during the Taliban regime can be deduced from the extracts taken from the novels. Laila too could sense the danger. She felt that her children were going to die right before her eyes. However, the

decision to put Aziza in the orphanage was taken at the behest of Rasheed who had by now become jobless. His futile attempts to get a job brought out the demon in him, which eventually resulted in verbal and physical assaults.

Putting Aziza in the orphanage was one of the toughest decisions Laila had taken in her life. But Zaman's calm demeanour soothed her troubled soul. Though a Pashtun from Khandahar, he considered the Taliban as savages. His hatred for the Taliban is evident in the words that he spoke to Laila.

“It is those *savages*, those *wahshis* who are to blame. They bring shame on me as a Pashtun. They've disgraced the name of my people. And you're not alone, *hamshira*. We get mothers like you all the time—all the time—mothers who come here who can't feed their children because the Taliban won't let them go out and make a living. So you don't blame yourself.”

(ATSS 283)

Zaman's words serve two purposes. They reveal his anger at the Taliban for bringing shame on Pashtuns and his deep sympathy for women and children who were the primary victims of the Taliban's chauvinist attitude. The sentiments expressed by Zaman can be considered as the one shared by majority of Pashtuns in the country.

Laila's visits to the orphanage was often marred by the Religious Police who had by then become a "faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception; thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert" (*Discipline* 214). She would be confronted with a barrage of questions: "What is your name? Where are you going? Why are you alone? Where is your mahram?" (ATSS 285). Often she was whipped with a radio antenna and forced to go back home "bloodied, without so much as a glimpse of Aziza" (286). If she could reach the orphanage, she could spend hours with Aziza who would tell her what Kaka Zaman had taught the children—a bit of history, geography and science. Laila was surprised when Aziza told her that in case of a Taliban inspection, they had to put the books away and pretend to knit. Aziza's enthusiasm for learning dispelled Laila's gloom to a certain extent. Her passion for imparting education to her child reminds the reader of Babi, Laila's father, who would often remind her that when the war was over, Afghanistan was going to need young educated girls like her because he staunchly believed that "a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated" (ATSS 103).

Amir's search for Sohrab ends in the Ghazi stadium where Baba used to take him to see football matches when he was a child. The stadium was crowded. Expectation was writ large on the faces of everybody. Amir's eyes surveyed the ground where instead of the lush green grass he saw holes and

craters. Most notable was a “pair of deep holes in the ground behind the south-end goalposts” (TKR 234). Later Amir realized that these deep holes were meant to carry out Taliban style execution to people who had committed adultery. To his great horror, he saw a man and a woman being taken to the goalposts. The woman screamed and kicked. Amir felt that he would never forget the sound of that scream. “It was the cry of a wild animal trying to pry its mangled leg from the bear trap” (235). Then they were forced into the chest deep holes. The accused pair’s torsos extruded from the ground. The stage was set for the Taliban style execution to take place. A white-bearded cleric who stood near the goalposts recited a prayer from the Quran. Amir suddenly remembered the contempt Baba had for the clerics and mullahs who often used Sharia to advance their personal goals. Baba used to say: “*Piss on the beards of all those self-righteous monkeys. They do nothing but thumb their rosaries and recite a book written in a tongue they don’t even understand. God help us all if Afghanistan ever falls into their hands*” (235). Amir took comfort in the fact that Baba was not alive to see how his beloved country had fallen into the hands of a militia who ruled it in the name of Islam with scant regard for humanity.

After the prayer, the cleric addressed all those who had gathered in the stadium in a booming voice:

“We are here today to carry out *Sharia*. We are here today to carry out justice. We are here today because the will of Allah and the word of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, are alive and well here in Afghanistan, our beloved homeland. We listen to what God says and we obey because we are nothing but humble, powerless creatures before God’s greatness. And what does God say? I ask you! WHAT DOES GOD SAY? God says that every sinner must be punished in a manner befitting his sin. These are not my words, nor the words of my brothers. Those are the words of GOD.” (235-236)

