

Introduction

The Afghan Quagmire

While the history of contemporary Afghanistan is complex, it is not opaque; rather, it is best understood by giving historical context its due because it still plays a crucial role in politics today” (Barfield 15).

Afghanistan occupies a unique position in the collective consciousness of the world for the indisputable fact that from days of yore it has been a happy hunting ground of imperial powers who wanted to exert control over the vast territory that functioned like a cluster of fiefdoms under able kings or tribal chieftains. It emerged in its modern form in the 19th century as a buffer state embroiled in the power struggle between the Czarist Russia and the British India. Nowhere in the world does one come across a land where geography has played a decisive role in determining its destiny. A landlocked country with the erstwhile breakaway republics of the former Soviet Union like Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan bordering the northern region, Iranian plateau in the west and the Indian sub-continent in the southeast, Afghanistan’s history is intertwined with a multiplicity of histories that lend a unique charm and distinct flavour to the cultural landscape of the country. The significance of this strategically placed geographical location has always played a major role in shaping the region’s history and culture as well as its

past and present. The presence of a large number of ethnic groups—Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Nuristanis, Aimaqs—each with distinctive ethnic characteristics bears testimony to this fact.

The first allusion to the land presently known as Afghanistan appears in the Zoroastrian scripture written in the 6th century BC during the reign of Cyrus, the great Achaemenid monarch. The reign of his successor Darius the Great saw the sovereignty of the Achaemenid Empire extend from North Africa to the River Indus in the east. It is said that Darius had to station strong garrisons in the eastern region in order to subdue the chieftains of the small Afghan kingdoms who resisted against his suzerainty. This is a fine instance to understand the instinct of resistance that is deeply ingrained in the character of a race of people who inhabit the territory known as Afghanistan. Even Alexander the Great who set his foot in the region in 330 BC had to face rebellions in his onward march of conquering the land. For the hardy and indefatigable people of the region, the troops of the mighty Alexander in the ancient period and that of the Soviet Russia and America in the modern period were one and the same—forces that had to be abhorred and kept at bay. Sir Martin Ewans, a former officer of the British Diplomatic Service, summarizes a dominant feature of Afghan history in the following sentences:

If there has been an overriding feature of their history, it is that it has been a history of conflict—of invasions, battles and

sieges, of vendettas, assassinations and massacres, of tribal feuding, dynastic strife and civil war. Rarely have the Afghans allowed themselves, or allowed others with whom they have come into contact, to lead out their lives in peace. (12)

In spite of this grave reality, the land had, as Thomas Barfield, a professor of anthropology at Boston University remarks in his *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, “a positively magnetic attraction” for the invaders (66). Of all the invasions that happened over the course of centuries, the most definitive was the one made by the Arabs in the 7th century AD. The Arab invasion ushered in Islam which in due course of time obliterated all the existing religions and practices. It has to be mentioned in this context that it was during the time of Ghaznavid dynasty made up of Turks from the northern regions, Islam began to flourish in Afghanistan. Mahmud, the greatest of the Ghaznavids who ruled from 998 to 1030 championed the cause of Islam. He promoted mass conversion to Islam among Hindus and Buddhists and looted Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries to fill his coffers. The worst affected was Buddhism that had enjoyed the patronage of Emperors like Asoka and Kanishka in the 1st century BC and the 2nd century AD respectively as it could not withstand the onslaught of Islam in its expansionary mission. Bamiyan in Central Afghanistan with its innumerable niched caves where thousands of

monks lived peacefully loudly proclaims the glorious Buddhist heritage of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic past.

One of the calamitous events in the history of Afghanistan occurred in the 13th century AD when hordes of Mongols under the leadership of Genghis Khan invaded the land. Though a brilliant commander and an able administrator, he would brook no opposition to his invading forces. The brutality inflicted by the Mongols still remains as a bleeding wound in the psyche of the nation. How inextricably past is connected to the present can be seen in the presence of a large number of Hazara population in Afghanistan. The Hazaras, one of the most persecuted ethnic groups in Afghanistan, are considered as the descendants of the Mongols; their distinctive Mongoloid features loudly proclaim their origin. The Mongols were followed by the Timurids and the Mughals, each contributing in its own way for the advancement of a culture that was primarily Islamic in character and temperament. It was in the 18th century, Ahmed Shah, a Pashtun of the Abdali tribe, could gain control over the land and establish the Durrani Empire which was characteristically Pashtun. The long history of Pashtun dominance in Afghanistan's troubled political history began with the ascension of Ahmed Shah Durrani to the seat of power in 1747, and lasted for nearly 230 years till it came to an abrupt end with the murder of President Daoud in 1978.

Towards the end of the 18th century and in the beginning of the 19th century, the mountainous and traditionally tumultuous land of Afghanistan, overran successively by Macedonians, Mauryans, Kushans, Arabs, Ghaznavids, Ghorids, Mongols, Timurids and Mughals, became a hub of political activity where the leading players were the Russian and the British empires “as each sought to stop the other gaining a hold over the area, including the various khanates of Central Asia” (Marsden 16). The mutual distrust the European colonists had for each other resulted in a power game that prompted the British to send invasion forces to Afghanistan in 1839 and 1878. Interestingly, the British invasion of 1878 can be considered as a prelude to the Soviet invasion that took place in 1979, nearly a hundred years later. It is not to be forgotten that the jihad against the Soviets and its after-effects still play havoc in the lives of Afghans. But it was during the time of the first Anglo-Afghan war, Islam and the concept of jihad started wielding its power as a mobilizing factor in the country. Until 1840, as Barfield remarks, “religion had played a minor role in internal Afghan politics because fighting had always been Muslim on Muslim” and the banner of jihad had been used only to fight against “the polytheists on the Indian plain or their Muslim rulers” (*Afghanistan* 122). But in 1840’s a new political situation emerged that legitimized the call for a jihad against “the British occupation of Afghanistan in support of Shuja,” popularly known as Shah Shuja, that put “Afghan opposition in a religious framework” (122, 123). Apprehensions that the

ulema and the mullahs had about increased British interference accentuated the role of Islam. Ahmed Rashid's views on the role of traditional Islam in Afghanistan are worth noting here. He comments:

Traditional Islam in Afghanistan believed in minimum government, where state interference was as little and as far away as possible. Everyday decisions were carried out by the tribe and the community. Amongst the Pashtuns, village mullahs, although largely uneducated, ensured that the mosque was the centre of village life. (83)

Undoubtedly, the British interference threatened the traditional power base which earnestly sought redress in religion. It also fortified the fact that "religion had always been the best way to unite tribes that were otherwise too divided to unite on any other basis" (Barfield, *Afghanistan* 123). Barfield also claims that this "leaping to a "defense of Islam" to justify resisting a regime in Kabul or its policies would henceforth become a sword that was rarely sheathed in Afghan politics, regardless of whether foreigners were actually present on Afghan soil" (123).

It is worthy to note what Olivier Roy, a researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, says in his *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* on the unifying role that Islam has always played in Afghanistan: "In a country like Afghanistan, where the concept of the nation has developed

but recently, where the state is seen as external to society and where people's allegiance is directed primarily towards their local community, the only thing which all Afghans have in common is Islam" (30). From what Roy states, it is clear that Islam has always played a decisive role in the lives of Afghans. For centuries this religion has been the axis round which their lives revolved. For an ordinary Afghan, it is not an ideology that thrives on the intellectual discourses carried out in the religious realm, but an all-embracing way of life. When religion becomes a way of life, its influence can be seen in all aspects of life. In such a society, it is inconceivable to disjoint religion from politics as they are so firmly intertwined. And here lies the relevance of using jihad as a religious tool to gain a political end. This helped the clergy to frame "their opposition to the British in terms of a religious jihad" and its success led to the peripheral expulsion of the British from the Afghan soil (Barfield, *Afghanistan* 133). However, it was Amir Abdur Rahman, famously known as the Iron Amir, who "made defense of Islam and jihad a feature of Afghan national identity when dealing with the outside world" (155). He also linked "elements of Islamic belief with Afghan tribal customs in ways that convinced his largely illiterate population that the two were identical" (158-159). Barfield explains:

The tautology was that since all true Afghans were devout Muslims then all their customs must be Islamic as well, otherwise they could not be good Muslims (which they were by

definition). Anyone proposing to change tradition could therefore be accused of attacking Islam itself. In other Muslim countries there was debate over responding to the Western colonial challenge by changing old traditions and reforming Islam, but not in Afghanistan. (159)

The Amir's catabolic view of Islam linked with his policy of "xenophobic isolation" safeguarded Afghanistan's national integrity; yet shut the country off to new thoughts and ideas (159). The reforms introduced by King Amanulla in the 1920s made him the victim of the wrath of the ulema and the mullahs which eventually resulted in his exile in a foreign land. Nevertheless, it was soon felt that the country could not remain immune to the winds of change that breezed through the citadels of power across the world. The changes that took place in the intellectual domain of Afghanistan, especially in Kabul University in 1950's, introduced two streams of ideologies in the political spectrum of the country—Communism and Islamism, and the adherents to these creeds were known as the Communists and the Islamists. Little did they know that they would be rewriting the history of their nation in the near future.

