

Anguish in Afghanistan

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FICTION: WAR LEAVES DEADLY secrets and, in their wake, grieving survivors seeking answers. When Pakistan-born Nadeem Aslam published his first novel, *Season of the Rainbirds*, in 1993, there was no doubting the beauty of his formal, almost old-style prose, the artistry of his storytelling.

Almost a decade later, he came of age with *Maps for Lost Lovers*, a heroic book that confronted the horrors and complications of multi-racial Britain and the difficulties created by culture, tradition and the age-old cause of violence - religion. In it, two brothers murder their sister because she happens to fall in love with a man belonging to the - in their opinion - wrong faith.

Ignored by Booker, it was deservedly shortlisted for the Impac prize. It is that rare thing, a great book possessed of a terrifying beauty, a novel that demonstrates how vital a role fiction plays in understanding and explaining reality.

Now Aslam, far more sophisticated an artist than Salman Rushdie ever was or will be, confirms he is a writer of singular genius whose wisdom and humanity are more than able to contend with his subtle rage. Beautiful, harrowing and fired with a compelling sense of horror, *The Wasted Vigil* is remarkable, not just by Aslam's high standards, but by any criteria. The fact he has, again, been overlooked by the Booker judges may not be all that surprising, yet it does suggest an almost breathtaking lack of historical awareness, never mind critical insight on the part of a panel that appears to have focused on geographical spread. Many writers have been attempting to articulate the horror of a world at war, a world now at the mercy of the relentless enemy - international terrorism. Some have come close to explaining the bewilderment, but none have come as close as Aslam. *The Wasted Vigil* is the novel we should all read.

LARA IS RUSSIAN and has come to present-day Afghanistan to discover what happened to her soldier brother some 25 years earlier. She has arrived, already the victim of a chance beating for appearing - unintentionally - to have insulted the laws of God, to the house of Marcus, an English doctor. His story is complex. His doctor wife and daughter have both been viciously murdered, as he remarks to Lara: "This land and its killing epochs . . . The Soviet invasion took away Zameen , the Taliban era swallowed up Qatrina . I fear that this new war will take someone else away."

There is no central character, because all the characters are important. Lara, who had hidden helplessly back in Russia while her husband was brutally killed, wonders what happened to her brother. She knows he was no hero. Her investigations in Russia have already led her to damaged ex-soldiers, such as Piotr Danilovich, who, having acted like savages in Afghanistan, are now lost souls. "She had taken with her the gift of a single pomegranate when she went to visit Piotr Danilovich last December, having located him after all the years. When he returned from Afghanistan he had failed to adjust to life, becoming silent like all soldiers who come back from a war. There was a period about which he would speak somewhat vaguely to Lara, but which she knew from other sources to be a time of mental collapse. Now he lived a hundred or so kilometres outside Moscow, in a place known as the House of Ten Thousand Christs."

A powerful sense of what it is like to be engaged in an underground war emerges from the pages: "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 other-worldly assistance."

The soldiers go to war and are faced with surreal horror, and they react with staggering viciousness. This is a brutal book. People are maimed and killed. Women are tortured and humiliated and physically torn apart, invariably in the name of religion. Aslam confronts the realities yet such is his restraint and skill, so precise is the characterisation, that he articulates a harrowing bewilderment. There is no polemic because the characters are genuinely bewildered.

Lara searches for the truth and begins finding fragments in a way similar to the rate with which she uncovers pieces of a picture. Marcus lives in a house in which the pictures on the walls have been daubed over with mud because images were forbidden by the Taliban, and before that the Buddhist art had been similarly hidden from the Muslims. His wife Qatrina, whose humanity caused her to slowly lose her mind, nailed all the books to the ceiling, piercing them as if through their hearts in order to protect them from the soldiers.

The novel that continually comes to mind while reading *The Wasted Vigil* is *The English Patient* (1992). Just as Ondaatje makes inspired use of images throughout that book, often violent images, so too does Aslam. This is a brooding, atmospheric narrative in which butterflies and toys explode, becoming bombs and landmines. "The three sleeping children. The butterflies would blow off a foot or a hand and half a face, maiming rather than killing, though the long distance which had to be traversed to reach a medical facility would ensure that the victim died of blood loss, gangrene or simply shock." Also in common with Ondaatje, Aslam follows his characters, including an Englishman, as they drift through the aftermath of war, of many wars. There are many victims; even the killers are victims because the enemy is everywhere. Old Marcus is wise, yet never becomes a token Prospero because his wisdom has been acquired through experience; his wife was stoned to death, his daughter smashed to pieces having been repeatedly raped. His hand was severed, the very act choreographed as part of a grotesque sideshow. Many of the truths are articulated from beyond the grave by Qatrina, the wife of Marcus, as another character, David, an American with his own complex story, recalls of Qatrina when speaking to Lara: "The cause of the destruction of Afghanistan, she said to me towards the end of her life, is the character and society of the Afghans, of Islam. Communism wasn't the ideal solution to anything but, according to her, her fellow countrymen would have resisted change of any kind . . . "

ASLAM ENSURES THAT many of the conversations ebb and flow, creating the impression that the characters are half speaking to themselves as much as to the people they are addressing. Just as the characters are trying to piece together answers, the reader becomes caught up in the watching and waiting. The level of skill at work is extraordinary. Aslam also makes brilliant use of anecdote and episodes from history. Culture and tradition, paintings, images, myth as well as the everyday griefs are juxtaposed throughout.

All the while, regardless of the present-day betrayals, Aslam's delicate, lyric art evokes the insane physical beauty of the country - the mountains, the trees, the fruits, the vast, misty skies. It is an intensely human book; the characters respond to each other in solidarity and in desperation. The use of the word "vigil" in the title is inspired - this is a vigil, a vigil for everyone, particularly Lara, the woman who has undertaken a personal pilgrimage on behalf of a missing brother: "Darkness fills the orchard behind her, a chill in the air as there was at dawn. A bird had been singing on a branch in the courtyard and a thin plume of white vapour had emerged with the notes each time it parted its beak to sing."

Late in the novel Marcus watches another character, Casa, a young man intent on one dramatic act, though here temporarily at peace looking at the half-concealed wall paintings: "Through the dusty panes he can see Casa in there, holding the yellow light in one hand, the book in the other. There is half a grizzly bear near him. A hoopee in flight, also unfinished, the untrimmed mass of branches making it seem it is flying while on fire. There is a flamingo. In his journal the Emperor Babur recorded seeing thousands of them in Afghanistan in 1504."

The narrative is about Afghanistan, characters such as Lara and David bring their countries, Russia and the US, with them, so too to a far lesser extent does Marcus, the old Englishman. But Nadeem Aslam's stark, outraged, thoughtful novel, with its unsettling, sorrowing beauty, is far bigger than one doomed area of war - this is a universal book about our diseased,

destructive and self-destroying world. It is a huge achievement, immense in its wisdom and humanity. The technique is adroitly handled, as graceful as a dancer. The characters are real, the narrative power worthy to stand shoulder to shoulder with Tolstoy. Maps for Lost Lovers is a courageous book, The Wasted Vigil is an inspired one, the quest novel we should - no must - all read.

This story was found at:

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2008/0830/1220019323984.html>