

Conclusion

The most distinctive aspect of Afghanistan's national character is the vibrant and pulsating role Islam plays in the lives of Afghans. For centuries, Islam has been the pivot round which their lives rotated. For an ordinary Afghan, his religion is not a philosophy that thrives on the discourses carried out in the spiritual realm, but an all-encompassing way of life. When religion turns into a way of life, its impact can be seen in all aspects of life. In such a society, it is unimaginable to separate religion from politics as they are so strongly interwoven. Despite the fact that Islam has been the basis for the semblance of unity that has prevailed among Afghanistan's multifarious and multi-ethnic population, it has been the coalition of religion and politics and its repercussions in the national and international levels that has given Afghanistan a unique place in the political consciousness of the world.

Resistance to forces, both external and internal, that wanted to undermine the existing traditional power structures of the society either by invading the land or by enforcing reforms alien to the people of the land has been an overriding feature of Afghanistan's tumultuous history. Territorial invasions that occurred intermittently over the course of centuries only strengthened the germs of resistance infused in the national character of this mighty rugged land. The most expressive manifestation of this character could

be seen in the resistance showed by the Afghans to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan and to the invasion forces of the Soviet Union in the last quarter of the 20th century of Afghanistan. The novels under study *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* written by Khaled Hosseini and *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam offer ample opportunities to the reader to probe deep into the myriad forces that pushed millions of Afghans into a state of exile, poverty, despair, and death by locating all the major happenings of the most crucial period in the modern history of this vulnerable nation within the framework of jihad. It is a concept that has been widely misused since the evolution of Islam as a religion. A reading of the fictionalized historical narratives like *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil* acclimatizes the reader with the grand narrative of jihad's social and political manifestation in Afghanistan and substantiates the undeniable fact that the contemporary history of Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the jihad that had been waged against the PDPA and the Soviets from 1979 to 1992.

Sweeping changes ushered in by the Communist Revolution of Afghanistan in April 1978 and the subsequent Soviet invasion in December 1979 devoured the ordinary citizens of Afghanistan in ways unimaginable. Information garnered from facts cleverly cloaked in the poignant narration of lives as lived by millions of Afghans in the aftermath of the Communist Revolution substantiates the brutality that poor innocent Afghans had to

undergo at the hands of a fate that was quite ruthless and indifferent. While the events that preceded the Communist Revolution and the Soviet invasion and the resistance showed by the people against an alien ideology and its perpetrators find a place in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it is Aslam who sensitises the reader of the adverse impact of the defensive jihad waged to protect the land from the infidel invaders, and its political ramifications. Since the jihad sanctions migration to foreign lands, there occurred the mass exodus of millions of war affected Afghans to Peshawar in Pakistan which eventually resulted in the opening of the refugee camps under the patronage of the resistance leaders who had already established their offices in Peshawar way back in late 1970's. For the resistance leaders who were Islamists and die hard fundamentalists, the opening of the camps for the refugees offered an opportune moment to exert their ideology that had not been well received earlier by the tradition bound people of Afghanistan.

Aslam in his novel *The Wasted Vigil* portrays the dubious activities that took place in Peshawar in the name of jihad. It is also an account of a noble Islamic concept that went wrong in its religious articulation. When analysed with the help of historical data and information gleaned from other published works, what Aslam portrays in his novel resonates with actual incidents that took place in the refugee camps in Peshawar. In no time, cold war weary America, oil rich Saudi Arabia and the host Pakistan took side with

the mujahidin whose numbers swelled to thousands as the war progressed. Islamic radicals from all over the world converged in Peshawar to get indoctrinated in radical Islamism. The novel authenticates the indisputable fact that it was the jihad against the Soviets that provided a platform for radicals like Osama bin Laden to get acquainted with each other and become jihadis in pursuit of Islamisation of the world.