The communists founded the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1965 and the key players were Nur Muhammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal. But by 1967 the PDPA diverged into two factions, the

Khalq (Masses) and the Parcham (Banner). The Khalq under the leadership of Taraki and Hafizullah Amin enlisted heavily from the estranged Ghilzai Pashtuns in the Soviet-trained military, while the Parcham under the command of Karmal had its power basis in the educational institutions and the bureaucracy. Though both the factions were Marxist and pro-Soviet, the Khalq advocated an uprising that would overthrow the old order and pave the way for quick advancement to socialism. Parcham was more inclined to join forces with progressive elements within the elite and envisaged a slower economic change.

The Islamists had their footing in the Sharia Law Faculty in Kabul University and started functioning as a party in 1973. The founding members were Burhannudin Rabbani, Ghulam Rasul Sayyaf, both faculty members and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. They drew succour from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and wanted to constitute a state built on Sharia laws where politics and religion were interconnected. Their hatred for the communists was well known and it often resulted in violent clashes between the two factions. It was with growing anxiety that the Islamists watched the infiltration of the state machinery by the communists. Their wrath had no limit at the realization that the coup led by Daoud on 17 July 1973 when King Zahir Shah was abroad was carried out with the assistance of Parcham faction of the PDPA. Roy comments on the situation that evolved: “Daoud, a Pashtun nationalist, and a

man of secular outlook whose support came from the communists, was in every respect totally and implacably opposed to the Islamists” (74). Naturally, his ascension to power led to the arrest of Islamists. It was at this critical juncture a split arose between the moderates and the radicals among the Islamists. The radicals led by Hekmatyar wanted a popular uprising against Daoud’s administration but it did not find much favour with the moderates led by Rabbani. Later they ironed out their differences and regrouped at Peshawar. They had the blessings of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the President of Pakistan, who waited for an opportune moment to counter the pro-Pashtunistan policies of Daoud. Pakistan’s political meddling in the affairs of Afghanistan took a serious tone hereafter. The Islamists were allowed to open offices at Peshawar and received training from the Pakistan army to accomplish clandestine operations in Afghanistan. The offices opened by the Islamists later found much favour with the refugees who came to Peshawar after the Communist Revolution and during the time of the Soviet occupation. However, most of the uprisings planned and executed by the Islamist leaders from Peshawar did not bear much fruit due to lack of coordination. Repeated failures forced Rabbani to come to certain conclusions that “there could be no uprising without close links with the *ulama*, the people of influence within traditional society; neither could it succeed without close contact with the peasants; and it was clearly necessary to coordinate a peasant uprising with a rebellion in the towns and on the part of the army” (76). It was this realization that finally led

to the success of the uprisings against the communists and the Soviets. Before dwelling further on this topic, it has to be noted that the romance between the communists and Daoud did not last long. It came to an abrupt end when Daoud was murdered in a bloody coup by the PDPA in April 1978.

The resistance of the Afghan people to the communist regime in Afghanistan did not begin with the full-fledged invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet forces in December 1979. Rather, it began with the Saur Revolution when the Khalq faction of the PDPA came to power on 27 April 1978 through a coup d'état with the agenda of bringing progress to a predominantly conservative and backward country through the implementation of an ideology that was alien to much of its population. To many international observers, the event that took place in the Afghan capital Kabul on 27 April was yet another third world coup d'état that brought with it an unsteady regime. For the ordinary Afghans, the coup d'état signified the end of the political supremacy of the Durrani Pashtuns. No one thought that it was the beginning of one of the most tragic periods in the history of Afghanistan as it had totally upset the political framework in the country which later led to the Soviet invasion.

From the outset, the Afghan communists were acutely aware of the fact that they were treading on a slippery zone since their roots were mainly ideological rather than tribal, and it would not be easy for them to bring about a Communist Revolution in their country with an indifferent peasantry and

small groups of working class scattered across Kabul and a few other cities. Since they had come to power through a military coup, they felt that they had to make an impact quickly and dispassionately before the emergence of a counter-revolution. However, the initial policy enunciated by the PDPA showed a recognition of the shaky position of an ideologically focused party with strong alien roots in a traditional society that took pride in keeping foreigners at bay. It clearly stated that the PDPA would show deep respect to the social, political, cultural and religious practices and traditions of the people of Afghanistan. There was also a concerted effort on the part the PDPA President Taraki to appease the “tribal and nationalistic sentiments of the ethnic Pushtuns” as they constituted the majority population of the country (Edwards 24). However, when the initial euphoria died down, there could be seen a shift from the non-ideological line adopted earlier to communist ideology which earnestly sought its materialization in transforming the Afghan society along communist lines.

Decrees were framed to bring about drastic changes in the society. The land reform decree was framed in such a manner that its strict implementation would bring about total redistribution of land. It placed strict bounds on land holdings, any excess land being appropriated without reparation and dispersed among landless peasants and other deserving people. It also ensured that measures would be taken for the creation of cooperatives to replace the

traditional rural economic relationships. The marriage decree formulated by the government intended to eliminate bride price, fixed minimum age for marriage and stated that freedom of choice would be permitted. The communist regime also gave paramount importance to literacy programmes based on a Marxist curriculum with Russian language as the medium of teaching at the secondary level.

The problem with the measures adopted by the communist government was the gross negligence it showed to the complexities inherent in the functioning of the Afghan society and the economic and social structures on which it relied. It became apparent that for the PDPA leadership ideology was of utmost importance and they had no understanding of the poor workers and peasants on whose behalf they were literally acting. They were confident that through the decrees they would be able to rout the rural power structures and reinstruct the peasants. They paid no heed to the fact that for the peasant in the countryside, the imposition of communism was a part of the infiltration of the rural areas by the state bureaucracy which he detested. For him “the state is alien, and the relationship between the peasantry and the state official is characterized by a profound and mutual contempt” (Roy 10). Finally, when the decrees were introduced there was widespread protest. Agrarian reforms made neither the landed gentry nor the peasants happy. Though the peasants who had mortgaged their lands to landlords or moneylenders got their assets

back, they could not cultivate their lands as there was no one to lend money to purchase essential commodities like seeds and fertilizers. Angelo Rasanayagam in his magisterial study *Afghanistan: A Modern History* opines that the “overall effect of the decree was to short circuit the traditional and informal system of rural credit that enabled the peasants to survive” (74). Moreover, most villagers who got free land found it un-Islamic to accept land that had been confiscated from another though it was legal from the government’s viewpoint. Some farmers who had managed “to repossess their holdings re-mortgaged them to their old creditors” (75). The failure of agrarian reforms can be attributed to “the PDPA’s failure to appreciate the internal dynamics of the rural communities they were trying to change” (75). The result was widespread resistance spearheaded by the landlords and the money lenders who joined hands with the mullahs and *ulema* “who gave their blessings to the unholy cause of defending the marriage of Islam and usury that was a mark of tribal economic relations in Afghanistan” (75).

The educational reforms too were bitterly resented for a variety of reasons. The teachers hired for the campaign were mostly male student volunteers from Kabul and other cities. Their authoritarian behaviour and condescending attitude were not acceptable to the elderly folk who were forced to attend the literacy classes. Moreover, the devout were perturbed by the political indoctrination implied in the texts used. But what instigated the

poor illiterate masses of the villages to choose the path of resistance was the mingling of the opposite sexes in the literacy classes. It was an idea quite alien to them, and therefore highly unacceptable. Likewise, the new marriage act struck hard at the heart of traditional marriage contracts. “The aspect of the decree that provoked the most controversy was the upper limit of 300 afghanis placed on the *haqmehr*, or money payable to the wife in case of the dissolution of the marriage” (77). Nevertheless, in advanced urban areas the decree was hailed as a harbinger of real change as it granted autonomy to youngsters to choose their partners. But, as Rasanayagam says, marriage reforms articulated through Decree 7 was perceived by the backward and unlettered people of rural Afghanistan “as a frontal attack on tradition” (77). To make matters worse, the communist regime replaced the Afghan flag with its green stripe signifying Islam, with a red flag. Of the other acts that provoked the masses, the two notable ones were the omission of the customary invocation of Allah before official statements and party demonstrations that symbolically restrained a person’s autonomy through a string of well-orchestrated movements and expressions. For most villagers, party rallies performed before the bewildering eyes of the local community was a source of embarrassment and disgrace. In effect, the measures taken by the PDPA clearly flaunted its alignment to communist ideology which alienated the masses from the ruling class. Ewans points out that the PDPA’s aim was in accord with Marxist line -

“to shatter feudal and capitalist relationships and establish the state as the single repository of patronage and authority” (193).

