

## **Chapter 1**

### **Descent into Abyss: An Afghan Fiasco**

Afghanistan's political history in the last quarter of the twentieth century was beset by a brutal ideological war waged between Communism and Islamism, two dominant ideologies that tried to revamp the existing traditional power structures buttressed by patriarchy and religion by introducing reforms that were alien to the natives. While the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) founded by the communists in 1965 wanted to bring progress in Afghanistan through socialism, the Islamists desired to develop a new-fashioned political ideology grounded on Islam which they considered essential to align with the modern world and the best means to encounter foreign imperialism. Though it was commonly perceived as a power struggle waged in an ideological realm, the ascension of the PDPA to the seat of power in Afghanistan in April 1978 brought home the reality that Communism had finally succeeded in making its presence felt in a country that had always revelled in the glorious heritage of Islam.

Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* provides the reader with insights and information that are of immense significance in understanding the great political shift that rocked Afghanistan in April 1978. In chapter 15 of the novel, one comes across Rashid and Mariam, the

protagonists, who were listening intently to the news broadcast that promised a new dawn in the confused political milieu of Afghanistan of the late 1970's. The broadcast referred to the Saur Revolution that had put an end to the presidency of Mohammed Daoud Khan when rebellious forces led by the PDPA besieged the Presidential Palace on 27 April 1978 and killed Daoud and his family. Hosseini writes: "Daoud Khan had been killed, but not before the communist rebels had killed some twenty members of his family, including women and grandchildren" (ATSS 92). He also writes that on the radio, "a woman's voice was saying that Taraki, the leader of the Khalq branch of the PDPA, the Afghan communist party, was in the streets giving rousing speeches to demonstrators" (89). A short while later, Abdul Qader, one of Taraki's close associates, addressed the nation over the radio:

"The era of aristocracy, nepotism, and inequality is over, fellow *hamwatans*. We have ended decades of tyranny. Power is now in the hands of the masses and freedom-loving people. A glorious new era in the history of our country is afoot. A new Afghanistan is born. We assure you that you have nothing to fear, fellow Afghans. The new regime will maintain the utmost respect for principles, both Islamic and democratic. This is a time of rejoicing and celebration." (92)

His exuberance matched the spirit of many ardent communists in Afghanistan. Little did Rashid and Mariam know that the massacre that preceded the revolution was a prelude to the brutal wars that would annihilate the lives of millions of Afghans.

Through a very effective narration of an incident of great political ramifications, the novelist has succeeded in building up the momentum in the reader by acclimatizing him to the political change that happened in the history of Afghanistan. He also merged the political and the personal when Fariba gave birth to Laila on the day of the revolution. Contrary to the jubilation that was going on in the streets, the reader gets a glimpse into the deeply private joy of a family. “Noor said her eyes were gemstones. Ahmad, who was the most religious member of the family, sang the azan in his baby sister’s ear and blew in her face three times” (93). Later in the novel, the reader finds that shortly after the arrival of the Soviets “Ahmad and Noor had left Kabul for Panjshir up north, to join Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud’s forces and fight the jihad” against the communist government and the infidel invaders much to the disappointment of the family, especially their mother Fariba (108). Though the novelist casually introduces Ahmad as a very religious person, one can sense the presence of two strong ideologies, namely Communism and Islamism, trying to gain an upper hand in the lives of Afghans at a critical juncture in the history of their nation.

Youngsters and even men with families leaving their homes to be a part of the jihad began much before the arrival of the Soviets. It started when the communists came to power through the Saur Revolution, and gathered strength when decrees were announced in a rather random manner in a country where men had always lived “by ancient tribal laws” (121). They found the decrees “to liberate women, to abolish forced marriage, to raise the minimum marriage age to sixteen for girls” quite unpalatable to their traditional taste and powerful enough to create fissures in the socio-political life of Afghanistan (121). Hosseni writes: “There, men saw it as an insult to their centuries-old tradition . . . to be told by the government—and a godless one at that—that they had to leave home, attend school, and work alongside men” (121). Naturally, there was widespread resistance across the country spearheaded by the *ulema* and the mullahs who considered themselves as the vanguards of Islam, a religion that had always acted as a bedrock powerful enough to withstand the tremors exerted by the divisive forces of ethnicity, tribalism and sectarianism in times of national crises. So when the whole country rallied under the banner of Islam to fight against the communists and their reforms, Islam served as a great leveller that blurred all the narrow boundaries that had often kept the people divided. And this was achieved by positioning resistance of the Afghan people into the framework of jihad, an Islamic concept that developed during the time of the Prophet. Nadeem Aslam writes: “The rebellion against the Communist government, begun [sic] back in the spring,

had now spread to most provinces there” (TWV 74). When the PDPA found that it was not going to be easy for them to quell the rebellions, they earnestly sought the support of their Soviet masters who did not fail them by invading Afghanistan on 27 December 1979. This invasion was different from the ones that had happened previously for the simple reason that it pitted Afghans against Afghans themselves. In fact, the PDPA waged a war against its own people with the help of the Soviets. The presence of the Soviets with a foreign ideology gave legitimacy to the defensive jihad launched against them which eventually transgressed all the jihadi canons stipulated by the teachings of the Prophet and the Islamic law for waging a just war.

While Khaled Hosseini’s locale for action in *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is Kabul, Nadeem Aslam weaves his narrative mainly against the backdrop of a small village named Usha in Jalalabad and Peshawar in Pakistan. When the Soviets arrived, they knew that the villages were the hotbed of resistance, and combed them to find miscreants who did not favour Communism. Aslam’s observation that the “mosque was among the first places the soldiers had visited upon entering Usha, rightfully suspecting it of being the possible centre of the resistance” (TWV 20-21) is true when analysed from the point of observation given by Rasanayagam:

Some two months after the arrival of the Soviet forces, a nationwide movement called Allah-u-Akbar (God is Great) was

mobilized against the Karmal regime. Processions were organized during which slogans were chanted against the regime and its Soviet backers. At night time the entire population would gather on the rooftops to intone the *azan*, the Muslim call to prayer, a novel form of non-violent protest that had been used in Pakistan to overthrow Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977. (95)

This reiterates the fact that the influence exerted by the mosques, and the *ulema* and the mullahs in leading the resistance was very high. Even spontaneous uprisings or local reactions against coercive intervention on the part of government officials who visited towns and villages with the intention of imposing reforms were often preceded by preaching by religious leaders or men of standing like village elders. It is worth mentioning here that even before the Soviet invasion there had been instances when the fanatics had, in the name of Islam, berated the modernization steps taken by the rulers of Kabul “which they saw as intrusions by the state into the sacrosanct way of life of the *qwan*” (95). But after the invasion, their battle cry became that of jihad, “a holy war for the liberation of Muslim Afghanistan from the infidel invaders and the overthrow of their local puppets” (95). And all those who took part in the jihad were called the holy warriors or *mujahidin*.

