

Chapter 3

Vandalism Unleashed

“A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive,” reads the inscription on the stone plaque positioned at the entrance of the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul. It bears witness to the courage and determination showed by the museum staff who braved great odds to salvage the priceless exhibits kept in the museum from cultural vandalism that happened during the time of Afghan civil war and the reign of the Taliban militia. It also serves as a bleak reminder to the necessity of protecting a nation’s cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, to let the spirit of the nation soar high in the realm of art and culture.

History is replete with stories of wanton destruction of cultural artefacts during the time of war and conflict. In recent times, the ancient cities of Palmyra and Mosul in Syria and Iraq caught the attention of the world when ISIS in its mad frenzy to erase all the traces of alien cultures blew up sites that bore testimony to a vibrant past. By destroying temples, mosques, shrines, museums and libraries that housed relics, ISIS tried to wipe out the indispensable heritage of Syria and Iraq that did not align with their militant Islamic ideology. Stephen Stenning, Director, Culture and Development, British Council, remarks that ISIS’ destruction of cultural sites sheds light on

the mindset of an extremist outfit governed by sheer political will to eliminate any cultural expression alien to its ideology. He adjoins:

It is ruthless in its mission to present its way as an uncomplicated, non-compromised and pure form of Islam. Its adherents wish to remove not only symbols of other faiths, but also anything valued by those who follow Islam in a different way. References to pre-Islamic history that could distract the faithful are therefore anathema.

When viewed from this perspective, the destruction of the giant statues of the Buddhas of Bamiyan seems to have been based mainly on the Taliban's militant iconoclasm and regressive interpretation of Islamic law.

The rich tapestry of Afghan culture found its most effective manifestation in the Buddhas of Bamiyan that were very much a part of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic past. Bamiyan's ancient history chronicles the intermingling of spirituality, trade and commerce. Strategically located on the Silk Route that linked India, China, and Central Asia in the east with Greece, Rome and the Byzantine world in the west in the ancient past, Bamiyan was for more than a thousand years a prominent centre of trade and commerce. Then in the 13th century, the place was completely destroyed in a massive attack launched by Genghis Khan and his hordes of Mongols to avenge the death of the ruthless warrior's favourite grandson. Though reduced to rubble, Bamiyan

still speaks eloquently of its one-time former grandeur and carries the mark of an unmistakable religious semblance. All those who had traversed through Bamiyan before the destruction of the giant statues in March 2001 had seen them standing tall in the niches carved along the sandstone cliffs of Bamiyan.

The novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil* speak eloquently of the splendid Buddhist heritage of the war-torn Afghanistan. In the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini makes Babi undertake a journey in 1987 with young Laila and Tariq to the lush green valley of Bamiyan which lies 145 miles north of Kabul when the jihad against the Soviets was still going strong. The journey was meant to contribute to their education too—to make them aware of the rich Buddhist heritage of their country that had become the byword for religious extremism. The grandeur of the narrative that introduces the reader to the magnificence of the statues from Laila's point of observation is as majestic as the Buddha himself:

The two Buddhas were enormous, soaring much higher than she had imagined from all the photos she had seen of them. Chiseled into a sun-bleached rock cliff, they peered down at them, as they had nearly two thousand years before, Laila imagined, at caravans crossing the valley on the Silk Road. On either side of them along the overhanging niche, the cliff was pocked with myriad caves. (ATSS 132-133)

The sight of the colossal Buddhas overwhelmed the little ones. Laila felt that “she could live to be a hundred and she would never again see a thing as magnificent” (132). Tariq felt small and insignificant before the magnificence of the Buddhas. Hosseini has succeeded in making the reader perceive the resplendent beauty of the giant Buddha statues through the eyes of two innocent children who have not yet experienced the ravages of the war at a deeper level.