As the resentment mounted, the government resorted to repression. All those who opposed the government were either killed or arrested. Pul-i-Charki, the notorious prison on the outskirts of Kabul, got filled with political prisoners. Among them were military officers who had defected, politicians, government officials, and members of the clergy. In the country side, thousands lost their lives in mass murders or simply disappeared. The PDPA’s symbolic construction of a narrative steeped in an ideology that was alien to a predominantly peasant folk, forced people to rally behind Islam which offered a platform for all the disenchanted sections of the population to articulate their dissatisfaction with the new regime. This does not mean that Islam had earlier been unimportant. On the contrary, the Afghans were pious Muslims who obviously saw their country as an Islamic nation. But, as Edwards says, “between the margins of personal and national identification with Islam, religion and religious figures seldom entered the political arena, especially in rural areas” (41). An exemption to this rule happened when the integrity and the Islamic character of the country were threatened by foreign forces or sweeping internal changes. On such occasions, Islam acted as a binding factor for otherwise disjointed factions and groups in the country. Roy remarks: “The need to have a strong central power to defend the community of

believers against infidels is recognized by everyone and always becomes more important in periods of crisis, receding into the background in the absence of external threat” (20). The PDPA government and the reforms that it introduced once again brought all the disjointed factions in villages and urban centres together under the banner of Islam. Uprisings that occurred in the country were resistances that vocalized the discontent of a nation whose Islamic character and integrity felt threatened by a foreign ideology. Once again, a few observations made by Roy are worth pointing out though they are more related to Afghan rural life. Roy says that even when Islam transmits the principle of social justice, “it does not, in itself, have a blueprint for a state to rival the state which actually exists” (28). Roy further contends that Islam “does not promise a utopia that involves upsetting society, for the peasant is not revolutionary, neither does it present a political programme of the kind espoused by the Islamists,” because the peasant considers the transformation of personal conduct as being more important than the reform of social structures (28-29). He considers true Islam as “enjoining upon its followers a number of very specific rules, obedience to which ensures economic and social justice (for example there is the condemnation of usury)” (29). It is important to remember that the notion of Islam as a counterbalancing power to the tyranny of the state is not of modern origin, but grew in importance after 1924 when the state launched a course of action for secularization, ushering in the development of state bureaucracy. Even the decrees framed with the best

intentions were seen as tyrannical “because they remove from the peasant overall responsibility for the conduct of his affairs” (29). Understandably, reforms, whether the ones introduced by King Amanullah or President Daoud or the communists, were considered as encroachments into the functioning of the traditional society which naturally paved way for resistance.

When the resistance gathered momentum breaking the barriers of ethnic and tribal affiliations, people sought the support of the Islamist parties at Peshawar. It is to be noted that most of the resistance groups that formed across the country in the aftermath of the new ideological explosion that characterized the Saur Revolution had its ideological base in Islamism that took roots in the country since the second half of the twentieth century, and were led by the Islamists who abhorred the communists. When the PDPA came to power, the Islamists knew that they were communists, for they were too familiar to each other as they had shared the same space in schools and universities. Since most of the tribal leaders and their followers could not withstand the pressure brought on them by the unprecedented agitation incensed by the reforms in the countryside, they moved to Pakistan where they were received with open arms by the disfavoured Zia-ul-Haq regime, eagerly waiting for ways to stabilize its rule with international support. An anti-communist objective became the means to do so. Rasanayagam writes on the situation that evolved in Pakistan during that critical juncture:

Every arriving Afghan was given a daily stipend of four rupees—more than the average income of an Afghan peasant. By the end of 1978 some 80,000 Afghans had reached Pakistan according to government figures. Pakistan also claimed to have spent the equivalent of 145 million dollars on ‘humanitarian existence’ to the Afghan refugees. (79)

The role played by Pakistan in the Afghan resistance movement was so great that its implications were powerful enough to have a lasting effect. Meanwhile, forces of resistance assembled in Pakistan established training camps in North West Frontier Province to change Afghan refugees into guerrilla fighters. No one had any clue then that these training camps would later get converted to jihadi training camps where thousands of refugee boys would get initiated into the inhuman world of terrorist activities. These camps had the blessings of Pakistan President Zia who found it as one of the means to pursue his anti-communist agenda. The presence of a large contingent of Soviet personnel and advisors in Afghanistan did not deter him in any way. Rasanayagam writes that in “January 1979 a first contingent of some 5000 insurrectionists under the banner of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-i-Islami entered Kunar province, attacked Asadabad, its principal town, and captured a strategically located government fort” (79). This was first in the series of attacks launched by the Islamist parties against the PDPA government.

Meanwhile, a major uprising that started in the city of Herat in May 1979 made the Khalq and its Soviet patrons think of an alternative to subdue resistances that had been raging across the country intermittently. Ewans says that for the Soviets the “onward march of communism was irreversible, and there was no way that a communist regime, once in power, could be allowed to fail. Any such failure would be gravely damaging to Soviet prestige and would raise doubts about the USSR’s ability to support other communist regimes” (196).

But the dilemma of the Russians was that in spite of all the military and economic support and the presence of their service people and civilian advisors, they were incapable either to influence the fundamental policies and actions of the Khalq regime or alleviate their consequences. The Soviets found themselves in a conundrum. At a meeting of the Soviet Politburo convened in March 1979, the Afghan situation was discussed in detail. To Defence Minister Ustinov’s statement that his forces would be ready for deployment at any time, KGB Chief Yuri Andropov’s response was significant. He spoke with conviction that in a country like Afghanistan where religion dominated every aspect of life, and illiteracy and economic backwardness were at its lowest point, issues could not be resolved through socialism. Andropov’s views were supported by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. He emphasized the fact that the deploying of Soviet troops in Afghanistan had no legal

justification as he felt that what was happening in the country was an internal affair, “a revolutionary internal conflict, a battle of one group of the population against another” (85). Gromykov’s view strikes at the heart of the problem. But his seemingly innocent opinion very cleverly hides the fact that the PDPA was almost functioning like a feeder party of the communist party of Russia by turning a blind eye to the harsh realities of Afghan life. Resistances, large or small, were the natural response of a people on whom an ideology alien to them was brutally inflicted. Rasanayagam writes that contrary to what was projected in the media at that time and later in the copious literature that had developed around the subject, “the Soviet leadership was not at all eager to send their armed forces into Afghanistan” (87). Views aired by Andropov and Gromykov very clearly suggest this. But what transpired between March and December 1979 rewrote the history of Afghanistan.

It was during this time, the power struggle between Amin and Taraki headed to a collision which culminated in the murder of Taraki. Amin’s hundred days reign saw nearly three-quarter of the country rise in rebellion. The morale of the Afghan army reached its nadir during this period. Rasanayagam observes that by now Amin must have realised that his position was in danger. The country was in a state of unrest, army was in shambles, and Amin could not nurse the delusion that Pakistan would relinquish its

assistance to the Peshawar based Islamic opposition parties. His political overtures to the US only distanced him from the Soviets. Early in December 1979, Soviet forces were positioned at strategic locations and an invasion seemed imminent. Eventually, Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on 27 December 1979. Ewans writes on the events of the day:

Late on the 27th, part of the Russian force took the central part of the city and the main ministries, while 700 KGB troops, dressed in Afghan army uniforms, headed for Darulaman. During the night, in the face of strong resistance, which caused the death of over one hundred of the attackers, the palace was assaulted, and Amin was killed. . . . Within a few weeks, three further divisions were committed and total numbers grew to some 85,000. (203)

A new heartless and bloodthirsty phase in the history of Afghanistan began with the Soviet invasion. What made it all the more tragic was the harsh reality that it gradually brought to the surface all the vicious forces that had been lying dormant for long in the character of the nation. Although thirty eight years have gone by since the invasion, its by-products—the brutal civil war that raged in Afghanistan in the last decade of the 20th century, the emergence of the Taliban and the American invasion—still play havoc in the lives of the Afghans. Rasanayagam mentions about a document dated 31

December 1979 that speaks volumes on the reasons behind the military intervention. It discloses “Amin’s smear campaigns against the Soviet Union, his hampering of the activities of Soviet personnel in the country and of his efforts to mend relations with the United States” as part of a more stable foreign policy program (90).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was widely condemned. However, the Soviet Union did not show any sign of succumbing to the pressures of world opinion. With Babrak Karmal at the helm of affairs, the PDPA promised a fresh phase of the Saur Revolution. It included a new constitution that anticipated elections and a multi-party system, a re-evaluation of the land reform decree, an exoneration for returning refugees and freedom to political prisoners. In the meantime, executions continued unabatedly and prisons got fuller than they had been under the previous regime. Karmal knew how important it was for him to placate religious opinion in order to regain the confidence of the masses. With that view, he guaranteed freedom of religion, established Islamic institutions and restored the old black, red and green national flag much to the annoyance of the Khalq. But Karmal could not keep up with the pretences forever, and very soon it became quite clear that the new regime was very much under the control of its Soviet masters. Russian advisers held key positions in the ministries and the KHAD. The old antagonism between the Khalq and the Parcham resurfaced. Bitter infighting

within the cabinet and the armed forces gravely affected the functioning of the government which resulted in the total collapse of all sectors like education, trade, commerce, industry and agriculture.