Amidst growing resistance, life became rather difficult for ordinary Afghans. Hosseini writes that the comrades could be seen everywhere and they themselves were divided into two—“those who eavesdropped and those who didn’t” (TKR 98). A random remark may land one in the dungeons of the notorious prison Pul-i-Charki. Even the sanctity of a classroom was often violated by the presence of comrades who would teach the students “to spy on their parents, what to listen for, whom to tell” (98). In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Hosseini presents a typical state sponsored classroom where communist indoctrination used to take place regularly. The teacher, an ardent communist, disallowed her female students from veiling. “She said women and men were equal in every way and there was no reason women should cover if men didn’t” (101). From her statement it can be deduced that she was acting as a mouthpiece of a regime that wanted to encroach into the traditional patriarchal structure of a society steeped in Islam and Sharia laws, and where gender disparity was quite high. The teacher also spoke eloquently of the Soviet Union. According to her, everyone in “the Soviet Union was happy and friendly, unlike America, where crime made people afraid to leave their homes” (101). This opinion speaks volumes on the hostility of the communists to America and what it stood for. Hosseini successfully manages to lay bare the mindset of the communists who ardently believed that Communism would bring progressive changes in Afghanistan. He makes the teacher speak in glowing terms about the Soviets:

“That’s why our Soviet comrades came here in 1979. To lend their neighbor a hand. To help us defeat these brutes who want our country to be backward, primitive nation. And you must lend your own hand, children. You must report anyone who might know about these rebels. It’s your duty. You must listen, then report. Even if it’s your parents, your uncles or aunts. Because none of them loves you as much as your country does.” (101)

To the vast majority of the population in villages like Usha, what was happening in the schools was against the moral and ethical code legitimized by Islam and traditional tribal laws. Nadeem Aslam writes that the villagers in Usha burnt a school opened by the communists “with the active involvement of the members of the two rich landowning families” (TWV 20). The teachers and their families were brutally killed and their bodies were thrown into the river. Nadeem Aslam’s expression, ‘two rich landowning families’ tends to be political for the obvious reason that it refers to the much hated land reforms introduced by the communists and detested by the rich landowners. The incident vividly portrays the hatred people in villages had for the communist ideology and its perpetrators.

For the Soviets, violence against its ideology was nothing short of violence against its imperialist powers; something that had to be repressed by

all means. The arrival of the Soviet soldiers in Usha in search of those who had been a party to the massacre finally resulted in the capture of Zameen, the high spirited young daughter of Marcus and Qatrina, and her lover, the young communist. As in all wars, women and children were the first casualty of the Afghan-Soviet war. Abductions and rapes became the norm of the day as most of the soldiers who came to Afghanistan were in the prime of their youth. Benedikt Petrovich, the man “who fathered Zameen’s child through repeated assault” is a true representative of disgruntled Soviet soldiers who found themselves at a loss in the wilderness of Afghanistan (TWV 37). Though armed with sophisticated weapons, they very soon realized that they were no match to the Afghan guerrillas who would appear from nowhere to strike at them. “The Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan had called the rebels dukhi, Russian for ghosts, never knowing when they would arrive, never understanding how they could slip away suddenly, the only explanation being that they had otherworldly assistance” (68). This observation made by the novelist Aslam alludes to the guerrilla war waged by the mujahidin in the early days of the jihad, that is, before they were flooded with sophisticated weapons supplied by countries like America and Saudi Arabia. Dorris Lessing provides the reader with an interesting information with regard to the valour shown by the Afghans on adverse conditions. She writes: “Some of the most extraordinary battles of our time have been fought between armies of modern tanks, and ragged men, women and children armed with homemade grenades, catapults,

stones, ancient rifles” (34). In fact, before getting baptised into the technology of modern warfare, the mujahidin resorted to indigenous methods of warfare to resist the mighty Soviet military force and had been successful to a great extent.

To smother the resistance, the Soviets had to resort to inhuman ways like planting landmines that crippled people who stepped on it. The most notorious were the butterfly mines made of “green plastic and shaped like butterflies or sycamore seeds, with a wing to allow them to spin to earth slowly” (TWV 255). Aslam divulges a few more details:

The Soviets were known to have dropped mines disguised as toys onto villages—dolls and colouring pens, bright plastic wristwatches. Things designed to attract children. They fell from the air into houses and streets and the result was meant to encourage parents to vacate a village, a place where children were no longer safe. (255)

The fact that the landmines had been specially designed by the Soviets for use in the war against the Afghans shows how callous and indifferent the Soviets had been in their pursuit of dominance. Hosseini too has dealt with this issue in his novels. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Hosseini makes Laila go through the paper clippings and pamphlets her brother “Ahmad had managed to collect from insurgent groups and resistance organizations headquartered in Pakistan”

before he embarked on his journey as a mujahidin (109). In one of the clippings, she could see the photograph of a legless boy receiving a lollipop from a man in a long white overcoat, and the caption below the photo serves as an eye opener to an uninitiated reader who is unfamiliar with the war tactics employed by the Soviets against the insurgents who had to fight their jihad with uncouth weapons. It reads: “Children are the intended victims of Soviet land mine campaign” (109). It was a ploy, a psychological warfare, planned and executed by the Soviets to undermine the strength of the mujahidin, and thereby, the jihad. If a child picked up a toy, “the toy exploded, tore off fingers or an entire hand. The father could not join the jihad then; he’d have to stay home and care for his child” (109). For most Afghans to be a part of the jihad against the invaders was a long cherished dream that gave a sense of purpose to their otherwise uneventful life. Staying at home to take care of a maimed child was considered as an ignominy that deprived them of being a mujahidin, a holy warrior. The willingness showed by the Afghans to go to the warfront can be better understood on the basis of what Olivier Roy says about the spiritual dimension the war had introduced in the behaviour of individuals who were familiar with the rhetoric of jihad as well as Islamic law. Roy opines that “the proximity of danger and the necessity of choosing between flight and personal involvement in combat have given an authentic resonance to the desire for jihad” (158). A fighter who took part in the war of resistance, otherwise known as jihad from the Afghan viewpoint, was “motivated by a

profound belief that he will go to Paradise, either because he has killed an enemy (and become a ghazi), or because he himself has been killed in combat (and has therefore become a shahid, martyr)” (158). The exhortation of the mullahs and the *ulema* only strengthened this view. When approached from this religious perspective, a crippled child could deny his father either his paradise or martyrdom. The ‘toy idea’ was also a well devised plan on the part of the Soviet military strategists to incapacitate young ones from taking part in future combats. The article “Landmine Use in Afghanistan” published by Human Rights Watch in October 2001 reports that though nearly all combatants in Afghanistan in recent decades were thought to have used land mines, nearly all were laid by Soviet and pro-Soviet Afghan armed forces from 1979-1992. The presence of a large number of handicapped people in Afghanistan can indeed be considered as one of the bitter remnants of the Soviet-Afghan war.

There is a rather painful, yet, interesting observation in *The Wasted Vigil* that there were numerous shops in Afghanistan that sold single shoes. Lara, a Russian who had come to Afghanistan in search of her long lost brother Benedikt, had seen “single shoes being sold in Afghanistan’s shops” (TWV 27). This paradox can also be seen in the political drama that unfolded in the international level after the invasion. Raja Anwar, a noted Pakistani journalist and an erudite scholar on Afghan affairs comments on this: “The

Soviet military intervention and its rejection by the Afghan people was the best 1980 new year gift for the United States, Western Europe and China. Unlike ordinary gifts, it has retained its value in the years that have followed” (199). Afghanistan became an international hotspot where all major players wanted to work out their political ambitions. Marcus who had lived in Afghanistan for more than two score years, and who still believed that there would have been no ruination “if this country had been left to itself by others” (63) reminisces: “The entire world it seemed had fought in this country, had made mistakes in this country, but mistakes had consequences and he didn’t know who to blame for those consequences. Afghanistan itself, Russia, the United States, Britain, Arabia, Pakistan?” (29-30).