It was quite a surprise for Laila and Tariq when Babi made them climb up a narrow winding staircase carved along the side of one of the statues. As they went up, they could see numerous caves together with tunnels, penetrating the cliff in all the directions. “In some parts, the staircase was open to the Buddha’s cavity” (133). The reader marvels at the architectural acumen showed by the people of a very distant past who painstakingly carved the statues on the rock cliff of Bamiyan. Standing upon its head, Laila and Tariq listened to Babi with a sense of wonder when he said that Bamiyan “had once been a thriving Buddhist center until it had fallen under Islamic Arab rule in the 9th century” (133). The caves Laila and Tariq had seen were chiselled by Buddhist monks to live and provide shelter to weary travellers who journeyed along the route. At one point “ ‘there were five thousands monks living as hermits in these caves’ ” (133). The monks also painted beautiful frescoes along the walls and roofs of the caves. During the Taliban regime, these caves

offered a sanctuary to hundreds of Hazaras who fled the mainland fearing persecution. One can see the interiors of these caves in the movie *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* directed by Iranian director Hana Makmalbaf. Laila was also enamoured by the silence that pervaded the valley. An iconic photograph taken by Keith Worsley Brown in June 1972, standing atop the head of the western Buddha, offers a panoramic view of the valley and the Hindukush, and speaks volumes on silence that seeps into the heart of the onlooker (Blansdorf and Petzet). Babi, while extolling the beauty of the silence that engulfed them, reminded them of their cultural legacy: “ ‘The silence. The peace of it. I wanted you to experience it. But I also wanted you to see your country's heritage, children, to learn of its rich past. You see, some things I can teach you, some you learn from books. But there are things that, well, you just have to see and feel’ ” (134). Babi’s words exuded with pride when he spoke of his country’s rich past.

The novels *A Thousand Splendid Sun* and *The Wasted Vigil* provide the reader with opportunities to delve into the much less known Buddhist legacy of Afghanistan. Buddhism began to flourish in Afghanistan under the patronage of Emperor Asoka who launched a fierce campaign to propagate the teachings of Buddha across the Mauryan Empire. The geographical entity now known as Afghanistan was a part of the Mauryan Empire in those days. On Asoka's insistence, the teachings of Buddha got engraved on rocks and pillars across

the empire. A few inscriptions of Asoka had been sighted in Kandahar, a place now appraised as the birth place of a pernicious kind of Islam. The first one, a mini rock edict inscribed on a boulder was discovered in 1958 at the foothills of Chel-Zina. This bilingual edict in Greek and Aramaic affirms cultural syncretism accomplished due to the presence of a large number of Greeks in Afghanistan. The second edict in Greek engraved on a rectangular piece of porous limestone block was discovered by a German doctor from the debris of old Kandahar city in 1963. It also speaks volumes on the impact of Greek legacy on the cultural landscape of Afghanistan, and is now preserved in the National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul.

Greek culture hit upon Bactrian art in the 4th century BC when the territory known as today's Afghanistan became part of the vast Macedonian Empire following the invasion of Alexander the Great in 330 BC. In Dr. Mohan Lal Sharma's opinion, Greek realism blended with Indian mysticism on Afghan soil giving birth to "a new school of art known to historians and Indologists as the Gandhara School or more properly Graeco-Buddhist School of Gandhara" which doubtlessly had its heart at Hadda, six miles south of modern Jalalabad (15).

Aslam's fascination for the Buddha is evident in his choice of Jalalabad as the locale for the story of *The Wasted Vigil*. He furnishes the information that "this province was one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the

Buddhist world from the second to the seventh centuries AD—over a thousand Buddhist stupas in the area echoing incantation of monks back then” (TWV 17). The most prized possession of Marcus and Qatrina was a massive stone head of the Buddha that they encountered while clearing the ground for constructing their perfume factory. “Vertically it measured ten feet from one ear to other. Horizontally it was fifteen feet from the top knot to the decapitated neck” (17). For Marcus it was a face that annunciated of a remote past. Aslam's description of the stone head brings alive the serenity that is characteristic of the Buddha's face: “Eyes two-third closed in meditation. The smile of serenity. The large dot between the eye-brows, perfectly circular like a guitar's round mouth. The head covered entirely in the incised ripples of hair” (17). Here too one can discern the influence exerted by the Greeks on Buddhism. Aslam writes:

It was here in Afghanistan that the Buddha had received a human face, earlier representations of him having been symbols—a parasol, a throne, a foot print. A begging bowl. The Greeks in Afghanistan gave him the features of Apollo, the god of knowledge, the god who repented. The only Asian addition to Apollo was a dot on the forehead and the topknotted locks. (168)

Greek influence on Afghanistan's cultural landscape had always been a matter of great interest to archaeologists. Excavations carried out by French archeologists to find out a Greco-Bactrian city in northern regions of Afghanistan finally saw success in 1963 when the remnants of a Hellenistic city was unearthed at Ai Khanum. The remains of the place give the impression that the sophisticated city was ransacked by nomad invaders probably by the end of 2nd century BC. Numerous such discoveries have been made across the country over the years, and the Kabul Museum with its rich collection of Graeco-Bactrian coins, Gandharan statues of Buddha, and innumerable inscriptions in Greek and other languages bear testimony to this fact. Therefore, Marcus' discovery of the stone head of the Buddha in his compound cannot be considered as a singular experience.

Of all the Buddhist relics that have been found in various parts of Afghanistan, the Buddhas of Bamiyan stand out for its sheer magnificence and splendour. It is believed that the smaller statue of 35 meters height was built in the 2nd century AD during the reign of Kanishka of Kushana dynasty whose vast empire extended from Kandahar to Varanasi. The love and admiration people had for the teachings of the Venerable Master reached its zenith in the succeeding eras and culminated in the making of a statue of 55 meters height probably in the 5th century AD. The statues had the definitive characteristics of all sub-continental Buddhas. They were decked in Greek robes that depicted

the inimitable assimilation of Hellenism popularized by the soldiers of Alexander the Great with ancient Indian and Central Asian art. Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim who reached Bamiyan in 630 AD had left behind a lasting imprint on the Buddhist heritage of Bamiyan in his travelogues. He writes about the bejewelled statues that outshone everything in its vicinity with its golden splendour. He also records having seen “a large number of Buddhist monks and monasteries in other parts of Afghanistan” (Ahir 9). Archeological excavations and historical evidences delineate the fact that Buddhism thrived in many regions in Afghanistan like Bamiyan, Kapisa—modern day Begram, Jalalabad, Ghazni, Hadda, Bulk and Surkh Kotal until the onslaught of Islam in Afghanistan in the 9th century AD.

In the light of the factors mentioned in the previous chapters, it can be assiduously said that for nearly 1500 years the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan had been mute witnesses to all the ravages inflicted upon the country by invading armies or conflicting forces that jeopardized the welfare of the country to safeguard their narrow provincial interests. They epitomized the never say die attitude of a race of people marauded by one invader after another. “Macedonians. Sassanians. Arabs. Mongols. Now the Soviets” (ATSS 132). Right through, they stood as symbols of resistance and fearlessness. To quote Babi's words: “Battered, and nothing pretty to look at, but still standing” (132). Like the Afghans, the Buddhas too had withstood the test of time braving all

iniquities until the Taliban decided to destroy them in the name of Islam. The historical importance and the political dimensions that these symbols commanded in the disquieted political milieu of the last decades of the 20th century outweighed its less onerous past. In no time, the Buddhas, the symbols that had always refused to surrender to the pressures of myriad political power plays or forces of nature, the steady reminders of non-violence and tolerance in a country that had gone awry in multiple ways, were pitted against the Taliban whose predilection for violence and spectacle was unmatched in the history of Islam.

It was with horror and disbelief the world greeted the Taliban's decision to demolish the statues of Bamiyan. Since the Taliban claimed themselves as the sole rulers of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, its decision accrued the effect of a belligerent state sponsored cultural terrorism—a state waging a war against remnants of its own cultural heritage. The context of such a state sponsored crime against culture stemmed from “the sheer will to eradicate any cultural manifestation of religious or spiritual creativity that did not correspond to the Taliban's view of religion and culture” (Francioni and Lenzerini 620). The edict released in Kandahar on 26 February 2001 by the Islamic State of Afghanistan and reproduced by Finbarr Barry Flood in the appendix given towards the end of his study “Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm and the Museum” reads thus:

On the basis of consultations between the religious leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, religious judgments of the ulema and rulings of the Supreme Court of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, all statues and non-Islamic shrines located in different parts of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan must be destroyed. These statues have been and remain shrines of unbelievers and these unbelievers continue to worship and respect them. God almighty is the only real shrine (*taghut*) and all fake idols should be destroyed. (655)

The edicts end with an instruction given by Mullah Omar to the members of the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Suppression of Vice and the Ministry of Information to destroy all the statues across the country so that none would worship or pay homage to them in future.

