

Book Review

The Wasted Vigil, Author: Nadeem Aslam, Publisher: Faber and Faber, 2008/ Penguin India pp 372

Nadeem Aslam's 'The Wasted Vigil' is a book that is a literary dedication to the people of Afghanistan. No pretensions on that here. The smallest episode, the biggest incident, tragic statistics, cruel objectives, the minutest detail on Afghanistan and the Afghan people find a way into the book. And that is Aslam's strength here – a passion to tell Afghanistan's contemporary, war-riddled history backed by extensive research. The lives and experiences of his characters are just pretexts to talk about the country and its war history of daily brutality. A motley mix of men, women and children, it really is the critical dialogue from the female characters that makes this Afghan story at once poignant and disquieting, set as it is against a tapestry of savagery where love, compassion and humanity negotiate their space amidst violence and even more violence.

In this never-ending war the Soviets, the Americans, Pakistanis and the Afghan Mujahideen are all equal villains with the ordinary Afghan caught in the crossfire. But Aslam's ordinary Afghan is as much Marcus Caldwell, an Islam convert married to an Afghan woman and living in the shadow of the Tora Bora mountains for half a decade as is Casa, a Talib who grew up across the eastern border of Afghanistan in womenless, sadistic Taliban-run refugee camps. Zameen's narrative encompasses accounts of innumerable Afghan women – of repeated displacement and seemingly interminable mental, physical and sexual violence both in the public and personal spheres as each man carries forward his personal cycle of cruelty.

The lone survivor in that mansion of memories Marcus, opens his home — quite literally a metaphor for Afghanistan and a beautifully haunting monument to his own colossal losses - to the rest of the narrative threads. So there is the Russian woman Lara looking for her soldier brother who disappeared during the Soviet invasion after defecting; David, the American and a former spy whose ideals swing as wildly as the fortunes of Afghanistan during his twenty-five years in the country; Dunia, the primary school teacher and the martyr's promised virgin; James, a Special Forces soldier, the disconcerting symbol of the war against terror and...to Casa. United in suffering – each personal though - yet still divided by ideology their fates and lives are entwined but never joined. Each searching for the elusive - Marcus for his grandson, Lara for her brother, Casa for the virgin promised on the eve of his martyrdom, Dunia for a life of dignity and respect and David for his son.

The brutality evident in the deaths of characters and the memory of it for the living whether it is Lara's husband's torture or her own beating at the hands of a boy not even half her age, Marcus' amputation and Qatrina's

insanity and subsequent stoning, of life and death in a single frame when Zameen gives birth even as butterfly mines kill the two boys she is protecting. The violence is evidenced in not just the characters but in the books nailed to the ceiling, the abandoned perfume factory in the garden, the partially excavated head of a Gandhara Buddha, the mud-masked paintings, all gathered together in one house and all buried away from the Taliban's Vices and Virtues ministry. Marcus' home, like Afghanistan, is the graveyard of a great, distinctive, violated, moth-eaten culture protected within the shambled remains of shell-shocked walls.

As the novel unfolds, Aslam meticulously peels off layers of documented savagery witnessed by the country over centuries from vicious rapes to the conniving and feuding warlords, ghastly methods of torture and its common employment, misguided Americans and their mulish meddling, friendly fire and civilian casualties, of local political tussles settled by missiles and international forces. The brutality of the violence is heightened by its absurdity as Katrina is stoned for her 'illegitimate' relationship with Marcus. A marriage of several decades is annulled and termed adultery as the ceremony was performed by a woman.

The *Wasted Vigil* as a narrative nonfiction gives greater coherence to the widespread experience of terror and trauma, distrust and dread, cynicism and hatred and ultimately the human cost of the war. Aslam's own subtle rage at the callous complicity of men and nations in the devastation of Afghanistan is unmistakable throughout the book. The *Wasted Vigil* is an ode to not just one immigrant community or one war-wrecked village but the psyche of a people mutilated by war and oppression. So from the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, to the Sikh and Hindu community in the country, the orphaned Afghan boys-turned-Talibs programmed for revenge in the Taliban refugee camps all find themselves woven into the book.