Marcus’ retrospection proves to be true when studied from the scholarly perspective pointed out by Gilles Kepel, a French political scientist and one of the leading experts on the Middle East in his *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*. Kepel opines that the “Afghan jihad against the Soviets became the great cause with which Islamists worldwide identified, moderates and radicals alike.” For many Arabs, it signified a paradigm shift from “nationalism to Islamism.” Besides the Afghan mujahidin, Kepel points out that “the international brigades in Afghanistan hailed from all over the Muslim world—Egypt, Algeria, the Arabian Peninsula, and Southeast Asia.” When the war progressed, most of them came to the camps in Peshawar where “they

received training in guerrilla warfare techniques and built up a variant of Islamist ideology based on armed struggle and extreme religious rigor” (Kepel 8). In fact, it could be said that these camps provided a platform for these radicals to forge “tactical and ideological links that would serve them well in the future. The camps became virtual universities for future Islamic radicalism” (Rashid 130). It is against this background, Osama bin Laden’s involvement in Afghan jihad gains importance. His arrival in Peshawar in 1980 with a Saudi contingent and meeting the mujahidin leaders could be deemed as the beginning of his long term political involvement in Afghan matters. In 1982, he started living in Peshawar offering his technical expertise in building roads and depots for the mujahidin. He also tried to spread Wahabbism among the Afghans and succeeded in doing so to a great extent. Naturally, it can be presumed that it was the influence exerted by the radicals like bin Laden on Afghans that “favored the spread of Islamist militant ideas over those of traditional Islam, with its emphasis on symbolic sites, the land, and the hierarchies of rural and tribal society” (Kepel 142).

The global dimensions that the Afghan jihad acquired in the 1980’s with the presence of a large number of Islamic militants from across the world in Peshawar were not taken seriously by various intelligence agencies like the ISI and the CIA, the Americans, the Russians, and the world in general. They viewed the American involvement in the Afghan-Soviet war as the literal

manifestation of ‘eye for eye’ principle, that is, Americans wanted Afghanistan to be the Vietnam of the Soviets. Kepel reiterates this fact when he says that as far as America was concerned the holy war in Afghanistan had one major goal— “to set a Vietnam-like deathtrap for the Soviet forces that had invaded Kabul in December 1979 and thus to precipitate the collapse of the Soviet empire” (8). To drive this point home, Aslam uses a piece of conversation that took place between Lara and David, a CIA agent, based in Peshawar. To Lara’s matter of fact enquiry whether he had helped the guerrillas, David remains nonchalant. Lara takes his silence as an act of affirmation. “ ‘It’s okay,’ she says. ‘The two empires hated each other. I know that when Soviet troops entered Afghanistan, the reaction in the United States was, ‘We now have the chance to give the Soviets their Vietnam.’ Revenge’ ” (TWV 80). The fact that no international player was least bothered about the millions who would lose their lives or get displaced at the cold blooded materialization of this ‘revenge’ made the meddling of external players in the Afghan-Soviet war all the more gruesome. Peshawar in Pakistan was the battle ground where this feud was mainly waged reveals Pakistan’s massive and cumbersome involvement in the human tragedy that took place later.

Aslam leaves no stone unturned when he narrates how Peshawar emerged as the theatre of war in the political schema of the Afghan refugee crisis. He writes that when “the Soviet Army crossed the River Oxus into

Afghanistan in December 1979, secret agents from around the world began to congregate in the Pakistani frontier city of Peshawar. It now became the prime staging area for the jihad against the Soviet invaders, rivalling East Berlin as the spy capital of the world by 1984” (TWV 111). This comment made by Aslam rings true when read against the backdrop of Lessing’s findings on the spies in Peshawar. She notes that they were famous for their multiple loyalties: “KHAD, the Russians themselves, foreign governments, the competing Afghan political parties in exile, all spy on each other, on the mujahidin, on the refugees, and on visiting journalists and aid workers” (46). Aslam reiterates this fact in his novel saying that the city of Peshawar which was also considered as the second home of Buddhism “was transformed into a city filled with conjecture, with unprovable suspicions and frenzied distrust” (TWV 111). The city that had acquired the dubious status as the headquarters of the resistance movement from where resistance leaders like Rabbani, Hekmatyar, Maulana Khalis, Sayyaf, Mujadidi, Nabi Muhammadi, and Pir Gailani commanded the mujahidin in matters of war also became a home for millions of refugees who fled from the combat zones in Afghanistan. J. N. Dixit who served as India’s ambassador to Kabul from 1981 to 1985 writes of those days in his book *An Afghan Tragedy: Zahir Shah to Taliban:*

About two and a half to three million Afghan refugees had fled into Pakistan with the arrival of Soviet forces. This was fertile

ground for recruiting personnel for the Afghan resistance. Saudi Arabia, Libya, Egypt and Pakistan joined hands to subvert the Karmal regime and to pressurize the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops. Zia-ul-Haq and President Regan came to an understanding for organizing sustained resistance to the Karmal regime. (26-27)

Mass exodus to Pakistan and Iran was facilitated by several factors. Of these two deserve special mentioning. The first was based on the precedence set by the Prophet himself—“of Muhammad leaving Mecca for Medina, many Muslims believe that their religion obliges them to leave a territory which has ceased to be Islamic, in order to dwell in another Muslim land” (Roy 166). The second one was more or less a flight from the war zone when “the regular Soviet offensives with armoured vehicles and air support, the intensity of the fighting, the destruction of harvests and reprisals against the civilian population have made survival difficult” (166). When viewed from what was happening in Afghanistan, both the factors prompted migration. By 1984, the number of refugees in Pakistan and Iran swelled to 3.5 million and 1.5 million respectively. There were also millions of internally displaced people in Afghanistan who left their villages to the safety of the towns and the cities. As the resistance against the puppet government of Babrak Karmal as well as the

Soviets intensified, the life of ordinary Afghans in Afghanistan and refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran became highly miserable.

It was also during this period the judicious and cautious attitude showed by the Americans in the beginning of the war gave way to indiscreet and unscrupulous meddling in Afghan affairs by funding the mujahidin with arms and weapons through Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI. It was President Regan's war strategy "to keep the Russian wound bleeding" and the role played by the CIA could not be undermined (Ewans 228). It is in this context the role of Peshawar as the main hub of refugees attains importance. Lessing writes: "From the moment you arrive in Peshawar, Afghanistan enfolds you—the enormity of it, the horror, the sadness" (49). Aslam positions David, an employee of the CIA, in Peshawar amidst swarms of disillusioned refugees who had to put up with poverty and inhumanness at the hands of the fundamentalists who had opened offices in Peshawar way back in late 1970's when the jihad began. Aslam writes: "Wherever David looked he could find evidence of the war in which those weapons were being used. Makeshift ambulances filled with the wounded and the dying raced through the mountain passes towards Peshawar, carrying at times children who had been set alight by Soviet soldiers to make the parents reveal the hiding places of guerrillas" (TWV 111-112). Though Aslam does not elaborate the journey that these wounded had to undertake along the treacherous mountain passes to reach

Peshawar, mere references like ‘ambulances filled with the wounded’ serve as a bleak reminder of the inhuman war that was being pursued on the other side of the border where hundreds used to get killed or wounded on a regular basis from Soviet offensives. It is mind boggling to perceive that the millions who crossed the Afghan-Pak border to reach the safety of the refugee camps in Peshawar and the thousands who jumped into the bandwagon of jihad as mujahidin had a hard life and often a shortened one. Lessing opines: “If badly wounded in battle they do not survive: there are all those great mountains to cross to reach hospitals” (43). A woman who had been a part of the journey undertaken by a group of villagers when their village was bombed by the Russians narrates:

“There was snow and there was ice, no water, our children’s tongues were swollen from lack of water. It took us two weeks, the Russians bombed us all the way, they dive bombed us day and night. This girl here’ – one of the young women – ‘was on a horse with a baby under her arm, the Russian aeroplane came low and she felt blood running; it was from the baby. She fell off the horse, the baby was dead. Many had their feet frozen from frost bite. Of the hundred who left with us only ten got through the mountains to Pakistan.” (Lessing 78)

All the refugees who reached Peshawar had experienced the toughness of the long hazardous journey at one point or the other and had such heart-rending stories to narrate. But the tragedy did not end there. A different kind of fate awaited the refugees in refugee camps in Peshawar after their long perilous journey through the inhospitable mountain passes. Once in Peshawar, they had to register themselves as members of any of the fundamentalist parties or resistance groups for their sustenance in refugee camps. Aslam notes that more the members more the money these groups would get from America (TWV 132). Registration also entitled the parties to enjoy ownership over the refugees which ensured a steady supply of mujahidin for combats. Raja Anwar remarks that “if an Afghan refugee refuses to join the ‘jihad’ when ordered to do so by the party he has been forced to become a member of, his membership is immediately cancelled—and with that his rations too” (238). Therefore, it became obligatory for most of the male refugees to go to the battlefield to sustain their families.

Lessing comments that though it is easy to reduce the refugees to mere numbers—three million or four million, it is only when one sees the refugee camps that stretches for miles, the enormity of the invasion strikes the observer— “endless swarms of children, most of them not being educated; women cooped up together, no proper sanitation; not enough water” (84). Rasheed, the protagonist in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, describes the squalid

conditions of the refugee camps to his wife Mariam: “ ‘People living under scraps of cardboard. TB, dysentery, famine, crime. And that’s before winter. Then it’s frostbite season. Pneumonia. People turning to icicles. Those camps become frozen graveyards’ ” (193). More frightening was the way he bragged about Peshawar brothels. “ ‘Business is booming there, I hear. A beauty like her ought to bring in a small fortune, don’t you think?’ ” (193). All this was happening in the name of jihad seems to be ironical. When Aslam writes that Zameen “had to do it for three months” (TWV 132) as there was no alternative for her other than sell her body to save her new born son from the throes of death, it is evident how cruel the refugee camps were to the needy and the desperate.

One of David’s pastimes was walking through the crowded streets of Peshawar to alleviate his self-imposed solitude. It was during one such wandering he accidentally came across Zameen’s long lost lover—the communist. It was shocking for him to realize that the young man’s ardour for Communism had not waned in spite of all the hardships people had to undergo in the aftermath of the revolution. The young man opines:

It remains the best hope for a country like Afghanistan. Never mind food, some people in my country can’t afford poison to kill themselves. There’s no other way we can put an end to the feudal lords and the ignorant mullahs who rule us with their

power and money, opening their mouths either to lie or to abuse. (TWV 124)

He seemed to be unaware that the mullahs had become all the more powerful, treacherous and demanding, imposing all kinds of restraints on refugees in the camps. Later David got the information that the Soviet military was planning to carry out “an air attack on the refugee camp where the young man lived” (126). It was a well-known fact that the “refugee camps of Peshawar were the hubs of the anti-Soviet guerrillas, where commanders and warriors came to regroup and recuperate after fighting the Soviet Army in Afghanistan” (126). The proposed air attack opened before the CIA an opportune moment to tarnish the Soviets before the world. Arrangements had been made for correspondents and television crew from the West and Muslim countries to show up in Peshawar, “so that the news of the carnage would spread around the world” (126). Here too, it was the life of the poor refugees that was put at stake. Despite knowing that thousands of refugees were going to die in the carnage, Americans stood impassive, did not do anything to prevent the barbarous, bloodthirsty event from happening. After the aerial bombardment, David could see that the place looked almost like a furnace, “smoke issuing from it in enraged billows as though demons had been set free by the bombing” (127). He could see many rows of burning houses where Afghan refugee families had lived. His contemplation on the masterly execution of the

whole show reveals the lack of interest the superpowers had in the lives of Afghan refugees: “The civilised world would see this and condemn Soviet brutality, Moscow made to rethink its policies” (127). Afghanistan looked like a huge chess board where two imperial powers—the Soviet Union and America—tried to accomplish their plans specifically meant to disgrace the other.

One of the saving graces that abates the bitter sweetness of Aslam’s narrative was the genuine friendship that gradually blossomed into love between David and Zameen. She told him that the small apartment where she lived was meant for the women in the refugee camps to come and embroider in secret. The secrecy had to be maintained because the fundamentalists would not appreciate it. Her words reveal the hardships women had to undergo in the refugee camps:

“It’s secret because we fear the fundamentalists who have constructed mosque upon mosque in the refugee camps and have forbidden work and education to women, so much so that a woman in possession of silk thread is branded a wanton, it being the Western aid organisations that began the embroidery scheme to give war widows a chance to earn a livelihood.”

(124)

Aslam hints at the stupendous job that was being done by various aid agencies to help the women in the camps. It was against the preaching of the fundamentalists who tell women that “they must beg in the streets—or that is Allah’s way of using them to test who is charitable and who isn’t—or send their little boys out to be labourers in the bazaars” (124). The information delineated is sufficient enough to startle the reader at the realization that the Taliban who came years later were simply emulating the life they had seen and experienced in the refugee camps in Pakistan. Barfield’s views on refugee camps in Peshawar are worth mentioning here. He opines that these “camps are notorious hotbeds for radical movements of all types because they are generally poor, provide few opportunities for young people, and are under the control of political factions that manipulate their population” (*Afghanistan* 256). This casts a doubt on the credibility of Afghan resistance leaders or Islamist fundamentalists who later acquired the dubious status of major warlords. It is hard to believe that they could forget the Prophet’s tradition of ‘just war’ that safeguarded the interest of women and children. So it is quite clear that most of the resistance leaders, the mullahs and the *ulema* as well as the former feudal lords who pretended as petty warlords had become power mongers who wanted to assert their supremacy over the refugees by donning the role of tough taskmasters at some point during the course of resistance. They were harsh not only to the captured soldiers, but also to their own people. Raja Anwar puts on record that in 1985 it was known to everybody

that all the major Afghan political parties in Peshawar had detention centres and torture cells where “captured Soviet and Afghan soldiers—and suspects from ‘Mujahideen’ ranks—were kept” (240). In *The Wasted Vigil* Aslam presents two warlords—Gul Rasool and Nabi Khan—who mercilessly indulged in crimes in the name of jihad.

The fate of some captured Soviet soldiers and defectors met at hands of the Afghan warriors like Gul Rasool and Nabi Khan was horrifying. To save bullets they were buried alive. Or repeatedly hurled from a roof until dead. Thrown off mountainsides, nothing remaining of them but bones at the base of a cliff after the wolves had been at them. (96)

Anwar says that those who were fortunate enough “to obtain their release or escape from ‘Mujahideen’ captivity tell of atrocities committed on defenceless men which have few parallels” (240). It shows that what was happening in the name of jihad was a brutal war where violations of basic human rights were rampant. And this violation could be seen at its best in the lives of women in the refugee camps.