The name of God was so powerfully invoked by the cleric that it had a tremendous impact on all those who had gathered in the stadium. Therefore, when he pronounced his verdict that the adulterers should be stoned to death, a murmur of approval swept through the crowd. What followed was a murder that was quite ferocious in its execution. A talib walked to a nearby pile of stones, picked up a rock and “hurled the stone at the blindfolded man in the hole” (237). When the stone struck the head of the man, the woman screamed. The next stone struck her. He went on throwing stones till their bodies were reduced to “a mangled mess of blood and shredded rags” (237). It was a horrendous sight to behold. To witness the murder of a human being as an entertainment with crowds chanting Allau-Akbar was disgusting for Amir. His

eagerness to escape from the Ghazi stadium was thwarted by his mission to save Sohrab from the hands of the talib who carried out the execution.

What Amir witnessed in the Ghazi stadium was a hudud punishment, a rarity in most Islamic countries in the modern age. John L. Esposito in his *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam* observes that offenses “punishable by hudud are considered attacks against the established social order, threatening the cohesion and morality of the Muslim community” (149). They are restricted to definite acts like adultery, false allegations of unchastity, theft and alcohol consumption. Even under such circumstances, hudud punishments should be carried out only when the accused has been proven guilty. The Taliban’s scant regard to this aspect had often led to the criticism that their knowledge in Islamic jurisprudence was limited and overshadowed by Pashtunwali. As per Sharia law, to prove adultery four witnesses were needed. But in Pashtunwali, mere hearsay was enough to consider a person guilty. Hence, during the reign of the Taliban, hudud punishments were rampant. Every Friday, Rasheed went to the Ghazi stadium with a pepsi in his hands to watch “the spectacle” (ATSS 251). Coming back home, he would describe with a queer sort of exhilaration “the hands he’d seen severed, the lashings, the hangings, the beheadings” (251). For him, it was just a form of entertainment in which he could indulge without the fear of being punished. Though women were barred from entering the stadium to witness such

ostentatious display of torture, children had free entry. For them, a severed limb or an amputated hand was a toy in flesh and blood that would arouse much mirth and laughter. In *The Wasted Vigil* the reader comes across a talib who grabbed the amputated hand of a thief from the ground and “held it above the heads of a cluster of children who laughed and tried to grab it as he encouraged them to leap up higher and higher” (179). Nadeem Aslam’s grim portrayal of the barbaric entertainment to which people were subjected during the Taliban era reminds the reader of Hosseini’s depiction of Buzkashi, Afghanistan’s national passion, in *The Kite Runner*. The element of cruelty in this sport does not escape the reader’s eyes as it is played with the carcass of a sheep or cattle. The crowd assembled at the venue usually “roared with excitement as the horsemen on the field bellowed their battle cries and jostled for the carcass in a cloud of dust” (TKR18). No doubt, the public executions held in the Ghazi stadium during the Taliban regime and the Buzkashi tournaments were spectacles meant to provide entertainment to the crowd gathered at the venue.

The Taliban’s spectacle of punishment was abhorred by a section in the Muslim world who argued that “the Taliban had no business enforcing sharia law because their knowledge of it was rudimentary and flawed” (Barfield, *Afghanistan* 262). This notion was supported by the al-Azar trained Egyptian clerics who had the opportunity to meet the top echelon of the

Taliban leadership. To their great dismay they found that Mullah Omar's and his friends' knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence was not strong enough to help them to frame decrees aided by theological evidence. This was largely attributed to their lack of knowledge of the Arabic language and literature. In the case of the rank and file of the Taliban, a closer scrutiny of their upbringing reveals the strong influence exerted by the jihadi training camps where they had been taught that "no true Muslim should shrink from killing in cold blood" (TWV 90). Nadeem Aslam gives a vivid account of what was happening in these camps in *The Wasted Vigil*. He writes that these jihadi camps were proverbial hells where the campers were taught to slit the throats of sheep and goats while reciting verses from the Holy Quran. This initiated them to the world of cruelty sanctioned by religion.