With regard to American involvement in the Afghan-Soviet war, it has to be mentioned that it was not humanitarian concerns that made America get involved in the affairs of Afghanistan, but pure hatred for a regime that occupied an ideologically different realm. On many an occasion, the characters in the novel *The Wasted Vigil* allude to America's intent to convert Afghanistan into Soviet Union's Vietnam. It clearly points to the clever craftsmanship showed by Aslam in keeping alive a rather tragic historical narrative of American involvement in Vietnam by making it an integral part of the annals of Afghan jihad. The facts provided by Aslam illumine the reader on a plethora of issues that endangered the future of Afghanistan and affirm the fact that history is not something that could be forgotten as time passes by, but is an impressive explication that could be kept alive in the collective consciousness of the world through master storytellers.

Both Hosseini and Aslam through their captivating narratives foreground the fact that as in all wars, the worst affected in the jihad against

the Soviets were women and children. There are umpteen number of references in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil* that prove that the refugee camps in Peshawar functioned like prisons for most of the refugees, especially women. As Aslam points out, one of the reasons for the incarceration of women was the unbridled power enjoyed by the mullahs during the time of the Afghan jihad. The unmitigated power that they had enjoyed in the socio-political life of Afghanistan for centuries took an ugly turn in the refugee camps where they converted the lives of women into veritable hells by the implementation of segregation and seclusion. The realization that these mullahs were the ones who had taught the tenets of Islam in the madrasas that sprouted profusely in the refugee camps in Peshawar is unsettling for the discerning reader.

Another factor that strikes the reader is the sense of alienation experienced by children in the refugee camps. The children who were the most innocent victims of the Afghan jihad lived amidst widespread poverty and squalor. Aslam's graphic description of the refugee camps brings to light the insensitive handling of the life of children by the resistance leaders and their arms and money lenders. There are innumerable incidents in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil* to prove that these madrasas later became highly detrimental to the political stability of Afghanistan as they churned out youngsters who were ready to sacrifice their lives to defend the cause of Islam.

The tragedy of Afghanistan lies in the reality that thousands of children who grew up or were born in the refugee camps in Peshawar were willing to sacrifice the interest of their nation at the altar of Islam. Aslam's portrayal of the caged life of the refugee children steeped in poverty and isolation, and sustained only on an overdose of Islam is powerful enough to elicit the sympathy of the reader. Casa in *The Wasted Vigil* is one such character who, in spite of being a jihadi to the core, fills the reader with pity. Aslam's portrayal of the character attests the fact that no one is born into the world as a terrorist or a militant: acute poverty, deprivation, ostracism and utter neglect on the part of the authorities pave way for the creation of anti-social elements who have no qualms in obeying the dictates of terrorist outfits. In the case of Afghanistan, it could be said that acute emotional depravity experienced by thousands of children while the jihad was being waged against the Soviets crystallised into sorrow and shook the very foundation of Afghanistan at a later stage in the history of the nation. The novels confirm the fact that the role played by the stakeholders, both internal and external, in this great tragedy was immeasurable.

The novelists have also given paramount importance to the political quandary that evolved in Afghanistan immediately after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces. It prolonged the tale of jihad which eventually pushed the nation into the chaos of a brutal civil war. Hosseini's depiction of the civil

war in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* informs the reader on the unabashed political opportunism showed by the resistance leaders who had no common political ideology to forgo their deep seated ethnic and sectarian differences. And the result was, as the novelist painstakingly narrates, incredibly terrifying losses that shattered the lives of thousands of innocent people. The civil war that ravaged the nation can also be considered as the consequence of the failure of the religious ideology of jihad at multiple levels. The unending wars brought only sorrow and misery in the lives of people. Kandahar, one of the Pashtun strongholds in southern province, was the worst affected in the imbroglio. The chaos that existed in Kandahar led to the emergence of a new religious entity named the Taliban, an Islamic reform movement that wanted to restore peace wherever anarchy prevailed. And the novels bear testimony to the fact that the way the Taliban restored peace was something unheard of in the history of Afghanistan.

All the three novels under study offer different facets of Afghan life during the last quarter of the 20th century. But the thread that connects the novels and posits it on a common platform is the overriding presence of the Taliban in the narratives. From the novels it can be easily gleaned that the Taliban headed by Mullah Omar and his friends were mostly comprised of youngsters who were born in the refugee camps in Peshawar and educated in the madrasas along the Afghan-Pak border. Hosseini's strategic inclusion of

the decrees that curtailed the freedom of women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* shows how vital they are to understand misogyny that had been the Taliban hallmark. The decrees framed by the Taliban on the basis of the Sharia laws provided a framework for the manifestation of the workings of power on human body.