Lessing’s interaction with the refugee women gave her a repertoire of information on this subject. Most women complained about “the narrowness of their lives now, shut up all together after their spacious life in the village” (78). When asked to say something about their homes in Afghanistan, an old

woman burst into tears. In between her tears she said: “ ‘Oh, Afghanistan, Afghanistan is my sweetheart, I long for my home, for my land, for my people, for my Afghanistan’ ” (81). Lessing categorically says that “of all people in the world the Russians ought to understand this” (81). The desire to go back to the meagre comforts of their homeland was immense in the refugees. But they were not able to do so as long as their country was occupied by infidels who paid scant respect to the life of tradition bound people. Moreover, the jihad against the infidels guaranteed political sanctioning to the extended stay of the refugees in countries like Pakistan and Iran. But this stay had been made tough by the rules and regulations imposed upon them by the fundamentalists and the religious leaders. Lessing writes that often women complained about the overbearing presence of the mullahs in the refugee camps: “ ‘The mullahs have us helpless in the refugee camps. They control what we do and the Pakistanis allow this’ ” (63). She again remarks that it was exactly because of this the mullahs had become so authoritative: “Pakistan has problems in policing the camps because men are not allowed into the women’s quarters, while mullahs, being so saintly, are. The Pakistanis therefore use the mullahs to control the women” (63). One can sense a tone of sarcasm in the expression ‘being so saintly’ as there was nothing saintly about most of the mullahs and clerics in the refugee camps.

Nadeem Aslam presents a typical cleric in *The Wasted Vigil* who “scrutinized the inhabitants of the camp for moral laxity, calling down Allah’s wrath on them through Friday sermons,” (133-134) and within months “he had had seven women murdered for being prostitutes” (133). He was also the one who supervised the mutilation of trees particularly sacred for the few Hindu citizens of Peshawar. This was also against the norms for the conduct of a just war stipulated by the Prophet. Men of his brood could flourish because of the leniency on the part of the city’s police and the magistracy. This laxity on the part of the administrators gave an added impetus to the Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas to kill the dispassionate clerics and warlords. Thus it is apparent that moderation was replaced by extremism in all facets of the life of the refugees. “Groups with extreme messages, whether their ideologies are political, ethnic, or religious, galvanize their followers not only with the visions of reclaiming a lost homeland but also of then transforming it” (Barfield, *Afghanistan* 256). This became evident to David when he “entered fully the hell that was the Afghan refugee camp ringed around the city” searching for Zameen and her son “among the three million refugees” (TWV 134). As he walked along, he could see “the clerics of the mosques shouting from the minarets that while the USSR was a prison, and the USA a whorehouse, Islam was the answer” (135). It appears that the name of Islam was used to serve the vested interests of some for political and religious gains. This can be understood in the light of the “role played by the institution of Mullahism” in a predominantly tribal

society like Afghanistan (Anwar 132). When Islam crossed the narrow confines of its Arab frontiers, it encountered many challenges of which the most important was the pressure exerted by pre-existent customs or beliefs. Raja Anwar argues that in Afghanistan too there were such unfavourable circumstances, and it was the mullah “who interpreted and applied Islam in line with the Afghan social and ethical value system” (133). An instance given by Anwar substantiates this point:

According to the teachings of Islam, it is forbidden to disfigure a dead body even if it is that of your bitterest enemy. However, to the ‘Mujahideen’, it is the observance of Islam itself to torture and mutilate the bodies of their captured enemies by chopping off their ears, noses, arms and legs before finally killing them. (239)

Here one can see Afghan tribal practices having an edge over Islamic principles. Social circumstances had played a vital role in giving mullahs a privileged position in Afghan society, and the refugee camps in Peshawar became a fertile ground for the mullahs to implement their perverted notions of Islam. It can be unequivocally said that the seeds of madness that led to the total disintegration of the country later was laid in the refugee camps in Peshawar and in the madrasas that sprang up along the Afghan-Pak border. Kepel notes that the Afghan refugee children who were often “taken in by the

madrassas as boarders” had to live in unfamiliar environments and made “to mix with Pakistani’s of different ethnic origins” (142). These young Afghans “trained in the spirit of jihad at schools to which nobody had paid much attention previously, gave birth to a hybrid movement” (143). The Taliban who surfaced years later when the civil war wrecked the lives of the people in Afghanistan were the products of these religious schools, and most of these schools had the blessings of the resistance leaders who were die hard fundamentalists.

It is to be said in this context that by around 1986 all major resistance groups started getting money and weapons from external sources. When studied together, the novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil* provide plenty of opportunities to understand how money and weapons specially meant to defeat the Soviets flowed into the hands of the mujahidin. Hosseini writes about President Reagan who “had started shipping the Mujahideen Stinger Missiles to down the Soviet helicopters” and how “Muslims from all over the world were joining the cause: Egyptians, Pakistani’s, even wealthy Saudis, who left their millions behind and came to Afghanistan to fight the jihad” (ATSS 102). Nadeem Aslam remarks: “The CIA didn’t care what the religious affiliation of the warriors was—wanting the funds to go to those who fought the Soviet soldiers the hardest” (TWV 133). The price that had to be paid for this gross negligence was immeasurable.

The ISI made it sure that the funds supplied by America and Saudi Arabia were given only to the Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas. America's Stinger missiles added a new strength and vigour to the jihad against the Russians. Raja Anwar writes about an American journalist "who had personally witnessed US experts training Hizbe Islami 'Mujahideen' in the use of Stingers" (233). This reference alludes to Hekmatyar's popularity and acceptance among Pakistan's military strategists. Being the most ultra conservative of all the fundamentalist resistance leaders, he was the one who had received a major share of weapons from the CIA through the ISI. Though the immediate use of these missiles was to bring down Soviet helicopters inside Afghanistan, they came to be of much use to Hekmatyar when he bombarded Kabul with his rockets and missiles during the time of civil war.

It was public knowledge that millions of dollars had been spent to boost the resistance. But not much was done to mitigate the sufferings of the refugees in the camps due to "the wholesale theft of aid money, to which all parties turned a blind eye as long as the Russians remained in Afghanistan" (Kepel 143). David could see heart wrenching sights of poverty in most camps. Aslam gives a moving description of what David witnessed in one of the camps:

One evening he stood to watch a pair of children, participants in a game of hide-and-seek that was in progress in a street of

hovels. They were crouching next to an open sewer that spilled black matter, their eyes trained on the door from which the seeker was probably to emerge, the smell of cooking smoke and bread floating in the evening air. David watched as the two children sprang to their feet and grabbed the little boy who had just appeared in the door, chewing, having just finished a meal. They marched him to a corner and then quickly, before David could believe what he was seeing, or react, a finger was inserted into the overpowered little boy's throat, the vomit emerging and being caught in the hands of the two assailants, who then began to eat the still-undigested food. The little boy stumbled away dazed and fell, his eyes bright with liquid even in the dusk. (TWV 135)

What David could do was just run away from the venue of tragic deprivation. All the while he was tormented by the thought that he too was responsible for the creation of it. "He had helped create all this" (135). No amount of cajoling on his part to make himself believe that "all this was the Soviet Union's fault" helped him to mitigate the horror of what he had just witnessed (135).

There had been several attempts in the past to record the ordeal of the Afghan refugees in Peshawar camps. Of these, a photograph that appeared on

the June 1985 cover of the *National Geographic* magazine spoke directly to the conscience of the world. It was the photograph of a young Afghan refugee girl named Sharbat Gula taken by renowned American photojournalist Steve McCurry. In her sea green eyes staring directly into McCurry's camera, the world could see the tragedy of a nation devoured by war.