The argument in the edict that the statues in different parts of Afghanistan were worshipped by unbelievers is a matter of contention. The Taliban leadership was well aware of the fact that over the centuries these statues had lost its status as idols of worship, and merely existed in the cultural domain as relics powerful enough to draw tourists from various parts of the world. At one stage, “the Taliban regime had even put guards in front of the Buddha statues, organized access for tourists, including selling tickets, while preventing any photos from being taken” (Ruttig and Clark). The potential of

Bamiyan to develop into a high profile tourist destination was known to Mullah Omar and his friends. In the article “Idol Threats” Barfield alludes to the assurance given by Mullah Omar in September 2000 on the safety of the statues: “ ‘The government considers the Bamiyan statues as an example of a potential major source of income for Afghanistan from international visitors. The Taliban states that Bamiyan shall not be destroyed but be protected.’ ” So the decision to demolish was a reversal from the earlier stand of protection and preservation promised by Mullah Omar to the most eloquent embodiment of the rich pre-Islamic heritage of Afghanistan. Opinions abound on the reasons behind the sudden reversal, and they range from the Taliban’s frustration at not being recognized by the international community as the official government of Afghanistan to the presence of a large number of Shia Hazaras in Bamiyan. But more convincing seems to be the influence exerted by Osama Bin Laden, a Wahabi to the core and a close ally of Mullah Omar. Flood’s remark that “the destruction of objects and monuments considered the focus of improper veneration has been a characteristic of Wahabism from its inception” holds true in this context (651).

It is interesting to note that the adamant stand taken by the Taliban resulted in a protest of epidemic dimensions. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini writes about how the world reacted to the Taliban’s call for the demolition of the statues: “There was an outcry around the world, from the

US to China. Governments, historians and archaeologists from all over the globe had written letters, pleaded with the Taliban not to demolish the two greatest historical artifacts in Afghanistan” (278-279). UNESCO Chief Koichiro Matsuura made an earnest request to the Taliban to rethink its decision saying that executing this decision would cause irreversible damage to a heritage of universal value (Bashir 37). The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan appealed to the Taliban leadership to show allegiance to their earlier commitment of protecting Afghanistan’s cultural heritage in general, and the Buddhas of Bamiyan in particular (37). While the Buddhists in Japan and Thailand urged the Taliban to rethink their decision, Sri Lanka launched an aggressive campaign to save the statues. Even Pakistan, the Taliban’s closest ally, “pleaded for the preservation of the ancient works” (40). Rekha Dixit in “Heritage Experts Condemn Taliban” reports a comment made by renowned Islamic scholar Rafiq Zakaria: “ ‘The Holy Quran is very specific on this subject. It very clearly denounces the desecration of sacred sites of other religions, pointing out that such intolerance could be targeted at Muslims too. These fanatics in Afghanistan are bringing disgrace to the Islamic faith’ ” (59). Islamic scholars from Cairo too argued for the protection of these cultural monuments. Francesco Francioni and Federico Lenzerini in their authoritative work “The Destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and International Law” allude to a remark made by renowned Egyptian scholar Fahmi Howeidy which clearly states that “Islam respects other cultures even if they include rituals that

