Covert Operations in Pakistani Fiction

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Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/ces/8800
DOI: 10.4000/ces.8800
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher
SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 April 2009
Number of pages: 15-25
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference
Muneeza Shamsie, "Covert Operations in Pakistani Fiction", Commonwealth Essays and Studies [Online], 31.2 | 2009, Online since 24 December 2021, connection on 12 April 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ces/8800; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.8800

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This paper explores the American-Pakistan-Afghanistan encounter portrayed in three recently published incisive Pakistani novels: *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by Mohammed Hanif, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, and *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam. Together they mirror the region’s history across thirty years and challenge the polarization of nations.

In the years prior to Partition, while the British Raj tried to formulate an exit strategy from India and arbitrate between the Congress and the Muslim League, as tensions between the two political parties grew and led to the latter’s increasing demand for Pakistan, the United States looked on with an engaged interest. In June 1947 the British announced the transfer of power and the partition of India. Shortly afterwards on 17 July 1947 George C. Marshall, the US Secretary of State wrote to President Truman: “I believe it would be in our interest to accord recognition to the new dominion of Pakistan… [which] will occupy one of the most important strategic areas in the world.” (Ali, 48 & 458) This was the beginning of The Cold War. The enemy was Communism and its great bulwark was Soviet Russia. After independence, Pakistan’s relations with America ranged from close military ally to political standoff, but in 1979, following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, ‘the US saw a God-sent opportunity to mobilize one billion Muslims against what Reagan called the Evil Empire’ and ‘to fight in the great jihad’. (Ahmad 265). They were aided by Pakistan’s military dictator General Ziaul Haq, who cast aside the modernizing liberal ethos of his forebears, civilian or military, and introduced religious extremism as the policy of the state.

This paper will explore three novels by Pakistani writers: *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by Mohammed Hanif (2008), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (2007) and *The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam (2008). They focus on Pakistan and America’s involvement in Afghanistan and its repercussions, and provide alternative views of history to notions of an East-West confrontation and their resonances across other cultures and countries. Hanif’s *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* is framed by the mysterious airplane crash in 1989 killing Ziaul Haq, the American Ambassador Arnold Raphael, and many high ranking Pakistani generals. The title refers to the popular belief in Pakistan that the fatal bomb was hidden in a case of mangoes. Hanif spins fictions of his own, juxtaposing Zia, Raphael, General Akhtar the chief of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and others in corridors of power, with the fictitious narrator, Ali Shigri, a cadet in the PAF (Pakistan Air Force) Academy who is incarcerated for a crime he has not committed. The novel asks: who killed Ziaul Haq? Hanif suggests everyone has a motive and an opportunity.

In *Shame* (1983), the Indian-born novelist Salman Rushdie employs magic realism to create a fictional world which “is at a slight angle to reality” (Rushdie 24) and follows the career of the pious and wily General Raza “Razor Guts” Hyder who ousts from power and engineers the judicial murder of his one-time patron and Prime Minister, the libertine and whiskey-drinking demagogue Iskander Harappa. *Shame* includes a brief episode of realism where the narrator, a visitor to Pakistan, comments on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and is critical of the subsequent British support for Zia. This was written shortly before the United States decided to commit itself wholeheartedly into the anti-Soviet jihad. The thrust and style of *Exploding Mangoes* is very different, and the American presence is pivotal...
to the novel which is strongly influenced by *The Feast of the Goat* by Mario Vargas Llosa (2000). Hanif tells of the last ten days of Zia; his chapters alternate between the third person narrative of Zia and others and the first person narrative of Shigri. Llosa’s book alternates between three interlinked stories, describing the last day in the dictatorial rule of Trujillo, the Dominican tyrant, who is propped up, as is Zia, by soldiers, censorship, corruption and state persecution. Furthermore the murder of Shigri’s father is very similar to the brother of a Llosa protagonist: they are both hanged in an apparent suicide. Both images evoke Zia’s execution by hanging of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Hanif’s political satire highlights the lethal combination of Zia’s zealotry and America’s geo-political interests. Zia believes that he is chosen by God to bring ‘Islam’ to Pakistan and hopes to win the Nobel prize too for bringing peace to Afghanistan. Immediately after his successful and bloodless coup against Bhutto (code named Operation Fairplay), Zia holds a meeting with his generals and takes the unprecedented step of first invoking a prayer and Allah’s blessings

_They [the generals] shifted in their seats, not knowing how to deal with this. They were all Muslims and they all knew the Chief had a religious bent. Some of them even called him ‘the mullah’ when talking on secure telephone lines. But a meeting was a meeting and mixing religion with the business of running the country was a concept not comprehensible to them (Hanif 30)._ 

Suddenly General Akhtar seizes the opportunity to praise Zia and Allah. The chubby-cheeked Zia understands well the ambitions of men. He hints at the appointments to come as governors and ministers: the unspoken and shocked objections to Zia’s display of godliness evaporate.