The life of deprivation, pain, fear and uncertainty experienced by the refugees in Peshawar was more or less experienced by people who remained in Afghanistan too. The report on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan prepared by Felix Ermacora, the Special Rapporteur, and published on 17 February 1986, gives a detailed account of widespread abuses that occurred during the Soviet occupation. She reports that to quell the resistance, the Soviets used advanced weapons and technology, resorted to carpet bombing villages to kill civilians as well as guerrillas, and strewn across the country anti-personnel mines that were designed to maim rather than to kill. Ermacora's study brought to light severe human rights abuses that had been taking place in Afghanistan in the name of jihad.

Though it is not easy for people to withstand terror and violence of this nature, the Afghans were an exception. Through very effective guerrilla warfare, they made the country ungovernable for the PDPA and its infidel supporters. Despite what has been just said, death stalked the families who had their children in the battlefield as mujahidin. When Laila's family received the

news of the death of Ahmad and Noor in the battle, they were devastated. The messenger who brought the news said that Ahmad Shah Massoud had personally oversaw the burial. Though Fariba, Ahmad and Noor's mother had never recovered from the great loss, in her moments of sanity she would remind her daughter: " 'That's the kind of brave young men your brothers were, Laila, that Commander Massoud himself, the Lion of Panjshir, God bless him, would oversee their burial' " (ATSS 128). But Laila could sense that Mammy's mental as well as physical health was worsening. Her only desire was to see her son's dream come true. " 'I want to see the day the Soviets go home disgraced, the day the Mujahideen come to Kabul in victory. I want to be there when it happens, when Afghanistan is free, so the boys see it too. They'll see it through my eyes' " (129-130). The grief that Laila's family experienced was shared by thousands of families in Afghanistan. It was the universality of this shared pain depicted in the novels under study that made them resonate with readers at large.

Another aspect that deserves mentioning here was the change that had come over in the attitude of the mujahidin towards jihad over the years. Though the jihad was still being waged with great ferocity, they had a feeling that the world was largely indifferent to the sufferings of the poor Afghans, both in the camps and in the battlefield. What all the mujahidin commanders said in unison to Lessing was about the shortage of food and the lack of other

basic necessities. “ ‘We have no food, we have no warm clothes, no boots, only sandals. We lose our feet and hands from frostbite. . . . Send us food, send us warm clothes’ ” (Lessing 53). Abdul Haq Afghani, the famous mujahidin commander said: “ ‘The only really hard thing is this: in the beginning we felt the whole world was with us, now we are alone’ ” (34). While arms and ammunition from America, Saudi Arabia and their allies in the war were supplied in abundance to keep the resistance alive, the ordinary Afghans, the mujahidin included, felt embittered for being denied the basic amenities of life.

Meanwhile, initiatives taken by Gorbachev since his ascension to power in 1985 to find an amicable settlement to the Afghan problem often proved futile since it was not easy to appease the mujahidin factions who had often been at loggerheads. But talks went on in Geneva to solve the political ambivalence. Najibullah’s attempts to forge a national reconciliation were thwarted by resistance leaders as it was suicidal for them to share power with the communists whom they had always abhorred. The situation that emerged is summed up by Raja Anwar in his characteristic style: “The tragedy of Afghanistan lies in the fact that the followers of both Marx and Mohammed are divided and at one another’s throats” (239). Even when the Soviet departure from the Afghan soil seemed imminent, the Peshawar based Afghan political parties could not reach a consensus on the formation of an interim

government “partly due to personality rivalries among the leadership and partly to traditional ethnolinguistic differences” (Maley 31). The influence exerted by the ‘characteristic Afghan style’ that is deeply embedded in the Afghan tribal mind too cannot be put aside. Anwar clarifies: “If two Afghans, for example, are equally armed, neither of them will even conceive of walking behind the other as it seem to him to constitute an insult to his family, his tribe and his own person” (242 - 243). Anwar illustrates further:

Although a special kind of anarchy born out of this very tribal attitude has always characterized Afghan society, the massive flow of foreign arms into the country since the Soviet intervention has immeasurably deepened that state of mind and way of life. The anarchic Afghan temperament has not only managed to stalemate the Red Army, but made it impossible for any future government to deal with a situation where every individual citizen is armed with modern weapons. (243)

This reality had an adverse impact on the political climate of Afghanistan before the Soviet withdrawal. Then came the day in April 1988 when Laila’s father Babi came home with the big news. “ ‘They signed a treaty!’ he said. ‘In Geneva. It’s official! They are leaving. Within nine months, there won’t be any more Soviets in Afghanistan!’ ” (138). But Fariba knew that the communist regime would continue with Najibullah as the puppet

president. The conversation that ensued shows her bitterness towards the communists as well as her eagerness for the return of the mujahidin:

“But the communist regime is staying,” she said. “Najibullah is the Soviet’s puppet president. He’s not going anywhere. No, the war will go on. It is not the end.”

“Najibullah won’t last,” said Babi.

“They’re leaving, Mammy! They’re actually leaving!”

“You two celebrate if you want to. But I won’t rest until the Mujahideen hold a victory parade right here in Kabul.” (ATSS 138)

However, Fariba went to the Military Club near Wazir Akbar Khan with Laila and Babi to see one of the last Soviet troops leave the city. She raised the photos of her beloved sons high over her head. Hosseini poignantly remarks: “There were others like her, women with pictures of their shaheed husbands, sons, brothers held high” (139). While standing there holding the photographs of their dear departed, they did not know that a few years down the line most of them would be labelled as war widows.

The loss incurred by the Soviet Union during its nine year occupancy was immense in terms of man power, expenditure of resources and international prestige. The invasion also speeded up the crumbling of the

Soviet Union towards the end of 1980's. But the loss suffered by Afghanistan cannot be measured by any existing parameters. A comment made by the Soviet dissident Andrei Sakarov reveals the horrifying impact of the Soviet invasion and occupation on Afghanistan:

. . . the war in Afghanistan was in itself criminal, a criminal adventure taken on, undertaken by who knows who, and who knows bears the responsibility for this enormous crime of our Motherland. This crime cost the lives of about a million Afghans; a war of destruction was waged against an entire people. . . . And that is what lies on us as a terrible sin, a terrible reproach. We must cleanse ourselves of this shame that lies on our leadership. (qtd. in Ewans 236-237)

The departure of the Soviets was the materialization of a long awaited dream for most Afghans. For them it was a hard-won victory gained through jihad. But the sweetness of this victory could be savoured only with the homecoming of the resistance leaders who had over the course of time become leaders of Afghan national parties based in Peshawar. It was public knowledge that as long as Najibullah held the reins of power the Soviets would keep the war going. This was evident from the way people passionately argued "that Soviets might be leaving but that they would send weapons to Najibullah in Kabul" (ATTS 140). Their disgust with a regime that would not let them go

free is apparent in these words. Therefore, what followed, as anticipated, was a period of unrest and rivalry. Hosseini writes of those days in *The Kite Runner*: “It should have been a time of glory for Afghans. Instead, the war raged on, this time between Afghans, the *Mujahedin*, against the Soviet puppet government of Najibullah (160). Here, it is essential to remember that the political conditions in Kabul deteriorated even before the exit of the Soviets mainly due to the reluctance showed by the resistance groups to partake in a coalition government proposed by the communist regime. Moreover, the resistance leaders who had always quarrelled among themselves could not come to an agreement on matters of administration. Hosseini summarizes the impasse that evolved: “The Mujahideen, armed to the teeth but now lacking a common enemy, had found the enemy in each other” (ATSS 155). This observation affirms the fact that it was the rhetoric of jihad that had kept all the resistance groups together in their fight against the infidel enemy. What was so tragic about the political deadlock that emerged after the withdrawal of the Soviets was the fact that it brought to fore all the untamed, corrupt and malign forces that had been lying abeyant in the psyche of the nation for the most part of the 20th century. Neither Islam nor jihad was strong enough to help the resistance leaders nor their followers to overcome their characteristic traditional and ethnic animosities. Therefore, though the withdrawal of the Soviets was hailed as the victory of jihad, there was not much to rejoice in it as it failed to unite various resistance factions at one of the crucial phases in

the history of the country. It also resulted in the continuation of jihad against the puppet government of Najibullah installed by the Soviets before their departure.