are against Islamic law” (627). All the pleadings fell on deaf ears. The world realized that it was going to witness an inglorious act that would be written in the annals of history as an act of Islamic iconoclasm. To make matters worse, the interest showed by the world for the conservation of the statues only reinforced the Taliban's stand on the issue. They could not understand why such an uproar was raised by the international community against their decision while millions of Afghan's were living in abject poverty because of the economic embargo imposed by the UN Security Council on Afghanistan. While the Taliban conveniently set aside the truth that the economic restraints were imposed against them for their highly oppressive violations of human rights as well as for hosting and supporting bin laden in his fight against the imperialism of the West, the world at large downplayed the “cultural and religious hegemony” the Taliban wanted to assert (Said, *Orientalism* 59). In “Idol Threats” Barfield points out this ideological underpinning projected in an editorial published in the Taliban newspaper *Shariat* which claimed that “ ‘objects of worship, which had been considered as sacred and worshipped in their time in the past, are filthier than everything else and thus it is necessary that our beloved country should be cleansed of the existence of such false objects’ ”(7). The anti-Islamic obscurantist policies of the Taliban can be understood from the arguments put forward by Asghar Ali Engineer, an activist and a scholar of Islam in his essay “Islam and Secularism.” He argues that “in 6:10 the Quran prohibits Muslims from abusing people of other faiths or their

gods as in turn they will abuse Allah” (139). He lends clarity to his argument by saying that the Quran also “states in 22:40 that no religious place should be demolished as in all religious places, be it synagogue, or church or monastery, name of Allah is remembered and hence all these places should be protected” (139). From the arguments given above, it is clear that the Islamic precepts do not oppose a pluralistic way of life. In fact, the Prophet’s life in Medina bears testimony to this fact. When the Prophet reached Medina, he found a pluralistic society there. To ensure harmony, the Prophet formulated an agreement with diverse tribes there “guaranteeing them full freedom of their faith and also creating a community in the city of Medina with an obligation to defend it, if attacked from outside” (139). When the example set by the prophet is juxtaposed with the Taliban’s obscurantism and Islamic iconoclasm, it becomes clear that the Taliban’s policies were in line with its violent pursuance of creating an Islamic state shorn of all other religious idols.

It is worthy to note here that the Taliban's antagonism to figuration had differently manifested earlier in its apathy towards paintings that depicted living things. The paintings that they had seen on the walls of Marcus’ house built by a master craftsman who was trained in the school of Bhizad, a renowned Persian painter, confused the Taliban before they obliterated them. An excerpt from the Hadith cited in “Islamic Art and Depictions of Muhammad” lends authenticity to the Taliban’s insensitivity to the

picturization of living things: “ ‘Ibn ‘Umar reported Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) having said: those who paint pictures would be punished on the Day of Resurrection and it would be said to them: Breathe soul into what you have created.’ ”

Though the excerpt validates the Taliban’s cultural vandalism of obliterating paintings, it caused undue pain to many an artist. Like all art aficionados during the Taliban regime, Marcus too had smeared mud on almost all depictions of animate beings in paintings. “Even an ant on a pebble had been daubed. It was as though all life had been returned to dust” (TWV 11). Beings that escaped Marcus’ notice incurred the Taliban’s wrath. Aslam avers:

The Taliban did not know how to deal with the pictures—each bore of Allah's names in Arabic calligraphy, the Compassionate One, the Immortal One—but the words were surrounded by images not only of flowers and vines but of other living things. Animals, insects and humans. They wanted to tear out these details but couldn't because the various strokes and curves of the name took up the entire rectangle, reaching into every corner, every angle. (179)

The Taliban found their veneration for the Prophet at crossroads with the representation of living things in the painting. It could be said that Allah’s name in Arabic calligraphy saved the painting from cultural vandalism. But

when they chanced upon paintings that celebrated life with a profusion of animate and inanimate things with scant regard to Allah, they ruthlessly fired at them. “The Taliban would even burn a treasured family letter because the stamp showed a butterfly” (11). Hosseini too gives an interesting anecdote on this issue in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Tariq narrates how the Taliban was offended at seeing the long bare legs of Flamingos in a painting drawn by his cousin for which he was mercilessly beaten. To save the painting from destruction, he had to make the flamingos wear trousers. “ ‘And there you have it. Islamic flamingos’ ” (ATSS 295). The light hearted banter in Hosseini's depiction of ‘Islamic flamingos’ gets replaced by Casa's pensiveness in *The Wasted Vigil*. Casa is repulsed when he accidentally comes across a painting that depicts two lovers in each other arms in Marcus’ house. His reflection on the painting exposes the mindset of the Taliban. “If all this is what is meant by the word culture, then culture is not permitted in Islam” (TWV 189). The novelist succeeds in exposing the cultural depravity of the Taliban. Their utter disregard and lack of understanding of symbolic representation of culture as the best that has been thought and said finally led to the demolition of the Bamiyan statues.