The Taliban's favourite mode of punishment was public execution, "a political ritual" carried out in the presence of a large crowd (*Discipline* 64). When Mariam was brought to the Ghazi stadium to be shot dead for murdering Rasheed, her husband of twenty seven years, a "murmuring sound rippled through the stadium" (ATSS 328). She could feel thousands of eyes upon her as she walked towards the southern goal posts. A prayer came forth from her heart as she knelt on the ground to be shot dead: "O my Lord! Forgive and have mercy, for you are the best of the merciful ones" (329). Aslam writes that in the case of Qatrina, who was "indifferent to the idea of

supreme beings and their holy messengers,” a rain of bricks and stones awaited in the stadium (TWV 29). She was stoned to death as the Taliban found her thirty nine years of marriage to Marcus ineffectual as the marriage rites were performed by a woman. How gruesome her murder had been can be perceived from the way a “microphone had been placed close to her for her screams to be heard clearly by everyone” (29). While writing about public executions, both the novelists have underscored the role of a crowd as it was educational in character. Foucault explains the role of people on such occasions:

In the ceremonies of the public execution, the main character was the people, whose real and immediate presence was required for the performance. An execution that was known to be taking place, but which did so in secret would scarcely have had any meaning. The aim was to make an example, not only by making people aware that the slightest offense was likely to be punished, but by arousing feelings of terror by the spectacle of power letting its anger fall upon the guilty person. (*Discipline 57-58*)

From what Foucault states, it is conspicuous that the Taliban’s public executions were meant to terrorise people, to silence them forever by asserting the movement’s political hegemony. It found its true votary in Assef who

entertained the crowd in the Ghazi Stadium with his administering of the Taliban style justice. “ ‘Public justice is the greatest kind of show my brother. Drama. Suspense. And, best of all, education en masse’ ” (TKR 242). It took awhile for Amir to realize that the talib who stoned the young couple to death in the Ghazi stadium, who spoke to him on public justice and education en masse was Assef, his childhood acquaintance who harboured great dislike for Hazaras. For a brief moment, Amir thought of his boyhood days spent in the company of Hassan, his Hazara friend, whom Assef hated to the core. It seemed like a strange coincidence for Amir to confront Assef now after a long gap of nearly twenty years to enquire about Sohrab, Hassan's son.

The Kite Runner is wrought with innumerable incidents that throw light on the ethnic and sectarian rivalry that existed between the Sunni Pashtuns and the Shia Hazaras in Afghanistan for centuries. The novelist very subtly introduces the history of the Hazaras through young Amir's reading of a book written by an Iranian writer named Khorami. The book opens before the reader a flood of information on an oppressed race that had "to live with an ingrained sense of one's place in a hierarchy" (TKR 37). It also informs the reader how the Pashtuns had always persecuted the Hazaras and how their struggle to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century" was silenced with brutal violence (8). This alludes to an attack launched against the Hazaras in Hazarajat in Central Afghanistan during the reign of King Abdur Rahman

Khan (1880-1901), a Pashtun, popularly known as Iron Amir. Bernt Glatzer in his essay titled “Is Afghanistan on the Brink of Ethnic and Tribal Disintegration?” notes that Abdur Rahman subdued “the Hazara with a Pushtun army and allotted the best agricultural and pastoral land to Pashtun clans and chiefs” (171). It was a strategic move meant to push the Shia Hazaras further to the bottom of social hierarchy. Many were exiled to Kabul as slaves to do menial jobs and to bear the brunt of ethnic and religious discriminations enforced by the Sunni Pashtuns. The predicament of Shia Hazaras is of perennial interest can be seen in the umpteen number of articles written on this issue. An opinion similar to the one made by Glatzer was articulated recently by Ahmed Shuja, an Afghan observer and researcher, in an article written by Ruchi Kumar, a freelance journalist based in Kabul, and published in *The Hindu* newspaper on 29 October 2017. Shuja notes: “Sectarian persecution against the Hazaras existed since the 19th century, when Abdur Rehman was king.” In the same article, one comes across a comment made by Patricia Gossman, a senior Afghanistan researcher with the Human Rights Watch. She comments: “Ethnic divisions have been a feature of Afghan society and politics for a long time and have been exploited by political groups.” How these ethnic divisions fostered by sectarian differences aggravated during the time of the civil war had already been discussed in the previous chapter.