Meanwhile, Najibullah went on getting substantial help from the Soviets to perch himself atop the administration. He changed his tactics to portray himself as a devout Muslim. But people like Babi could see through his pretensions. “ ‘Too little and far too late,’ said Babi. ‘You can’t be the chief of KHAD one day and the next day pray in a mosque with people whose relatives you tortured and killed’ ” (ATSS 144). Nevertheless, Najibullah’s days were numbered. When the fragmentation of the Soviet Union became final in 1992, he felt “the noose tightening around Kabul” (144).

In the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini narrates the situations that emerged immediately after Najibullah ran to the safety of the UN compound near Darulam Palace in April 1992. The fall of Najibullah was acknowledged as the natural end of the jihad. The novelist has succeeded in capturing the euphoria experienced by Laila’s family at the success of jihad:

The jihad was over. The various communist regimes that had held power since the night Laila was born were all defeated. Mammy’s heroes, Ahmad’s and Noor’s brothers-in-war, had won. And now, after more than a decade of sacrificing everything, of leaving behind their families to live in mountains

and fight for Afghanistan's sovereignty, the Mujahideen were coming to Kabul, in flesh, blood, and battle weary bone. (ATSS 144)

People eagerly waited for Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Rabbani, Sayaf, and Abdul Ali Mazari who were resistance leaders transposed into major warlords. But mammy's hero was "Rabbani's ally, the brooding, charismatic Tajik commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Lion of Panjshir" (145). He was the only resistance leader who had never been to Pakistan when the jihad against the Soviets was being pursued, and his popularity knew no bounds. "His soulful black eyes would gaze back from billboards, walls, storefront windows, from little flags mounted on the antennas of taxicabs" (145). It was this popularity that the West wanted to capitalize earlier when the need for a national leader was urgently felt when the Soviet departure seemed imminent. Raja Anwar says that the West propped up the name of Massoud due to their ignorance of "Afghanistan's tribal and nationalistic contradictions" (242). But Massoud was well aware of these contradictions inherent in the nation's temperament and thought that the best way to overcome the imbroglio was, as Amin Saikal, a professor of Political Science says "to secure a transitional coalition as the first step towards creating a legitimate national government" (32). In order to achieve this aim, the leaders had to agree upon a mutually acceptable power-sharing agreement. Massoud's efforts saw its fruition in the

drafting of “the Peshawar Agreement of April 1992, forged between the Pakistan-based Mujahideen leaders” (32). Involvement of the Pakistan government headed by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif too was substantial in the drafting of the agreement. It was fashioned to provide a schema for an interim government to be enforced in two stages. In the first stage, the country would be ruled by a two month transitional government headed by Sebghatullah Mojadidi. In the second stage, Rabbani, the Jamiat leader, a Tajik, would take over from Mojadiddi for a period of four months. Then an interim government would be constituted as a prelude to elections.

Hosseini in his *A Thousand Splendid Suns* foregrounds ethnic rivalry that had always been a hindrance to solve political stalemate and to arrive at a consensus. He narrates: “Hekmatyar, who had been excluded, was incensed. The Hazaras, with their long history of being oppressed and neglected, seethed. Insults were hurled. Fingers pointed. Accusations flew. Meetings were called off and doors slammed” (155). It was no secret in Afghanistan that a Tajik at the helm would be unacceptable to the Pashtun majority. So, when Rabbani was elected as the president of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, there was a loud cry of protest from the discontent parties. However, for the war weary population of Afghanistan, it was a time meant to celebrate the victory of the jihad. Saikal writes of those days:

The Mujahideen take over was welcomed by many Afghans in the expectation of returning their war-ravaged country to peace and order. However, their expectations were soon to be confounded, for the Mujahideen victory quickly turned sour, making their rule a continuation of the warfare of the preceding thirteen years, with further losses for the Afghans. (29)

Shortly after the inception of the Rabbani government to the seat of power, the civil war commenced and with that another painful chapter in the history of Afghanistan began. Since there were no external forces to fight against, no geographical territory to protect and no reforms that imperilled the traditional power base, the discourse of jihad was not widely used in the beginning or during the course of the civil war. The unifying nature of Islam too suffered a setback. What one witnessed in Kabul was the manifestation of hatred. Once again Afghanistan fell into the hands of powermongers who had no qualms about showering rockets and missiles upon innocent people. After each blast “there was a scrambling, a bare-handed frenzy of digging, of pulling from the debris, what remained of a sister, a brother, a grandchild” (ATSS 156).

What was awfully grievous about the civil war was its fratricidal nature, and it was happening at a time when people earnestly wished for peace. And as usual peace eluded them. Relative peace that Kabul enjoyed

during the time of the jihad gave way to anarchy and lawlessness. “The streets became so unsafe that Babi did an unthinkable thing: He had Laila drop out of school” (ATSS 160). Marsden writes that “Kabul was carved up into territories controlled by different groups, and law and order were virtually non-existent” (37). It was Tariq who told Laila about the shifting boundaries inside Kabul, how areas had been earmarked by warlords to assert their power: “Laila learned from him, for instance, that this road, up to the second acacia tree on the left, belonged to one warlord; that the next four blocks, ending with the bakery shop next to the demolished pharmacy, was another warlord’s sector” (158). For a young girl like Laila, such demarcations were incomprehensible. Narrow provincialism of this nature mirrors the changes the war had brought in the temperament of the warlords, both major and minor, who wielded unmitigated power for a decade when the jihad was in full swing. It was this power that they never wanted to lose. The holy warriors of yesteryears in no time descended to the level of mere warlords. The tone of sarcasm in Hosseini’s language cannot be ignored:

And this was what Mammy’s heroes were called now. Warlords. Laila heard them called *tofangdar* too. Riflemen. Others still called them Mujahideen, but, when they did, they made a face—a sneering, distasteful face—the word reeking of deep aversion and deep scorn. Like an insult. (158)

From the level of the holy warriors, the local mujahidin commanders stooped to the level of petty warlords whose primary aim was to maintain their power at any cost.