It is interesting to observe how the Soviet invasion affected the functioning of the resistance groups that had positioned themselves at Peshawar in Pakistan. They forged new alliances with resistance groups inside and outside Afghanistan to widen their base. Ewans notes that some groups that operated in the centre and east of Afghanistan were mainly Shia and drew sustenance from Iran. Though the political, social and ethnic configuration of these groups often vacillated, the jihad they had already declared against the Kabul regime gave them a platform to sink their differences. So they could very easily extend the jihad to the infidel foreign invaders too. It is worthy to note the comment made by Barfield on the way the concept of jihad brought people together:

As with earlier resistance movements, this one took the form of a jihad against the infidel invaders because that was the classic way to overcome the qawm barriers that normally prevented unity among Afghan factions. It was also a legacy of Abdur Rahman, who had so permanently fused the defence of the nation with the defence of Islam that the two seemed inseparable after that. (*Afghanistan* 235)

The combatants who took up arms to fight their common enemy came to be known as mujahidin or holy warriors. Peter Marsden who had worked as Information Coordinator of the British Agencies Afghanistan Group defines the term mujahidin as follows:

The definition of the Mujahidin thus encompasses all those who moved to Pakistan and Iran, and engaged in fighting within Afghanistan on the basis of incursionary movements from these two countries, together with the many people who opted to remain in Afghanistan through the war, often fleeing to the sanctuary of the mountains with their families and organizing raids from there. (27)

Of all the resistance groups, seven groups of Sunni religious ideology which were further divided into Islamists and traditionalists, played a lead role in giving a purpose and sense of direction to the mujahidin. Of the four Islamist groups, the most radical and intransigent was Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami. A Ghilzai Pashtun from northern Afghanistan, Hekmatyar's commitment and great organizational skills made him a favourite of Pakistan's military regime and the CIA. He also strengthened his position by opening schools and training camps for refugees in Peshawar. However, Hekmatyar's personal ambitions often resulted in conflicts with other mujahidin groups. There was another Hezb-i-Islami led by Maulana Yunis Khalis, a populist

mullah who enjoyed the support of the *ulema* of the eastern regions of the country. He had under him able commanders like Abdul Haq who could successfully build up a competent guerrilla movement in and around Kabul. The Islamist group that was moderate in its attitude and approach was Prof. Burhannudin Rabbani's Jamiat-i-Islami. Rabbani was of the view that "in seeking to promote an Islamist direction, the party should proceed cautiously and with respect for existing beliefs, traditions and practices, including the traditional emphasis on consensual decision-making" (Marsden 29). It was composed primarily of Tajiks and other non-Pashtuns and had its operational base mainly in the northeast. The leadership of the Jamait-i-Islami was comprised of men of Islamist background and great commanders like Ahmad Shah Massoud. This helped the party later to develop into the strongest of the mujahidin groups. Ittihad-i-Islami, the fourth Islamist group, was formed by Addal-Rab al-Rasul Sayyaf. Like Rabbani, he too was an academic of high repute. He recruited Arab volunteers to his party which strengthened his relationship with Saudi Arabia. Of the traditionalist groups, the Afghan National Liberation Front established by Sibghatullah Mujadidi had its base in the rural areas of Afghanistan. Though Mujadidi's resistance group was ineffective in many respects, his name deserves mentioning here as he hailed from a great Pashtun family which headed "one of the branches of the Sufi Naqshbandi order in southern Afghanistan" (31). Harakat-i-Inqilabi-i-Islami was formed in the year 1980 under the leadership of an Islamic scholar named

Nabi Muhammadi. In the beginning, the party had the support of the *ulema* and the mullahs who managed the early uprisings against the PDPA. As it did not have an ideology of its own, it emphasized on the strict application of Sharia laws in life without adopting an Islamic direction, and therefore, could attract a large following in the initial years because of the ideals for which it stood. But its lack of organizational capacity weakened its position which forced its members to gravitate to Jamiat or Hezb-e-Islami (Khalis). It has to be mentioned in this context that “it is the closest in its beliefs to the creed of the Taliban” (32). Mahaz-i-Milli-i-Islami was also a traditionalist party led by Pir Gailani, a spiritual leader with his roots on Sufism. He had the support of the Pashtun tribes of southern Afghanistan. As he was a strong supporter of Zahir Shah, the former king, his party often functioned as a mouthpiece of the royal family. Just as the Sunni parties with footing in Pakistan derived succour from there, most of the Shia parties were supported by Iran. Though the presence of a large number of parties fighting against a common enemy gave the impression of unity, it proved to be a façade underneath of which lurked continual factional dispute. Evans notes:

From the beginning, the resistance groups were as apt to fight each other as to cooperate. Neither their shared Muslim faith nor the concept of *jihad* was strong enough to outweigh their

personal, tribal and ethnic antipathies, and all efforts to bring them together into a unified movement failed. (216)

The Pakistan government too had no wish to see a firm, united, well-armed Afghan militia settled in their soil. So they devised ways and means to keep the resistance groups under their control. As arms and ammunitions from other countries began pouring in, the Pakistani authorities took up the task of distributing them among the resistance groups under the supervision of the Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) which eventually led to rampant corruption. Other than the international aid, the wealth accumulated from the production and sale of opium also became a main source of income for the holy warriors and the Afghan refugee community. The acceptability of the resistance groups in Pakistan degenerated over the years as their disunity continued, and they became more and more involved in arms race, drug dealing and corrupt practices. Though the lack of unity incapacitated the resistance groups to organize their activities on a massive scale or accomplish an agreed strategy, it was not a hindrance to the conduct of the guerrilla warfare in which the military prowess of armed militants could be executed in small, distinct units. Meanwhile, the Russians found the mountainous rocky terrain of Afghanistan inhospitable as they could not station their tanks and heavy equipment in the narrow Afghan basins. Besides, they had to face stiff resistance from various insurgent groups at the local level. In nationwide

protests, hundreds got killed. The Russians soon realized that almost ninety per cent of the country was beyond their control. Mass exodus to Pakistan and Iran that continued relentlessly ensured a steady supply of fresh combatants to Peshawar based resistance groups.

Since the role played by the resistance groups during the time of the Soviet occupation is of great importance in shaping the future history of Afghanistan, it does seem worthwhile to study the theme of resistance in the Afghan context. M. R. D. Foot, a specialist on European Resistance, uses the definition given in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* to expand the term resistance as an “an organized underground movement in a country occupied by enemy forces carried on with the assistance of armed fighters for the purpose of frustrating and damaging the occupying power” (5). This definition substantiates the fact that the uprisings against the PDPA government and the Soviets were resistances meant to oust the occupying force and its cronies from the country. But theorizing resistance on the basis of Afghanistan’s Islamic background equates resistance to jihad. Doris Lessing in her *The Wind Blows Away Our Words: A Firsthand Account of The Afghan Resistance* writes about her interaction with the mujahidin in Peshawar. Lessing recounts: “When they are thinking of how they are presenting themselves to you, the word ‘Jihad’ is used in every sentence. This is their word for their resistance and it does not mean simply the ‘Holy War’” (43).

Jihad is a concept that has been widely misunderstood and misinterpreted since the evolution of Islam as a religion. Prof. Joel Hayward in his essay titled “Warfare in the Quran” remarks that jihad “far from meaning some type of fanatical holy war against all unbelievers, is the Arabic word for ‘exertion’ or ‘effort’ and it actually describes any Muslim’s struggle against the things that are ungodly within him or her and within the wider world” (51). In Islam the idea of ‘exertion’ works at two levels—a major level and a minor level. Shayke Ali Gomma, the former Grand Mufti of Egypt, expounds the difference between the two:

The major level of the jihad is *jihad al-nafs* or struggling against one’s lower self and its demeaning lustful desires. This jihad is the hardest because it needs discipline and hard work. The lesser, or minor jihad, is *al-qital* or armed struggle. This is the jihad that has been attacked by unjust and misleading propaganda in an effort to equate it with mere bloodshed. (154)

Gomma says that since the most important characteristic of Prophet Muhammad as made known in the Holy Quran is his merciful nature, the idea of ‘mercy’ “encompasses all the concepts and/or ideologies which stem from Islam and are promoted by it, including the concept of jihad” (154). It is this idea of ‘mercy’ as well as the ideas of compassion and forbearance deeply embedded in the spirit of Islam that is being violated by fanatics, militants and

terrorists who perpetrate violence in the name of Islam. Under such circumstances where the role and meaning of jihad within the framework of traditional Islam gets misconstrued beyond recognition, it becomes imperative to “denounce in the strongest possible terms all forms of terrorism that masquerade as jihad” (Kazemi 133).