What lights up *The Kite Runner* as a novel is its sensitive portrayal of human relationships that transcends the narrow confines of ethnic and sectarian discords. Baba “a towering Pashtun specimen with a thick beard” considered Ali, his Hazara friend, as a brother he never had (TKR 11). The childhood revelries of Amir and Hassan had the beauty of an innocence unmarred by prejudices. But, unlike Baba, Amir as a child was often a witness to the abuses hurled at Hassan for his “characteristic Mongoloid features” (11). It was young Assef who first made Amir woke up to the sinister reality of cultural prejudices that Hazaras experienced in a country that had been their home for centuries. Assef’s deep seated hatred for the Hazaras finds expression in these words: “ ‘Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans not this Flat-Nose here. His people pollute our homeland, our *watan*. They dirty our blood. . . . Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say. That's my vision’ ” (35).

The reader gets the impression that the massacre of the Hazaras by the Taliban forces in Mazar-1 Sharif, a Hazara stronghold in north-west Afghanistan in 1998, was in accordance with the fulfilment of this vision: “To rid Afghanistan of all the dirty, *kasseef* Hazaras” (36). The hatred of the Pashtun Taliban for the Hazaras reached its zenith in 1998. The military setback suffered by the Taliban in Mazar at the hands of the Hazaras in 1997 only aggravated the hatred. By then, most of the provinces in Afghanistan

except a few ones like Mazar-1 Sharif in the north, were under the control of the Taliban. In a massive offensive launched against the bickering forces of the Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Taliban entered Mazar-I Sharif. Immediately after taking the city, announcements were made by the Taliban mullahs that the Shia Hazaras could “convert to Sunni Islam, or leave for Iran or face death” (Rasanayagam 157). The role played by the mullahs in Mazar carnage could not be ignored. Ahmed Rashid reports that “Mullah Omar had given them permission to kill for two hours, but they had killed for two days” (73). Here the reader can see how a movement that had begun with the intention of restoring peace in the country had denigrated to the level of a militant organization madly in pursuit of power.

It is worthy to note here that King Abdur Rahman who considered the Hazaras as infidels had no regard for the priests and mullahs of his time. Ewans notes that Iron Amir in his *The Life of Abdur Rahman* makes scathing remarks against the mullahs saying that their teachings were contrary to the teachings and principles of Muhammad. He found their tyranny and cruelty unbearable. The Taliban leadership composed of mullahs and maulavis gives the impression that they were the prototypes of the ones who lived nearly hundred years ago—tyrannical and cruel.

The Taliban’s penchant for virulent display of power found its most brutal expression in Mazar-I Sharif where thousands of Hazaras were

massacred in a violent frenzy in 1998. It was the worst genocide the Afghans had seen in the modern history of their country. Sitting in front of Assef in a room that smell blood, Amir remembered reading about the ethnic cleansing that shocked the world in the comfort of his home in San Francisco. But he could not then gauge the depth of horror to which Hazaras were subjected in their home land. Human Rights Watch reports that immediately after grabbing control of the city, the Taliban troops indiscriminately killed hundreds of civilians, firing noncombatants and suspected combatants uniformly in residential areas, city roads and market places. Rasanayagam gives an account of what the Taliban did in Mazar:

After a full day of indiscriminate killings the Taliban targeted the Hazaras, enlisting local Pashtuns who knew the city well in their search. Thousands of Hazaras were taken to the main jail, and when it was full they were dumped in locked containers and suffocated. Some containers were taken to the desert outside Mazar and their piteous human contents, if still alive, were massacred. (157)

The hatred and vengeance the Pashtuns had for the Hazaras were brought alive through Assef's mad ranting:

“Door-to-door we went, calling for the men and the boys. We’d shoot them right there in front of their families. Let them see.

Let them remember who they were, where they belonged. . . .
Sometimes, we broke down their doors and went inside their homes. And...I'd...sweep the barrel of my machine gun around the room and fire and fire until the smoke blinded me.” (TKR 242)

For Assef, the mad frenzy of killing was a liberating experience. Assef also said that he and his fellow talibs had left the dead bodies remain in the streets for days. What they did was contrary to Islamic precepts that demanded immediate burial of the dead. Amir was outraged at what he had heard and his anger spilled out in words: “ ‘Stoning adulterers? Raping children? Flogging women for wearing high heels? Massacring Hazaras? All in the name of Islam?’ ” (248). Amir's retort was the natural response of a man who could not accept the way teachings of Islam had been distorted by the clergy who considered themselves as the guardians of Islam.