The Taliban’s cultural vandalism in the beginning of the 21st century demands an allusion to a different era when art and culture thrived in Afghanistan under the patronage of Muslim rulers. Tamerlane of the Timurid dynasty, transformed Samarkand, the Timurid capital into a centre of cultural

excellence during his reign. His tomb in Samarkand proclaims the glory of Islamic architecture. The reign of his son Shah Rukh witnessed the Timurid renaissance. Architecture, literature, music, calligraphy, miniature painting and myriad forms of artistic expressions flourished profusely during this period. Unlike the Taliban, the Timurid dynasty of the 14th century was Islamic in its true spirit and fostered culture.

The depravity of the Taliban, both moral and cultural, reached its zenith when the Taliban militia started destroying the monumental Buddha statues with canons and tanks. Hosseini writes: “They had chanted Allah-u-Akbar with each blast, cheered each time the statues lost an arm or a leg in a crumbling cloud of dust” (ATSS 299). The description reminds the reader of the exhilaration that swept through the crowd that assembled in the Ghazi Stadium when they saw a severed arm or limb in a pool of blood. The crowd in the stadium too chanted Allah-u-Akbar which rendered legitimacy to the heinous crimes committed by the Taliban. From the parallel drawn here—invoking the name of God while being engaged in the ignoble acts of destroying the statues and killing people—it is quite evident that like all extremist movements, the Taliban too took refuge in religion to legitimize their actions.

Like the executions that took place in the Ghazi Stadium, the demolition spree unloosed across the country by the Taliban was meant to foster the movement’s religious ideology through instilling fear and terror

among people. Even the Kabul Museum was not spared. Hosseini in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* writes about men who “swarmed the dilapidated Kabul Museum and smashed pre-Islamic statues to rubble—that is, those that hadn’t already been looted by the Mujahideen” (250). Aslam too makes a similar observation when he says that “years of war and civil war have emptied this country’s museums” (TWV 52). The Taliban’s disregard for the voices that cried in the unison for the preservation of the most iconic representation of Afghanistan’s pre-Islamic past shows the contempt with which it held the world. It is interesting to note that for the majority of people in Afghanistan who were reeling under poverty, the demolition of statues did not have any impact on their lives. This can be seen in Laila’s attitude towards the whole tragic episode. She was numb to the news of the Buddha’s demise. Nearly thirteen years had gone by since her first visit to Bamiyan. Though she “remembered standing atop the bigger of the two statues with Babi and Tariq, back in 1987,” she was numb to the news of the Buddhas’ demise (279). It hardly seemed to matter. “How could she care about statues when her own life was crumbling dust?” (279). The harsh realities of life—poverty escalated by drought and economic sanctions imposed by the UN—pushed the Afghans into a state of oblivion where only the basic necessities of life mattered.

On the whole, the demolition of the statues can be considered as the culmination of a long history of murders, massacres, lootings, rapes,

abductions and executions that had been a part of the Afghan life for nearly twenty years.

Exactly five months after the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in March 2001, two tragic incidents of mammoth proportions shook the world. It was a strange coincidence that both the incidents took place in the month of September 2001. The first one was the assassination of the charismatic Ahmad Shah Massoud on 9 September 2001 while he was giving an interview to “a pair of journalists who claimed they were Belgians originally from Morocco” (ATSS 339). Later it was confirmed that they were al-Qaeda men. For many Afghans, Massoud embodied the true spirit of Afghan nationalism as he had never allowed himself to be a pawn in the hands of foreign powers during the time of war against the Soviet’s and later against the Taliban. When people came to know about his death, a torrent of grief was let loose across the country. Laila remembered the poster of Massoud that Mammy had on the wall of her bedroom and “how grateful Mammy was that Massoud had said a graveside prayer at her sons’ burial, how she told everyone about it” (339). Rasanayagam is quite sarcastic when he says that Commander Massoud’s death was “bin Laden’s last gift to his Taliban protectors” (257). The mordancy ingrained in the statement can be understood only on the basis of bin Laden’s kinship with the Taliban. On 11 September 2001, a day after Massoud’s assassination, the world witnessed a massive terrorist attack on American soil