The life of the Prophet is usually divided into two periods, the Meccan and the Medinan. In the Meccan period, the Prophet began getting revelations from the archangel Gabriel and acted as a guide and teacher to his followers who were living among the Quraysh, the polytheistic Arabs. This period of patient endurance of persecution at the hands of idolaters ended thirteen years later with emigration or Hijrah of the Prophet and his followers from Mecca to Medina. Once in Medina, the Prophet took upon himself the task of governing politically and spiritually both the Muslims and the non-Muslims of Medina. The Muslims “found themselves in a position where they had to defend the boundaries of their nascent state against the attacks of Quraysh who hoped to destroy this new religion in its infancy” (Gomma 161). It was at this time permission was granted to Muslims “to fight back against those who fought them, and to protect themselves against aggression” (161). This signifies that jihad is not a concept that originated with Islam. The circumstances that the burgeoning Muslim state had to encounter gave rise to jihad. According to Dr. Dagli, a professor in Islamic Studies, what differentiated the wars carried out

by the Muslims and non-Muslims was “the very fact that Muslims received revelation and guidance from the Prophet on matters of war established as a set of rules and legal precedent that set clear and unmistakable boundaries” (59). Unlike Christians, the Muslims had the benefit of a clear and binding antecedent that provided them with “conditions under which a just war could be waged” and “the rules on how the fighting itself is carried out” (59). This is one of the major contributions of the Holy Quran, the life and sayings of the Prophet and the behaviour of the nascent community to Islamic law. Dagli enunciates further that Islamic law considers war as an occasional necessary evil that has to be restrained by “concrete goals of justice and fairness in this world” and a law of war which is obligatory for all Muslims (59). The worth of the warfare is determined by “what is fought for, not from the fighting itself” (59). Rather than being worried about the holiness of the war that is being waged, the jurists of Islamic jurisprudence are more concerned about whether it is just and right, and based on Islamic teachings. Traditional Islam does not consider an unjust attack by Muslims as jihad, but as war. “Thus, not all war is jihad, and not all jihad is war” (59).

The fundamental rules of jihad are not cleverly garnered from history, but are clearly outlined in Islam’s authentic texts. These texts place utmost importance on the nobility of purpose of jihad, that is, jihad should not be waged to satisfy private motives, and also, there should not be fighting against

defenceless citizens who are not in the war front. Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, the first caliph, gave the following instructions to his armies before he sent them to combats:

“I instruct you in ten matters: Do not kill women, children, the old, or the infirm; do not cut down fruit-bearing trees; do not destroy any town; do not kill sheep or camels except for the purpose of eating; do not burn date trees or submerge them; do not steal from the booty and do not be cowardly.” (qtd. in Dagli 77)

Hasan al-Basri, a highly influential second generation Muslim described the ensuing points as infractions of the rules of war:

... mutilation (muthla), [imposing] thirst (ghulul), the killing of women, children, and the old (shuyukh) –the ones who have no judgement for themselves (la ra’yylahum), and no fighters among them; [the killing of] monks and hermits, the burning of trees, and the killing of animals for other than the welfare [of eating]. (78)

The tenets of just war also value not attacking and murdering people in an ambush and “preserving religious freedom for worshippers in their homes, churches or synagogues” (Gomma 156). It is also not permitted to assail the

enemy under the cover of night or use human shields “save in a state of war and under specific conditions detailed by jurists” (157). Thus the principles laid out in the Islamic law of war prohibit “naked aggression, the harming of non-combatants, excessive cruelty even in the case of combatants, and even addresses the rights of animals and the natural environment” (Dagli 78).

When the jihad propounded by the Prophet is juxtaposed with its modern variant, it is understood that there has occurred a paradigm shift in the attitude of people to the concept of jihad. Though it is still cloaked in the garb of religion, it has lost much of its religiosity, and has stooped to the level of war. Gomma relates this problem “to the issue of authority” (162). He says that in Islam people who do not have the requisite scholarship for making authentic interpretations of religious laws attempt to position themselves as religious authorities. More often than not, they are assisted in their unholy endeavours by “the proliferation of new media and irresponsibly sensationalistic journalism” which naturally pave way for fanatic reading of Islam that has no base in reality (162). Most of the extremists are the products of troubled socio-political scenarios and had imbibed a highly distorted version of Islam at a very young age. So they often violate the basic tenets of Islam. This is very much evident in the blatant violation of the right to call for jihad and declare war. Gomma opines that “it should be launched with the authorization of, and under the banner of, the Muslim ruler; it is imperative

that the decision to declare war be based on his own reasoning, and his subjects must obey him” (157). It is also made clear that before declaring war the Muslim ruler must consult with technical and military specialists, and also with political consultants as their knowledge is essential for delineating military strategy. Another point that Gomma stresses is that Islamic countries must adhere to the principles laid out in the international agreements and treaties they have become a part of on their own accord. So it is very clear that those who act against traditional Islamic doctrines have purely political aims —to create chaos in the world, and this is what terrorists have been doing for years. They rely on the concept of jihad to vindicate their crimes. Naturally, their diabolic stance often forces people to link the Islamic concept of jihad to violence and aggressiveness. It is worth quoting the verse in the Quran that gives the basic guideline for the Islamic law of war: “And fight in the path of Allah against those who fight against you but don’t transgress the limits. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors” (*The Easy Quran*, Al-Baqarah, 2:190). The fact that this verse occurs many a time in the second chapter of the Quran shows how vital it is to the conduct of a just war. Gomma says that this is a “lofty Islamic concept which bears no resemblance to the lawlessness practiced by terrorists” (163).

When seen from the Afghan political context, jihad, a concept that was brought in from Arabia, over the course of time, got assimilated with the

old tribal and feudal customs and traditions to become an integral part of Afghan life, and had always been used as a mobilizing factor to unite an independent miscellaneous population to fight against foreign invaders. Little importance was given to the idea of 'just war' as it was alien to their violent and aggressive temperament that often got translated into national behaviour at the time of crises. So, for the Afghans, the jihad against the Soviets was a holy war fought in the name of Islam, but, for an outsider, it was a chain of bloody wars, big and small, fought at multiple levels both inside and outside Afghanistan.

The Soviet military strategy in the Afghan jihad did not have a fixed pattern except the fact that it caused much hardship to millions of Afghans who got trapped in their country. American involvement in Afghan affairs during the period of Soviet occupancy too could not be overlooked. As the Russian dominance continued, America unscrupulously funded the mujahidin with arms and weapons. Afghanistan found herself flanked between two formidable foes embroiled in the cold war fiasco. In the meantime, the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev in the political scene in 1985 gave a new sense of direction to the Russian policy with regard to the continuing presence of Russian armed forces in Afghanistan. Gorbachev knew that the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan was inevitable sooner or later. Weak and inefficient Karmal was replaced by Dr. Mohammed Najibullah on whom

rested the task of saving the PDPA government from disintegration in case of a Soviet departure. Efforts made in 1985 to unify the seven main resistance groups based in Peshawar proved futile mainly because of the uncompromising attitude adopted by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Concerted efforts to unite Shia groups funded by Iran were also unsuccessful. In 1986 and 1987, bitter fighting continued between the mujahidin and the Afghan army. Paktya, Herat, Kandahar, and Kabul were shelled by rockets. The survival instinct showed by the mujahidin on the face of such terror made the Soviets think that they were waging a lost battle. In the intervening time, active discussions took place in Geneva to resolve the Afghan challenge peacefully. Soon it was realized that it would not be easy to reach a settlement by appeasing all the discontent partners. “The Soviet government was nervous about the survivability of the Najibullah regime while the Pakistanis declared that in the absence of a coalition, the civil war would be likely to continue and the refugees remain on Pakistani soil” (Ewans 232). Finally, when the Soviet troops started leaving for the Soviet Union on 15 May 1988 as per the Geneva Accords signed on 14 April 1988, the mujahidin found themselves facing a very delicate political situation as they did not know how to respond to the Soviet withdrawal. The internal rivalries between the mujahidin factions came to the forefront as the withdrawal proceeded. Gorbachev’s emissary Yuri Vorontov’s frantic attempts “to persuade the resistance groups to agree either to a cease-fire or to the formation of even an interim government” failed (234).

On 15 February 1989, “the final contingent of Soviet troops crossed the Amu Darya river into the Soviet Union” (234). The political conditions in Kabul deteriorated as days went by. The Soviet foreign minister Edward Shervnadze’s attempts to “persuade the resistance groups to participate in a coalition government, met with no more success than previous efforts” (235). Likewise, the ‘non-interference’ provisions mentioned in the Geneva Accords were neglected both by the Pakistanis and the Russians.