The theoretical propositions like panopticism, surveillance, creation of docile bodies put forward by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* facilitate the understanding of the process involved in talibanising a society. The novels articulate the fact that with the Taliban's introduction of the decrees that put immense constraints on people, the country was reduced to the state of a prison, panopticon modelled, where everyone came under the scrutinizing gaze of a superior force powerful enough to control their movements. The effective functioning of the panopticon at its best was seen in Afghanistan during the Taliban era when each family operated like a cell in a prison where traditional power structures like patriarchy and religion acted like coercive measures that controlled the lives of the inmates, especially women. It ensured the success of the Taliban's docility project of converting the society into a place where only the Taliban variant of Islam would dictate the rules of life. The net result of the implementation of the Taliban's misogynist views, as can be seen in all the three novels, was the gross violation of basic human rights in all walks of life. It is heart-rending to read

about women who had to bear the atrocities of a sinister force like the Taliban in their lives. There are also ample evidences in the novels that shed light on poverty and deprivation that existed in Afghanistan during the Taliban era. Children who wandered aimlessly through the debris of previous wars raise the question of the credibility of the Taliban jihad that deprived them of their childhood.

One interesting feature of Hosseini's novels is the conscious attempt made by the novelist to explore the delicate ground on which the Hazaras of Afghanistan had always moved, fearing persecution or death at the hands of Pashtuns. In the novel *The Kite Runner* Hosseini narrates the carnage in which thousands of Hazaras were brutally massacred by the Pashtun Taliban. Hosseini's depiction of the highly sensitive and volatile Pashtun-Hazara relationship serves the crucial function of keeping this issue alive in the public domain. The novelist also registers his protest against bacha bazi, a practice that sexually exploits boys by making it an integral part of the novel *The Kite Runner*. Hudud punishments that became rampant during the Taliban era also find a place in all the novels. Having said these, it is obvious that whatever the Taliban did in the name of Islam was meant to instil fear and terror in the minds of people and to create docile bodies that would forever be obedient to the dictates of the regime.

The Taliban's moral and cultural depravity found its most heinous expression in the demolition of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, the greatest symbols of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic past. There are umpteen number of references in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil* that highlight the rich Buddhist legacy of Afghanistan. The demolition spree unleashed by the Taliban throws light on its mad frenzy to erase all traces of alien cultures that bore testimony to a vibrant past. The novelists have succeeded in breathing life into the rich cultural history of Afghanistan that would otherwise have remained in oblivion bereft of respect and appreciation that were its due. Nevertheless, it has to be said that it was the Taliban's unholy alliance with Osama bin Laden that put it in a precarious position after the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York. The whole world knew that it was from Afghanistan bin Laden pronounced his jihad against America for occupying the land of two holy places—Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, and masterminded the destruction of the World Trade Center. In the novel *The Kite Runner* Hosseini vividly describes the nationalist spirit that suddenly caught hold over the whole of America. It was most vociferously expressed when President Bush declared 'war on terror' against al-Qaeda and all other terrorist outfits across the world while addressing a joint session of the Congress on 20 September 2001. Hosseini successfully immortalises a highly historical, critical and tragic moment in the history of the world through his chronicling of the obliteration of the World Trade Center in his novels.

The novels *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Wasted Vigil* that have been subjected to a rigorous study on the basis of several literary and non-literary sources and historical data, tellingly display the novelists' amazing power of observation and a deep sense of the socio-political factors that shaped the lives of millions of people in Afghanistan during the last quarter of the 20th century. Khaled Hosseini's clear and balanced style when placed in juxtaposition with the technical brilliance of Nadeem Aslam achieved through effective handling of ideas and words gives the reader a comprehensive picture of the Afghan life that had been subjected to the rigours of the Communist Revolution and its aftermath—the unscrupulous meddling of foreign powers in Afghan affairs, the civil war and the emergence of the Taliban. The novels exemplify the country's collapse into chaos and the great tragedy that inundated it.