

The Wasted vigil by Nadeem Aslam

August 31, 2008
Times Online

"Pull a thread here and you'll find it's attached to the rest of the world," an English doctor called Marcus Caldwell says of Afghanistan in the final pages of Nadeem Aslam's ambitious and luminous novel. As always in Aslam's work, these striking images are not merely decorative but have a significance and resonance, such as the spools of embroidery silk that in one scene leap out of a doorway "in many brilliant lines" onto a street in Peshawar.

These threads link several of the people who in the course of the novel are drawn to Marcus's house in Afghanistan. Lara has come from St Petersburg in search of a soldier brother who disappeared during the Soviet invasion; David is an American with a long involvement in the country, and was once the lover of Marcus's lost daughter; Casa is a devout but mysterious young Muslim whom the reader knows is pledged to rid his country of "infidels and traitors"; and Duina is a local woman who keeps a school running in defiance of the fundamentalists. Aslam's cast could be said to represent most of the factions involved in Afghanistan's long-running civil war, in which local warlords, the Soviet invasion, Taliban insurgents and a western alliance waging its so-called "war on terror" have all played their part. Aslam draws parallels between the motives, and indeed the methods, of the various combatants. The jihadist and the CIA operative are both in their own ways "believers" who feel under threat, and whose primary loyalty is anti-Forsterian: not to personal relationships or sentient fellow humans but to "nations and ideals".

Any fears that this set-up will make the novel too schematic are swiftly confounded. Characters may embody the radically opposed values of those caught up in the Afghan conflict, but they also remain living, breathing, all-too fallible individuals. Even Casa, who is introduced sending an unwitting youth to unsought martyrdom while blowing up a school, is partly redeemed for the reader because he is a suffering, if dreadfully misguided, human being.

While Aslam does not flinch from describing the particular savagery of Afghanistan - his characters are stoned to death, torn apart, have a hand cut off and an eye burnt out of its socket by a blowtorch - he doesn't follow the journalistic shorthand of presenting the country as a place of unparalleled and unrelieved grimness. He lovingly describes the natural beauty of a land in which many gemstones and the principal ingredients for perfumes are found, and which has an ancient and more peaceful Buddhist heritage, represented here by a huge, partly buried head. However, land mines hidden in blossoming orchards keep the Latin tag "et in arcadia ego" firmly in mind.

It might be argued that writing beautifully about horrifying current events is in some way questionable, but *The Wasted Vigil* reminds us that fiction can do things that mere reportage can't. Aslam's writing is indeed beautiful, but it is tailored to his material, less extravagant than the elaborately poetic prose with which he lit up a stark tale of honour killings in his wonderful *Maps for Lost Lovers*. Aslam does not simply appropriate a few headlines for easy currency. He has immersed himself in a country and a culture and drawn upon art, mythology and history to provide an involving and morally complex tale of the ruthless betrayals and the queasy compromises that are made by nations and individuals alike.

This story was found at:

http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article4626134.ece