Since the disapproval of the PDPA was the only adhesive that bound the opposing mujahidin leaders together, the collapse of the PDPA regime set in motion a fervent power struggle which ultimately made Rabbani, a Tajik, the President of the newly named Islamic State of Afghanistan. This new phase witnessed a baffling and constantly fluctuating set of alliances and treasons that resulted in a civil war no group could win. While each group enjoyed domination in at least one territory of the country, no one was strong enough to annihilate others. In the bitter feud that ensued, many parts of Kabul that had remained unaffected and undamaged were destroyed. Anarchy that prevailed in many Pashtun regions in the east and south led to the formation of the Taliban in 1994.

Ahmed Rashid, a brilliant Pakistani journalist who had covered the wars in Afghanistan as well as the armed conflicts in Pakistan and Tajikistan quite extensively, in his authoritative work *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and*

Fundamentalism in Central Asia says that the emergence of Taliban in 1994 “coincided with a fortunate historical juxtaposition, where the disintegration of the communist power structure was complete, the Mujaheddin leaders were discredited and the traditional tribal leadership had been eliminated” (97). The government under President Rabbani was in doldrums and most of the Pashtun areas in the southern provinces were under the grip of warlordism. So when the Taliban started its journey as an Islamic reform movement to restore peace and order wherever anarchy and unrest prevailed, they were hailed as peacemakers by a disgruntled population. The Taliban’s credibility to a great extent rested with the decrees they had formulated with the help of the Sharia laws. Though the Taliban claimed that the decrees were purely based on the Sharia laws, a close examination reveals that they were heavily tainted by Pashtunwali, a tribal code meant exclusively for the Pashtuns. “Pashtunwali is at one and the same time an ideology and a body of common law which has evolved its own sanctions and institutions” (Roy 35).

The tribal code and the Sharia laws are often found at variance. For instance, as per the Sharia laws, four witnesses are required to prove adultery whereas according to the tribal code, mere hearsay is sufficient to prove adultery. So the Pashtunwali and the Sharia laws can be considered as “two positive systems which are quite frankly opposed to each other” (36). Considering that fact, it is to be noted that though the tribal code is restrictive,

it is more democratic. It never attempts to go beyond the particularity of the tribe, and thereby, succeeds in maintaining consensus and harmony in the tribal community. Roy opines that in the political spectrum, “the tribal code tends to isolate the Pashtun community, while the Shariat, which does not recognise that ethnic groups have any ultimate reality, envisages a more universal social order” (36). Hence the work of the *ulema* is often perceived as a menace to the individuality of the tribe as it is feared that the *ulema* may try to displace the Pashtunwali by the Sharia laws. For this reason, the village mullahs have always enjoyed a closer rapport with the tribal community than the *ulema*. Roy observes that the charismatic mullahs have always used the tribal code effectively while acting as mediators. So when the Taliban leadership was formed, the *ulema* did not get any political role in the movement. It is interesting to observe that in the functioning of the Taliban, one can see the merging of both traditionalism and fundamentalism. In traditionalism, there is a desire to conform to the mores of the past as described by the forefathers. Roy comments on this aspect:

In this vision history and tradition are merged; the historical development of society is effaced in favour of an imaginary timeless realm under attack from pernicious modernity. Traditionalism can never provide the basis for any coherent

political programme; it is riddled with nostalgia and its politics naturally incline towards all that is conservative. (3)

Therefore, it endorses social practices like the veiling of women, compliance to authority, and reverence for hierarchies.

Fundamentalism is wholly different from traditionalism as its primary focus is on going back to the scriptures by eliminating the perplexity of tradition. As Roy states, it “always seeks to return to some former state; it is characterised by the practice of re-reading texts, and a search for origins. The enemy is not modernity but tradition or rather, in the context of Islam, everything which is not the tradition of the Prophet (the sunnat)” (3). But this ‘return’ to a perceived former state positions fundamentalism in a precarious state in the political spectrum. A return to the implementation of the injunctions given in the Quran and the Hadith is the fundamentalism of the madrasa, whereas a return to the practice of Sharia or religious law is the fundamentalism propounded by the *ulema*. So the return to the scripture at a critical juncture in the history of a nation brings with it a whole new set of traditions that demand new interpretations that may blur the text as much as it irradiates it. In Afghanistan, fundamentalism characterized the natural attitude of the educated clergy as well as the *ulema*, whereas the mullahs of the villages who have not studied the law in its entirety are traditionalists. The Supreme Shura, the Taliban’s top decision making body based in Kandahar,

was dominated by semi-literate mullahs who belonged to the southern provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and Urozgan. They all were Durrani Pashtuns and Mullah Omar's friends and colleagues. Though the Shura claimed that "it was following the early Islamic model where discussion was followed by a consensus amongst 'the believers' and sensitivity and accessibility to the public were deemed important," the Taliban leadership's ignorance of Islamic jurisprudence resulted in the formulation of Pashtunwali-Sharia laws, a by-product of the coalescing of traditionalism and fundamentalism that were thrust upon others (Rashid 95). Non-Pashtuns considered this as an attempt to inflict Kandahari Pashtun laws on the whole country. One of the accusations levelled against the Taliban was its inability to accommodate members of other ethnic groups and communities. Therefore, when the Taliban went ahead with its task of implementing its draconian laws upon a war weary population by making the country operate like a prison, little did they realize that they were ushering in a new order that would make the life of the people all the more miserable and tragic.

The theoretical propositions put forward by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* offer a framework to explore the modus operandi of talibanizing a society by making it function like a penitentiary. Jeremy Bentham's concept of panopticon, an architectural design that induces self-regulation in inmates without their conscious knowledge aided Foucault

to formulate a whole new range of ideas while studying the emergence of a set of disciplinary mechanisms that completely revolutionized the way prisoners were dealt with in the aftermath of the Enlightenment.

The 18th and 19th centuries witnessed the evolution of the prison as an important social institution where the authoritarian forces of corrective power could be used in an explicit manner. As perpetrators in opposition to the mores of the society in which they lived, prisoners could certainly be considered as “subjected bodies” upon which the corrective measures of the society could be ordained (Danaher, Schirato, and Webb 26). A whole new range of disciplinary mechanisms were generated to apply these measures on the bodies of the prisoners to ensure the smooth functioning of the prison. Thus the prison emerged as a smaller version of the macrosociety with its own code of conduct effectively maintained by officials well versed in prison conventions and procedures. The code of conduct that formed the back bone of the prison was a set of disciplinary mechanisms that regulated the behaviour of the inmates by operating all through the prison in ways that were imperceptible to them.

According to Foucault, one of the most fascinating aspects of the prison project is the emphasis placed on surveillance, a tool that is used in prisons to discipline and manage bodies. In effect, surveillance is inspection that functions endlessly. In order to substantiate his argument, Foucault refers

to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon—a building with a centrally located tower from where the prisoners are watched. “The theme of the Panopticon – at once surveillance and observation, security and knowledge, individualization and totalization, isolation and transparency – found in the prison its privileged locus of realization” (Foucault, *Discipline* 249). The utility of the thematic concept of panopticon can be fully understood in its totality when it is compared with the treatment meted out to prisoners before the advent of prison as it is known now. In olden times, prisoners were usually kept in dungeons, far away from the penetrating power of gaze. But the panopticon functions on the contrary principle of inducing “in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures automatic functioning of power” (201). In other words, the prisoners who live in perpetual fear of being watched regulate their behaviour. It does not matter whether they are actually being watched. Furthermore, the gaze that relentlessly watches over the prisoners can be anybody's gaze and this is the most important aspect of the panopticon schem—it diffuses the notion of the centrality of power. From the particular, as in the case of the sovereign power, power becomes general, ensuring a steady flow of “homogenous effects of power” over the body politic (202).

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault refers to the omnipresent nature of power: “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but

because it comes from everywhere” (93). Foucault’s power doesn't limit itself to an institution nor relies on the concept of inherent strength, rather "it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society" (93). Power is not attained or captured; it emanates from diverse points and remains active in all interplays of society. Foucault lends clarity to his argument in *Power/Knowledge*:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (98)

From what Foucault states it can be inferred that for him power is not simply a means to oppress, something that constraints the freedom of individuals, but a force that is constructive enough to bring forth desirable changes in a society. “It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the

whole social body, much more than a negative instance whose function is repression” (119).

The productive network of power that runs through the social body can be seen in the functioning of the panopticon that does not limit its point of application to mere observation. The panopticon’s ability to function like a laboratory “to carry out experiments, to alter their behaviour, to train or correct individuals” is widely used in the functioning of various social institutions (Foucault, *Discipline* 203). Foucault authenticates its “polyvalent” (205) characteristics in the following argument:

It is polyvalent in its application; it serves to reform prisoners, but also to treat patients, to instruct school children, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work. . . . Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used. (205)

From what Foucault says it is clear that for him panopticon is not a prison structure that remains in the periphery of society catering to the needs of social outcasts. Rather, it is an omniscient power that enforces its disciplinary mechanisms in diverse ways throughout the society.