masterminded by Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, a terrorist outfit that flourished in Afghanistan under the patronage of the Taliban. In the morning of that ill-fated day, two passenger aircrafts crashed into the north tower and the south tower of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan, New York. Millions who watched the fall of the 110 storey twin towers could not believe that terrorism had finally set its foot in America. The world at large regarded it as a mighty blow to the spirit of American nationalism fostered by economic, political and military powers.

It is heartening to note that no incident of political ramifications had escaped the mindscape of the novelists Khaled Hosseini and Nadeem Aslam. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini writes about the fall of the twin towers and its repercussions even in distant lands like Muree, a small village in Pakistan where Laila and Tariq had started their life anew. Their work in a hotel in Muree gave them an opportunity to witness the greatest catastrophe America had ever experienced in its history. They sat glued to the television along with several other guests. Hosseini's narration brings alive the horror:

The TV is tuned to BBC. On the screen is a building, a tower, black smoke billowing from its top floors. Tariq says something to Sayeed and Sayeed is in midreply when a plane appears from the corner of the screen. It crashes into the adjacent tower,

exploding into a fire ball that dwarfs any ball of fire that Laila had ever seen. (340)

The novelist remarks that a “collective yelp rises from everyone in the lobby” (340). It was inconceivable for millions of people across the world that such an incident had occurred in America. Without warning, the world plunged into darkness. When Hosseini writes that both the towers had crumbled in less than two hours, he confirms the greatest blow accorded to the pride and prestige of America. “Soon all the TV stations are talking about Afghanistan and the Taliban and Osama bin Laden” (340). The unholy nexus between the two agencies of power—one a full-fledged military movement that carried the trappings of religiosity, and the other, a terrorist outfit that harboured a deep dislike for the West—created a highly volatile situation in the world where all the dominant discourses got characterized by fear. And this is what the perpetrators of the crime wanted to achieve. To all those who wonder whether Islam fosters violence, Esposito categorically says that Islam, “like all world religions, neither supports nor requires illegitimate violence. The Quran does not advocate or condone terrorism” (*What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam* 119). The God of the Quran is steadily depicted as a God of benevolence and mercy as well as a righteous judge. Each chapter of the Quran commences with a reference to God’s benevolence and mercy, and in many situations, Muslims are advised to be merciful and righteous. But throughout history, the

tenets of Islam have been misinterpreted to justify violence, terrorism and all kinds of just and unjust wars. Terrorists like Osama bin Laden often transgressed Islam's benchmark for a just jihad and resorted to indiscriminate use of weapons and means to pursue their unholy dreams. Esposito observes:

They reject Islamic law's regulations regarding the goals and legitimate means for a valid jihad: that violence must be proportional and that only the necessary amount of force should be used to repel the enemy, that innocent civilians should not be targeted, and that jihad must be declared by the ruler or head of state. (122)

But today, contrary to the precepts of Islamic law, individuals and groups seize the opportunity to declare jihads and fatwas to indulge in violence and terrorist activities in the name of Islam.

The death of thousands of innocent people, and the fear it generated fostered the spirit of nationalism in America. The novelists discussed here have paid much attention to the problems created by the terrorist outfits to the innocent people all over the world. In the last chapter of *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini writes about the nationalist spirit that suddenly caught hold over the whole of America:

The American flag suddenly appeared everywhere, on the antennae of yellow cabs weaving around traffic, on the lapels of pedestrians walking the sidewalks in a steady stream, even on the grimy caps of San Francisco's panhandlers sitting beneath the awnings of small art galleries and open-fronted shops. (316).