It is worth mentioning here an anecdote taken from the Prophet's life. After coming back from the battlefield, the prophet remarked that he had a greater jihad to wage. In the eyes of the Prophet protecting the territory of one's country was lesser jihad and inferior to greater jihad which gave importance to conquering evils inherent in human nature or striving to become a better person by waging an internal war that aims at the purification of both heart and soul. When viewed from this vantage point, it is transpicuous that the resistance leaders were only concerned about lesser jihad that gave priority to territorial protection. Greater jihad was taboo for them as there was no attempt on the part of the leaders to rise above narrow ethnic prejudices, selfishness and greed to safeguard the lives of people irrespective of their ethnicity. Hosseini furnishes an incident to highlight this:

In June of that year, 1992, there was heavy fighting in West Kabul between the Pashtun forces of the warlord Sayyaf and the Hazaras of the Wahdat faction. . . . Laila heard that Pashtun militiamen were attacking Hazara households, breaking in and shooting entire families, execution style, and that Hazaras were retaliating by abducting Pashtun civilians, raping Pashtun girls,

shelling Pashtun neighborhoods, and killing indiscriminately. Every day, bodies were found tied to trees, sometimes burned beyond recognition. Often they had been shot in the head, had had their eyes gouged out, their tongues cut out. (ATSS 159)

It was brutality at its worst. The Pashtun-Hazara rivalry that had remained subdued during the time of the jihad against the Soviets showed its ugly face at the time of the civil war. When Hekmatyar hurled his rockets at Massoud from the southern border of the city, Laila lost Giti, her childhood friend. Later Laila heard that “Nila, Giti’s mother, had run up and down the street where Giti was killed, collecting pieces of her daughter’s flesh in an apron, screeching hysterically” (161). Giti’s mother was one among the thousands who had to witness the death of their precious children at the hands of a cruel fate. People fled to neighbouring countries fearing for their lives. Kabul experienced a wave of migration that took people to distant lands. Hosseini’s description of Laila’s neighbourhood brings alive the desolate look it bore: “The neighborhood had been all but drained of familiar faces, and now, only four months after fighting had broken out between the Mujahideen factions. Laila hardly recognized anybody on the streets anymore” (163). Tariq’s departure to Pakistan only aggravated her sorrow. She found herself alone with the sound of rockets “zipping across the sky as Hekmatyar’s and Massoud’s forces fought and fought” (169).

Tragedy struck Laila and her family in the form a rocket attack that killed her beloved parents leaving her as the lone survivor of her family, and forever at the mercy of Rasheed and Mariam. The realisation that she was pregnant with Tariq's child forced her to take the uncanny decision of becoming Rasheed's third wife. The civil war that ravaged the country shattered many a dream. Saikal writes: "By the end of 1994, Hekmatyar's indiscriminate bombardment of Kabul had managed to destroy half of the city and kill some 25,000 of its citizens" (33). This observation sheds light on the unscrupulousness showed by America, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in arming the resistance leaders with weapons while the jihad against the Soviets was being steadfastly fought. Rasheed, though a shoemaker, was very much aware of the politics that sealed many a deal during the days of the jihad. He tells Laila:

"If you ask me, the Americans armed the wrong man in Hekmatyar. All the guns the CIA handed him in the eighties to fight the Soviets. The Soviets are gone, but he still has the guns, and now he is turning them on innocent people like your parents. And he calls this jihad. What a farce! What does jihad have to do with killing women and children?" (ATSS 189-190).

Rasheed's words make sense to the reader who is familiar with the atrocities that had been committed in the name jihad. If this jihad had been

waged in its true spirit, much bloodshed could have been avoided; the conscience of the world could have been easily aroused against the cruelty of an imperial power.

Since the departure of the Soviets and the collapse of Communism, the world at large lost its interest in Afghanistan. Rasheed reveals his thoughts about Americans through these words:

“What do they care that Pashtuns and Hazaras and Tajiks and Uzbeks are killing each other? How many Americans can even tell one from the other? Don’t expect help from them, I say. Now that the Soviets have collapsed, we’re no use to them. We served our purpose. To them Afghanistan is a *Kenarab*, a shit hole.” (190)

The indifference showed by America to Afghanistan after the fall of the Soviet Union shows that it was only pursuing its vested interest by meddling in Afghanistan during the time of Soviet occupancy.

It is agonising to observe the ‘impact of indifference’ on the country and its people. Lawlessness prevailed in many parts of the country as the government in Kabul under Rabbani was not in a position to maintain law and order as it was more concerned about settling disputes through bloody warfare. Anarchy assumed appalling dimensions in many parts of Afghanistan. When

Hosseini writes that the streets “became littered with bodies, glass, and crumpled chunks of metal,” (ATSS 226) women were “killing themselves out of fear of being raped,” and men “in the name of honor, would kill their wives or daughters if they’d been raped by the militia,” (227) the novelist refers to the grave humanitarian tragedy that unfolded in Afghanistan during the time of the civil war. Aslam too has succeeded in capturing the savagery to which the nation had been subjected in the following narrative:

Afghanistan had collapsed and everyone’s life now lies broken at different levels within the rubble. Some are trapped near the surface while others find themselves entombed deeper down, pinned under tons of smashed masonry and shattered beams from where their cries cannot be heard by anyone on the surface, only—and inconsequentially—by those around them. (TWV 29)

The unending wars brought only sorrow and misery in the lives of people.

Deprived of all external help, the Afghans were left to fend for themselves. Only Pakistan had some political interests in Afghanistan as they wanted to influence Afghanistan’s post-war government, and for that, they needed a person like Hekmatyar at the helm. Hekmatyar’s objective to discredit the Rabbani government proved to be successful to a great extent. But, however he tried, his relentless canon and rocket attacks could not

penetrate the impregnable walls mounted by Massoud and his forces around Kabul. This discredited Hekmatyar in the eyes of the Pakistanis who were desperately seeking an ally in the region. So the ISI was prompted “to shift support to a newly-created alternative: the Taliban militia” that had already established its governance in Kandahar, a Pashtun stronghold (Saikal 34).

The novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil* substantiate the fact that the most calamitous event in the modern history of Afghanistan was the ascension of the Khalq faction of the PDPA to power in April 1978. Though forty years have gone by since that historical moment, its repercussions are felt even today in international politics. Intoxicated by power, the communists were in a hurry to restructure the traditional power structures of a country grounded on timeless customs and practices. The novels reveal that the outright rejection of the reforms by a vast majority of people was a set-back for the PDPA government that failed to acknowledge the hatred that the Afghans had always shown to alien ideologies. The brutal violation of the territorial integrity of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in December 1979 was to a great extent the result of the chaos that the reforms had unleashed across the country. The invasion also signalled the commencement of a series of jihad that totally disrupted the social fabric of Afghanistan. The most tragic outcome of the Communist Revolution and its aftermath was the global dimensions that the Afghan jihad

acquired over the years. As the novel *The Wasted Vigil* brilliantly delineates, Peshawar in Pakistan with millions of Afghan refugees became a melting pot for radical Islamists from across the world to assemble and thrive very much under the scrutinizing eyes of various intelligence agencies. Both the novelists covertly allude to the bitter reality that the unholy meddling of foreign forces in the internal affairs of a country is destructive.

The novels also give paramount importance to how factors like ethnicity and sectarianism inherent in the psyche of Afghanistan turned destructive in the power struggle that ensued immediately after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces. They irrevocably convey the message that if the resistance leaders had kept aside their differences and formed a government that gave paramount importance to the welfare of the war ravaged people, the tragedy that struck the nation in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the civil war and the subsequent emergence of the Taliban—would not have happened. Hosseini's meticulous narration of the vicious cycle of violence that rocked Kabul immediately after the ascension of Rabbani brings alive the horror of those days quite effectively in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The novel also highlights the trauma that the Afghans had to undergo due to the unsatiated thirst for power showed by their leaders and affirms that the brutal civil war that completely wrecked the lives of millions of poor Afghans was a proof for this. By offering an interesting and insightful narrative on a revolution that had

gone sour and its after-effects, the novelists Khaled Hosseini and Nadeem Aslam have succeeded in immortalising a fiasco that will remain etched in the minds of readers.