The advantage of the thematic concept of the panopticon is twofold—first is its ability to cover the whole social body and second is its effectiveness in converting the entire society into a docile body. Foucault observes that during the classical age, the body became an “object and target of power” (136). This gave rise to the formation of disciplinary methods: “a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour” (138). The human body entered a “machinery of power” that analysed it, broke it down and reorganized it (138). Foucault explains the changes incurred in the society due to the new development:

A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’ was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes with the techniques, the speed and efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. (138)

Foucault believes that the creation of this political anatomy need not be seen as an unexpected happening. In fact, it was the by-product of the merging of minor techniques, “multiplicity of often minor processes” that had been happening at various institutional levels for ages (138). This merging also created the layout of a broad plan to ensure the effectiveness of docility projects that would be conceived and executed. The attention paid to the little

things, the meticulousness of the regulations, the fussiness of the inspection, the supervision of the smallest fragment of life and of the body resulted in the success of the creation of docile bodies.

The Taliban emerged as 'holy warriors' in the terrified political milieu of Afghanistan with the avowed purpose of implementing the purist Islamic tradition in a country that had gone astray, and thereby, establish peace that had long eluded the Afghans. They knew that in a country like Afghanistan, where geography, religion, ethnicity, war and other destructive forces played a crucial role in shaping the everyday existence of people, it would not be easy to make the country function like a single composite unit steeped in Islamic traditions and practices. Hence from the outset, the need for imposing a strict discipline was felt by the Taliban leadership led by Mullah Omar, a Pashtun from Kandahar. Here lies the importance of the edicts issued by the Taliban on regular intervals. Framed on the basis of Sharia laws that were heavily influenced by Pashtunwali, the edicts became the framework for the functioning of the workings of power on human body. They were coercive measures powerful enough to “act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour” (Foucault, *Discipline* 138). The edicts issued by the Taliban were an effort on its part to formulate a tightly demarcated frame of reference within which the society could be accommodated. The Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of

Vice was set-up to enforce the Taliban regulations. The presence of the Religious Police reduced the country to a prison where thousands of inmates were kept on virtual house arrest. It was panopticon at work. The edicts issued by the Taliban made women disappear from the public space. One can see the working of the panopticon at its best in the Afghan context during the Taliban era. Fear of being watched by an all pervasive power even when real watching was not happening induced self-regulation in both men and women. It is interesting to read the comment made by Michael Ryan, a professor of English, on this situation: “The good citizen no longer needs to have his body punished because his mind has been trained in such a way that he himself enforces the law on himself” (77). What one sees is the success of the Taliban's docility project of converting a society “through a series of ‘quite coercions’ working at the level of people’s bodies, shaping how they behave and how they ‘see’ the world” into a place where only the Taliban's variant of Islam would dictate the norms of life (Danaher, Schirato, and Webb 62).

The greatest impact of the panopticon model was seen in the functioning of ‘the family’ during the Taliban era. Each family functioned like a cell in the prison where the existing patriarchal traditions acted like coercive measures that regulated the lives of the inmates, especially women. This turned thousands of families into exact replicas of a disciplinary mechanism. Foucault defines what a disciplinary mechanism is:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.

(Discipline 197)

It is the effective functioning of this mechanism that helped the Taliban to turn the malleable body of a woman into “the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces” (136). It was through this subjugated, recycled, altered and improved body that the Taliban wanted to strengthen the Islamic character of the country.

The Taliban’s taming of the body often crossed the narrow gender specifications while punishing people who violated the regulations imposed by them. Public executions and stoning to death became spectacles carried out in the presence of large crowds. Foucault states that a public execution is a “political operation” to make everyone conscious, by way of the body of the

convict, of the inordinate presence of the sovereign (*Discipline 53*). In the case of the Taliban, it was not the power of the sovereign that got displayed at the time of such public executions, but the political hegemony and supremacy of a militant force madly in pursuit of power. In its madness, it did not even spare the Buddhas of Bamiyan that had been very much a part of Afghanistan's cultural heritage. In a wanton display of cultural vandalism, the Taliban destroyed the giant Buddhas and the priceless artefacts kept in the National Museum of Kabul.

The Taliban's corrupt and immoral ways made it an easy prey to the dubious dealings of terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda who "wished to internationalize the Afghan war, and begin a new jihad that would topple existing Muslim governments, destroy the West, and create a caliphate that would rule the world" (Barfield, *Afghanistan 267*). The fate of the Taliban was sealed when the al-Qaeda, in a massive terrorist operation, destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center, New York, on 11 September 2001. American reaction was quite predictable. With President Bush' declaration of 'war on terror,' a new phase in the history of Afghanistan began. Once again, the country fell into the hands of foreign invaders. Instead of rising up against the infidel invaders as had been done in the past, the Afghan population considered Americans as a stronghold against the reoccurrence of civil war and the insolent warlords who waged it.

Afghanistan and its tortured past have always fascinated people who have traversed through the history of this great nation. The tumultuous events that violently shook the country in the last quarter of the 20th century saw a revival of interest in the lives of the Afghans. The steady clamour for books on Afghan history from various quarters resulted in the publication of umpteen numbers of books that throw light on the rich and vibrant culture of the country, the unique power and beauty of Afghan values and ethics, and the diverse communities and sub-sects that make Afghan culture truly heterogeneous. The Soviet invasion of 1979, the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from the Afghan soil in 1989 after installing Najibullah, the former KHAD chief as the communist president of Afghanistan, the civil war that ravaged the country since the inception of Rabbani, a Tajik, as the President in 1992, the arrival of the Taliban in the troubled political milieu of the country, the atrocities inflicted by the Taliban on the poor war ravaged citizens of the country created a strong social and aesthetic awareness among writers, and this awareness culminated in a plethora of narratives that ranged from authentic works on Afghan history to winged flights of fancy where facts merged with fiction to provide a wholesome experience to readers on how life had been lived by millions of Afghans during one of the most inhuman periods in the history of Afghanistan. Among the writers who have written about Afghan experience, the novelists Khaled Hosseini (1965-) and Nadeem Aslam (1966-) stand out for the authenticity they have lent to the Afghan

experience through their novels: *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil*. The saga of human suffering that these works unfold before the reader is mind boggling. Hosseini's novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are highly lyrical and deeply informative of the past and the present of the Afghans' mental and physical landscape as well as the trials and tribulations they had to undergo at the hands of myriad forces that played havoc with their lives. Aslam's novel *The Wasted Vigil* deals with Afghan reality in an innovative manner. Both the writers exhibit an astounding power of observation and a profound sense of the socio-political forces that redefined Afghan life as lived by diverse ethnic groups across the country. All the three novels with their compelling narratives have brought the Afghan reality to a larger audience outside the country.

Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul in 1965 when the socio-political atmosphere in the country was relatively calm under the kingship of Zahir Shah. His father's job as a diplomat with the Afghan Foreign Ministry had taken the Hosseinis to Iran in 1970. When they returned in 1973, tremors of an impending political change was in the air. No one thought that these tremors would culminate in the dethroning of King Zahir Shah in a bloodless coup by the king's cousin Daoud Khan. It was also during this time, young Hosseini was drawn to Persian poetry and Farsi language and literature. His literary expeditions opened before him an array of works that later found a

place in the life of young Amir, the central character in *The Kite Runner*. In 1976, the Hosseinis were relocated to Paris on yet another overseas posting. A few years later, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, they were compelled to seek political asylum in America. Life began anew for the Hosseinis when they were granted asylum by the American government. Once in America, they were shorn off the opulence life had so far bestowed upon them. Though they had to live on food stamps and welfare in the initial phase of their American life, they could stabilize themselves, both socially and financially, over the course of time. Struggles Hosseinis had to experience as Afghan immigrants had left an indelible mark in the young impressionable mind of the novelist. In 1993, Hosseini earned his medical degree. However, his love for books and writing had by then helped him to carve a niche for himself as a writer of repute among the Afghan expatriates. With the publication of *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, his popularity as a writer reached its zenith. His novels were devoured by an eager clientele charmed by the Afghan reality that they presented. Acceptance and adulation that his craft had offered him opened before him opportunities galore to immerse himself in humanitarian activities. As a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, he champions the cause of the marginalized, the abandoned, and the underprivileged.