Amir's search for Sohrab finally came to an end when the boy walked in with a guard who carried a stereo on his shoulders. Amir found the resemblance disorienting. The boy had the same “Chinese doll face” of his father (244). “His head was shaved, his eyes darkened with mascara, and his cheeks glowed with an unnatural red. When he stopped in the middle of the room, the bells around his anklets stopped jingling” (244). Then Sohrab started dancing to the Pashtun music that filled the room. “Tabla, harmonium,

the whine of a *dil-roba*” (245). This was happening at a place where all kinds of entertainment had been banned. One is reminded of the Taliban Education Minister Mullah Abdul Hanafi who said that the Taliban “oppose music because it creates a strain in the mind and hampers study of Islam” (Rashid 115). Hosseini sarcastically comments that “music wasn’t sinful as long as it played to Taliban ears” (TKR 245). What unfolded before Amir was bacha bazi or boy play done unabashedly. “Sohrab raised his arms and turned slowly. He stood on tiptoes, spun gracefully, dipped to his knees, straightened, and spun again” (245). Sohrab danced until the music stopped. Then Assef called Soharab to him. Holding the boy close to him, he slid his hands “up and down the boy's belly. Up and down, slowly, gently” (245). Amir felt that his flesh was shrinking against his bones when he saw Assef kissing the boy. He could see pleading in Sohrab’s eyes. “They were slaughter sheep's eyes” (249). Amir recalled that decades ago he had seen the same look in the eyes of young Hassan when he was about to be raped by Assef in an alley after the kite fighting tournament. Assef’s valiant call to his friends to be a party in the obnoxious act was rejected by them. The conversation that ensued between Assef and his friends strengthens the reader’s perception of Assef’s contempt for the Hazaras.

“Your father won’t find out,” Assef said. “And there is nothing sinful about teaching a lesson to a disrespectful donkey.”

“I don’t know,” Wali muttered.

“Suit yourself,” Assef said. He turned to Kamal. “What about you?”

“I...well...”

“It’s just a Hazara,” Assef said. But Kamal kept looking away.

“Fine,” Assef snapped. “All I want you weaklings to do is hold him down. Can you manage that?” (KR 66)

What followed was a brutal rape to which Amir remained a silent spectator. Being a mute spectator only strengthened the coward in him. He felt his heart being torn apart between duty towards Hassan and cowardice. Finally, cowardice won. It made him run away from the scene of rape. “I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me” (68). Though the novelist has succeeded in sensitively portraying the moral dilemma at a critical juncture in Amir’s life, the reader can sense that deep in his heart he knew that neither history nor religion could easily be overcome. A glimpse into Amir’s adolescent mind reveals this aspect. “In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shia, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing” (22). Even children are not immune to ethnic rivalries and sectarian differences is effectively portrayed here. In her essay “Theme of Identity and Redemption in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite*

Runner” Niraja Saraswat comments on this aspect. She writes: “To be a Pashtun is a vital part of your identity, it is suggested, because it means that you are in power and the dominant force in a country where the Hazaras have been suppressed and the Pashtuns still hold sway” (169).

Decades later fate brought Amir face to face with Assef. Only the milieu had changed. The slaughter sheep’s eyes Amir had seen on Sohrab’s face pulled at the strings of his heart. Amir could see that Sohrab like thousands of children in Afghanistan was a victim of bacha bazi, and it was not easy to unclasp the arm that had encircled him. The reader identifies the fate of the boy to the fate of the nation. The arm that encircled Sohrab symbolizes the vicious trap into which Afghanistan had fallen.