Aslam's political acumen is evident in the dispelling of the western discourse that converges on Taliban and Al-Qaeda sponsored terrorism as all that haunts Afghanistan today, replacing it with the more compelling argument that there actually is a multiplicity of factors at work. And in doing so there is an unmistakable analogous fanatical thread between a Muslim fundamentalist's zeal and an American CIA operative's righteous view of his job.

And even as Usha, the village is silenced into fear by the proximity of the continuing war it has its quiet broken by the falling thud of the books nailed to the mortared ceilings. And it is this stunning contiguity of brutality and love, moths and butterfly mines, precious stones and cluster mines, birdsong and booby-traps, love and desperation, madness and clarity that is at once beautiful and harrowing.

And yet there is an unquenchable vein of hope in this seemingly hopeless situation swathed in the closing images of Marcus' unending optimism as he continues his search for his grandson against the backdrop of the Buddha head slung from a military helicopter swinging high above the Hindu Kush as it is transported to the Kabul Museum. Also the author of

the much-admired *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Nadeem Aslam's third novel, *The Wasted Vigil*, is a literary recognition of, and tribute to, the anguish and tenacity of the Afghans both inside and out of Afghanistan.

By **Deepali Gaur**

The Great Immigration: Russian Jews in Israel, Author: Dina Siegel, Publisher: Berghahn Books, 1998

More than 750,000 Russian Jews arrived in Israel between 1988 and 1996. The major wave of Russian Jewish immigration began in 1987 and reached its peak in 1992 but even today there is a steady flow of immigrants from Russia to Israel. There are around 700,000 Russian Jews in Israel who constitute the second largest ethnic category after the Israeli Arabs who make up for around twenty-five percent of the population. Siegel is of the opinion that the scale and nature of the recent Russian Jewish immigration to Israeli society have been such as to contradict most of the known theories of immigration, integration and absorption. However, this Great Immigration, as it has been called, has gone largely unnoticed in Israeli public life. Information about this important event has been sketchy and largely characterized by stereotypes and simplistic generalizations.

The Great Immigration describes the impact of the immigration of the Russian Jews from the former Soviet Union to Israel. The sheer number of the immigrants, their diverse occupational qualifications and rich intellectual resources, their rapid integration into every sphere of social activity and their surprisingly successful political mobilization brought about a major transformation in Israeli society. The author refers to this immigration as having changed Israel, on the one hand, and the Russian Jews changed themselves, forging a new identity, on the other. For instance, the Israeli society of the 1990s expected the new immigrants to be enthusiastic Zionists, similar to the previous waves of immigrants but the scenario had changed considerably as on the one hand, the new immigrants came from a different Russia while on the other, Israeli society was not the same as twenty or thirty years ago, when the earlier waves of immigration had taken place. As a result, for the first time Israel moved towards greater cultural and ethnic pluralism. Based on a number of case studies, this book offers the first in-depth analysis of the life of the new Russian-Jewish immigrants and the interaction between them and other Israeli citizens. The author explores the peculiar set of problems facing the immigrants from the former Soviet Union and shows how the newcomers, by sheer number, were able to exploit their skills and capacity for political mobilization, to resist bureaucratic control and cultural assimilation. Adaptation did take place but resulted in new institutions and formations of class, hierarchy and leadership. The integration of such vast numbers of immigrants over a relatively short period is a

significant challenge for a society by any standards, but must certainly be considered an exceptional experience for a relatively small country such as Israel.

The focus of Dina Siegel's work is to analyze the process of adaptation of the immigrants in terms of the formation of their ethnic and personal identities with particular emphasis on how they took advantage of their public categorization as Russians to their advantage and furthermore how the preservation of Russian 'traits' was in fact an aspect in the cultural adaptation of the immigrants. A short time after their arrival in Israel, the Russian Jews realized that their interest could only be served by claiming their ethnic rights. The Russian immigrants were unable to escape stigmatization and avoid economic difficulties in the very diverse, ethnically and religiously unequal Israeli society. In such circumstances the symbolic significance of their Russian identity as well as their status as new immigrants became central to their existence and subsequently their ethnic-political identification in Israel became organizationally and characteristically relevant.

The distinctiveness of the book lies in the fact that the study is replete with detailed ethnographic descriptions and provides some rather fascinating insights while attempting to portray the process of identity formation and self empowerment of the new entrants in all its intricacy and diversity through its various stages but all this is subjugated to the voices and opinions of the immigrants themselves.

By **Priya Singh***

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