Khaled Hosseini's debut novel *The Kite Runner* published in the year 2003 gives the reader an opportunity to experience two important facets of Afghan life as it unravels through the lives of Amir and Hassan, a Sunni Pashtun and a Shia Hazara, at two different stages in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The first one lets the reader savour the beauty of rugged simplicity that characterized the lives of Afghans before the Soviet invasion. In an interview Hosseini stated that he wanted to remind the readers, especially in the West that "there was an Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion of 1979, and that Afghanistan had enjoyed decades of peace without anyone firing so much as a rocket." Having said that, it is not to be forgotten that in the first part of the novel *The Kite Runner*, the novelist writes about the harsh realities of sectarianism that lie deep in the nation's psyche. The second facet brings alive the horrors inflicted upon the hapless citizens of Kabul by the Taliban from September 1996 to till they got ousted from power towards the end of 2001. In order to write on this part of the novel, he relied heavily on what he had read and news footage he had seen. Listening to eye witness accounts had also helped him to bring alive the brutality of the age. Interspersed between the two was the rich community life enjoyed by the Afghans in America. What makes the narrative all the more interesting for the reader is the knowledge that Amir, the main character, bears a striking resemblance to the novelist in many respects. Like Hosseini, Amir is passionate about books and reading, migrates with his father to America, lives

on food stamps and welfare, becomes a doctor, and enjoys a rich community life in the company of fellow Afghans. What Hosseini hadn't experienced was the brutality of wars and the inhumanity of the Taliban. He compensates this by making Amir undertake a raucous journey through the heart of Kabul when the atrocities of the Taliban were at its peak. Thus he atoned for his absence during the most critical period in the modern history of his country.

Khaled Hosseini's second novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* published in the year 2007 is often considered as a definitive Afghan novel. Like *The Kite Runner*, it chronicles the most turbulent time in the modern history of Afghanistan. It is a tale of two women—Mariam and Laila—whose life is inextricably woven with the history of their nation. As the wives of Rasheed, they were burdened by the ill-effects of patriarchy and an unforgiving time. They represent millions of Afghan women who had to bear the atrocities of wars on their bodies and minds. Seed for the novel was sown in 2004 when Hosseini visited his homeland after a gap of nearly thirty years. His interaction with people in Kabul helped him to listen to heretofore unheard stories of women's sufferings. For the first time he understood the devastating effect of anarchy and extremism on women, and was impressed by the resilience and courage shown by the women at the time of extreme hardship. His deep sympathy for these women crystallized into the making of the splendid novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Hosseini reminisces:

When I began writing *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, I found myself thinking about those resilient women over and over. Though no one woman that I met in Kabul inspired either Laila or Mariam, their voices, faces and their incredible stories were always with me, and a good part of my inspiration comes from their collective spirit.

Hosseini's third novel *And the Mountains Echoed* published in the year 2013 confirmed his position as a master storyteller specialized in narratives suffused with Afghan flavour.

Nadeem Aslam was born in 1966 in Gujranwala in Pakistan to a communist father and a deeply religious mother. His father was a well-known poet and a film producer too. On his mother's side, there were fanatics, businessmen, accomplished storytellers, painters, and musicians. Aslam admits that it was from his family he had learned values that had kept him in good stead in times of crises. Aslam's life took a reversal when his family decided to migrate to Britain in 1980 fearing persecution at the hands of Pakistan's dictator General Zia-ul-Haq. Over a span of 30 years, Aslam's literary outpourings have confirmed his position as a novelist of enchanting poetry and grace admired by writers like Salman Rushdie and A.S. Byatt. *The Wasted Vigil* published in the year 2008 is third in the list of his published novels. His other works are *Season of the Rain Birds* (1993), *Maps for Lost*

Lovers (2004), “Leila in the Wilderness” (short story) (2010), *The Blind Man’s Garden* (2013), and *The Golden Legend* (2017).

Looking back from the vantage point of American forces entering Afghan territory and bombing Tora Bora in October 2001, *The Wasted Vigil* tracks decades of Afghan history from the viewpoint of three outsiders—a Russian, an American and an English—and a young talib. They all had suffered irreplaceable losses. Before taking a deep plunge into the troubled lives of his characters, especially, Marcus, Qatrina, and Casa—the young talib, Aslam conversed with Afghan refugees in Britain who had to undergo the harrowing experience of living in the hell Afghanistan had become towards the end of the 20th century. He also travelled extensively across the country to see for himself how Afghanistan had changed over the decades. What he saw shattered his mind. He unscrupulously incorporated whatever he gleaned from various sources in the fabric of his work. Landmines that maimed children, heinous rapes, jihadi training camps along the border where thousands of youngsters got trained to execute mass murders, unceremonious rendering of public justice, warlords and their unyielding feuds, ill-advised and meddling Americans criss-cross the narrative. It is also a work of surreptitious anger and deep anguish at the varied forces that have transformed Afghanistan into a wasteland.

All the three novels under study offer a unique opportunity to the reader to get accustomed to the great tragedy that had struck the nation in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Khaled Hosseini's clear and lucid style juxtaposed with the technical expertise of Nadeem Aslam achieved through clear manipulation of ideas and words gives the reader a comprehensive picture of Afghan reality.

In the area of literature review, there is no dearth of matter. It is a sure testimony to the ever growing fascination people have in the history of Afghanistan. "The Theme of Identity and Redemption in Khaled Hossieni's *The Kite Runner*" written by Niraja Saraswat explores how guilt and perseverance motivate the protagonist to seek redemption for the sin he had committed when he was young by rescuing his nephew from the hands of a Taliban official. His journey through Afghanistan during the time of the Taliban regime helps him to come in terms with his real identity.

Dr. Taran Parveen in her "Unveiling Political and Personal Turmoil: *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hussein [sic]," studies how incidents that happen in the history of a nation at a particular time period brings about devastating changes in the lives of its citizens. But Parveen states that inspite of the highly depressing socio-political scenario that is depicted in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, the novel ends with a note of optimism. The novelist succeeds in

doing so by a reversal of roles. He makes Amir, the protagonist, that too a Pashtun, a kite runner for Sohrab, a Hazara boy whom he had adopted.

Basharat Shameem in his research article “Living on the Edge: Women in Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*” studies women’s experiences as narrated by Hosseini in his novel. In the light of what is expressed in the novel, the article contextualizes the Afghan women’s experience in the framework of social, political and historical factors and concludes that through his narrative “Hosseini endeavours to provide voice to Afghan women by bringing their suffering to fore” (65).

In her authoritative study “In the Shadows and Behind the Veil : Women in Afghanistan under the Taliban Rule,” Anastasia Telesetsky gives an in-depth analysis “of the condition of gender apartheid” that existed in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule. The article also examines the reaction of the world to the plight to Afghan women during the period.

In “Internationalizing 9/11: Hope and Redemption in Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and Colum McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin* (2009),” Eoin Flannery asserts that both were ambiguous, representative texts that interweave different narratives conjointly in varying patterns of uniformity and sympathetic understanding. Neither novel aspires to political or cultural concurrence nor do they wallow in reactionary political dogmatism.

The history of Afghanistan, both ancient and modern, is invariably intertwined with factors like geography, ethnicity and religion. Since this study focuses on how Khaled Hosseini and Nadeem Aslam depicted in their novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *The Wasted Vigil* the most crucial period in the history of this vulnerable nation, that is, the last quarter of the 20th century in the history of Afghanistan, and positions all the major happenings of that period within the framework of jihad, an Islamic concept that evolved during the time of Prophet Mohammed, a deep probe is done into the working of myriad forces that played havoc with the socio-political conditions that prevailed in the country during the stipulated period of time. The study attempts to foreground and problematize the politics behind the undertext of these narratives which is arguably the phenomenon called jihad. It also gives utmost importance to the traumatic experiences that millions of Afghans had to undergo during this excruciatingly painful period. The theoretical propositions like panopticism, surveillance and the creation of docile bodies put forward by Michel Foucault in his definitive study *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* have been amply used to support the arguments.

Chapter 1 analyses the texts under study with special reference to the period that begins with the Saur Revolution followed by the Soviet invasion, withdrawal of the Soviet forces, Najibullah's reign, the civil war that broke

out in 1992 and the emergence of the Taliban. The concept of jihad has been explored exhaustively to understand resistance against the Soviets, the phenomenon of mass exodus to neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Iran, and the kind of refugee life that evolved in these places. The civil war that ravaged the country after the mujahidin take-over also is comprehensively dealt with.

Chapter 2 explores the changes that took place in the country under the rule of the Taliban militia and how it affected the lives of millions of Afghans as it is being narrated in the novels by Khaled Hosseini and Nadeem Aslam. Foucault's theoretical propositions have been used to substantiate the incidents propped up on the pillars of reality.

The Taliban's violent acts of cultural vandalism and how it deprived the country of its invaluable cultural artefacts are dealt with in Chapter 3. The chapter also narrates the role of Osama bin Laden and his jihad against the West which resulted in the conversion of Afghanistan into a breeding ground of terrorism.

The novels that have been subjected to a careful and critical study on the basis of several literary and non-literary sources, published historical data and social history shed light on the brutal history of a nation that had been the playground of imperial masters who ruthlessly wanted to assert their political supremacy on a territory inhabited by an equally ruthless people who rose up

in rebellion wielding jihad, an Islamic concept that had been used by them to protect the integrity and character of their country. The unscrupulous meddling of foreign forces in Afghan affairs coupled with violence and discord that characterized the Afghan temperament let loose the genie of destruction that had been lying dormant in the national consciousness of Afghanistan for the most part of the 20th century. The novels epitomize the country's descent into chaos and the great tragedy that engulfed it.