Khaled Hosseini’s novel *The Kite Runner* brought the problem of bacha bazi into limelight with its candid portrayal of Sohrab as a victim of an age old heinous practice. Here, the reader comes across a Taliban official who secretly indulges in pederasty abhorred by the Taliban leadership. In fact, one of the reasons that prompted Mullah Omar and his friends to mobilise the Taliban was this social evil that thrived in many parts of Afghanistan, particularly in Kandahar during the civil war. Acute poverty and illiteracy drove youngsters into the hands of predators who lured them away with the promise of money. There was no escape for the boys who had fallen into the

trap of bacha bazi as they were often patronized by the rich and the influential mujahiddin commanders and warlords.

Bacha bazi literally means boy play. Young effeminate boys who get initiated into the world of music and dance undergo gender assimilation before each dance performance when they dress themselves like girls with flowing skirts that caress their belled ankles. It robs them of their male identity. Their *kajalled* eyes and reddened lips blindfold the spectators to the reality that they are actually boys. The audience comprised of men of varied age groups fight among themselves to have sex with the bachas after their performances. It is an accepted fact that most bachas are sex slaves who choreograph their lives according to the whims and fancies of their rich patrons with little self-knowledge that they are the victims of the most heinous kind of child abuse.

In fact, pederasty is one of the most nefarious violations of human rights as it involves children and their crushed childhood. Hosseini makes Sohrab act as a mouthpiece for thousands of bachas in Afghanistan when he mumbles in a feeble voice that he feels dirty. A piece of conversation between Amir and Sohrab makes the reader realize the wretchedness involved in the practice of bacha bazi.

“Because—” he said, gasping and hitching between sobs,
“because I don’t want them to see me . . . I’m so dirty.” He

sucked in his breath and let it out in along, wheezy cry. “I’m so dirty and full of sin.”

“You’re not dirty, Sohrab,” I said.

“Those men—”

“You’re not dirty at all.”

“—they did things . . . the bad man and the other two . . . they did things . . . did things to me.”

“You’re not dirty, and you’re not full of sin.” I touched his arm again and he drew away. (TKR 278)

It requires courage and conviction on the part a writer to use his narrative as a tool to expose a regularized, methodical practice that is very much a part of Afghan life. In the movie *The Kite Runner*, bacha bazi is handled very delicately as the director of the movie as well as the production unit did not want to provoke the sentiments of an international audience for whom the movie was clearly meant to be. Islam abhors pederasty which is commonly referred to as homosexuality. It is considered as abnormal to indulge in such acts. Ahmed Rashid writes that the Taliban “clamped on homosexuality” and on one occasion Mullah Omar himself attended a function in which men condemned for sodomy were killed by toppling down a huge wall over them (115). So the reality that pederasty flourished during the Taliban era cannot be denied. Moreover, the fact that the boys had to dress themselves like girls and flaunt their dancing skills for the sexual gratification

of men reveal the abysmal darkness into which this once great nation had plunged.

The Taliban era is noted for the violence inflicted upon hapless citizens by communal bigots who formulated coercive measures on the basis of religion to restore peace in a country where anarchy and unrest reigned supreme. The novels substantiate the fact that whatever the Taliban did in the name of ugly and distorted version of Islam resulted in gross violations of human rights that forced people to go through extreme hardships. When studied from the theoretical suggestions propounded by Foucault, it is evident that with the help of the edicts framed on the basis of the Sharia laws, the Taliban could make the country function like a panopticon where the citizens were closely monitored through constant surveillance by an insensitive entity named the Religious Police. Both the novelists prove that in societies where ancient practices and traditions rule the roost, religion can act as a very effective surveillance tool to intimidate population through docility projects. Obviously, women and children who constitute the most vulnerable section of the population become the victims of such projects. The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* portrays how women had to bear the brunt of talibanisation both on their bodies and minds during the reign of the Taliban. *The Kite Runner* provides the reader with the harrowing details of ethnic animosity that culminated in the mass murder of thousands of Hazaras. The novels under study *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil*

present before the reader the barbarity that resulted in bereavement in the lives of Laila, Mariam, Hassan, Sohrab, Marcus, and Qatrina, and how they waged a bitter battle against a sinister force that wrecked their lives in ways unimaginable. The novels have successfully narrated incredibly terrifying experiences that will remain etched in the collective consciousness of people who read them.