Mention needs to be made in this context of the unholy alliance between the Taliban leadership and Osama Bin Laden which began in 1996 when he was given refuge in Afghanistan as the Taliban guest. Mullah Omar received him with open arms: “ ‘You are most welcome. We will never give you up to anyone who wants you’ ” (Lacey 201). It was the coming together of two men who “had toweringly grandiose visions of their purpose in life” (201). Their appreciation for each other was mutual. Lacey puts on record that on one occasion Mullah Omar called bin Laden “one of Islam's most important spiritual leaders” (201). Laden returned the compliment saying that henceforth his fatwas would be issued from Afghanistan from where soldiers wearing black turban and black banners would emerge to make a triumphant march to Jerusalem after defeating the infidels. Through clandestine operations Laden could very easily convert Afghanistan into a breeding ground for terrorists from far and wide. It was from Afghanistan Laden contrived plans to strike at the root of American power. His fatwa ‘Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places’

was very much a part of his jihad against the imperialist forces of the West, especially America, and a direct reference to the presence of American military forces in Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia.

The Taliban found themselves in a highly precarious position after the fall of the twin towers. Repeated requests to deport bin Laden from Afghanistan were floundered by the Taliban much to the chagrin of America and Saudi Arabia. Hosseini records: “The Taliban have announced that they won’t relinquish bin Laden because he is a *mehman*, a guest, who has found sanctuary in Afghanistan and it is against the *Pashtunwali* code of ethics to turn over a guest” (ATSS 341). Misappropriation of a time honoured Pashtun custom predicted further doom for a country that had already been in shambles. Mullah Omar’s lack of experience in matters of administration worsened the crisis. He even lost the support of his Pakistani patrons who started cooperating with the United States.

To follow Hosseini’s narration on this political quandary gives the reader an opportunity to see how fact and fiction merge into a unified whole to solidify a historic narrative. The novelist again positions Laila and Tariq in front of the TV screen to watch President George W. Bush address a joint session of the Congress on 20 September 2001. An excerpt taken from the speech shows how unexpected the attack was:

On September 11th, the enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. . . . Americans have known the casualties of war – but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning. Americans have known surprise attacks – but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day – and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack.

President Bush condemned al-Qaeda for propagating terrorism and the Taliban regime for converting Afghanistan into a terrorist zone by sheltering terrorists like bin Laden. He asked the Taliban to close every terrorist training camp in the country and hand over terrorists to right authorities. With his declaration of ‘war on terror,’ a new chapter was opened in the turbulent history of Afghanistan and in America’s fight against terrorism. Afghanistan, a land with a tortured past, once again became a ‘theatre of war.’ In October 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan with the avowed purpose of putting an end to the Taliban rule in Afghanistan and restoring peace in the region. Hosseini writes that soon after America bombed Afghanistan, “the Taliban scurried like rats into the caves” (TKR 316). Nadeem Aslam notes that by the end of 2001, American soldiers “ ‘commissioned by history’ ” ceremonially “buried a piece of debris taken from the ruins of the World Trade Center on the heights of a mountain range” (TWV 27). When Casa heard that

the US had deported the Taliban, a sly smile illumined his face at the thought that the Americans should not feel exulted. He said to himself: “ ‘The war hasn’t ended. The *real* war is about to begin’ ” (TWV 59).

The American invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 resulted in the temporary demise of the Taliban. It also signalled the end to the rhetoric of jihad that had kept the country completely under its sway for nearly a quarter of the 20th century. The novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil* shed light on the incident that preceded the cataclysmic event that hastened the doom of the Taliban, that is, the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. The events that followed the destruction of the twin towers, especially the reluctance showed by the Taliban in extraditing bin Laden from Afghanistan, show the Taliban leadership’s lack of experience in dealing with politics at a global level and its consequences. It matches the Taliban’s refusal to pay heed to the international outcry that occurred before the destruction of the statues of the Buddhas. These destructions aroused much distrust and anguish in the cultural and political realms of the world, and affected the world in a unique way by depriving it of two monuments—one of the pre-modern period and the other of the modern period. Both were icons that stood tall proclaiming the heritage—spiritual and materialistic of two nations whose history later got intertwined through an invasion that propelled the tragic story of a nation to further brutality. The

novelists have successfully established that it was the convergence of the Taliban's jihad against everything that was un-Islamic in Afghanistan and bin Laden's jihad against the West that resulted in the symbolic narration of hatred through destructions.