In *Exploding Mangoes* the central metaphor is a reference in the Quran referring to Jonah (Zunnus) which haunts the superstitious and paranoid Zia:

_And remember Zun-nus, when he departed in wrath: he imagined that We had no power over him? But he cried through the depths of the darkness ‘There is no god but thou: glory to thee: I was indeed wrong.’ (Hanif 23)"

The C-130 Hercules airplane in which Zia is killed bears a resemblance to a large whale. Other references to darkness, blindness, powerlessness, and repentance, re-occur throughout the book. Shigri is blindfolded and cast into a dungeon. His fellow prisoners include the politically aware but humble, nameless, non-Muslim, Secretary General of the Pakistan Sweepers Union; and Blind Zaina, a woman who was raped but has been charged with adultery because she could not see her attackers and name them. Blind Zainab and her women supporters become the symbols of the subversion which enters Zia’s home in the form of his wife Begum Zia, who challenges him at every step, including on his consultations with the Qazi (authority on Islamic Law) on the weighty matter of women and adultery. Ultimately it is Blind Zainab’s curse which floats in the air and causes an accidental bird hazard—a crow—to play a dramatic role in Zia’s fatal air crash.

The twin influence of the Old British Empire and the New American Empire emerge in, on the one hand, the archaic colonial British language speech and attitudes at the PAF Academy, and, on the other hand, modernization in the form of a hashish-smoking

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1. This refers to Zia’s infamous ‘Islamic’ Hudood Laws which did not differentiate between rape and adultery. A blind girl who was raped became pregnant and was convicted for adultery, which led to a strongly politicized women’s movement against Zia
American drill instructor, Lieutenant Bannon, a Vietnam veteran from Fort Bragg—Loot Bannon as he prefers to be called. Bannon keeps Bruce Lee posters in his room, nicknames Obaid Baby-O, and befriends both him and Shigri. Meanwhile in the PAF Academy, Shigri finds that Quran Study Circles replace recreation activities such as film shows (Where Eagles Dare, The Guns of Navarone) and in-house song variety performances (where Shigri plays the imperialist Eagle swooping down on the Third World Dove, played by Shigri's classmate and lover Obaid—a man with a penchant for pink underwear, the poetry of Rilke and Poison perfume). The cinematic descriptions of parades, swordplay, soaring airplanes and the sinister ISI operative Major Kiyani who smokes Dunhills non-stop, reinforce the sense of a cocooned military world, a breed apart from ‘bloody civilians’ (Hanif 129). The influence of archaic war films which shape the self-perception of the PAF cadets in Exploding Mangoes provide an interesting contrast with the more modern, racier fare such as Star Trek and Top Gun which defines in The Reluctant Fundamentalist (a novel focusing on a US-Pakistan relations) the perceptions of men in America’s ruthless financial world.

Exploding Mangoes hinges on Shigri’s intention to avenge the murder of his legendary father Colonel Shigri by assassinating Zia at a parade with the elegant thrust of the sword: Obaid realizes that Ali Shigri will be gunned down promptly. To create a diversion and delay the parade, at Bannon’s suggestion, Obaid steals an airplane and gives Ali Shigri’s call sign. This leads to Shigri’s interrogation, torture and imprisonment by Major Kiyani. The transfer of Ali Shigri to the prisons at Lahore Fort dating back to Mughal times provides a reminder of medieval power and iniquities endured by the powerless across the ages. This is in significant contrast to the Reluctant Fundamentalist in which the narrator Changez recalls the architectural splendors of Lahore’s Mughal monuments and the glories of a past civilization and empire, and in which figures only a fleeting reference to the legend of anarkali, an immured dancing girl. Moreover, Ali Shigri discovers that Kiyani has been trained in the techniques of guarding national security by none other than Ali’s father, the famous, honorable Colonel Shigri.

Bannon is a key CIA man. Ali takes him on a terrifying airplane ride to extract information about his father’s death. Ali knew his father ‘was running the logistics of the guerilla war in Afghanistan for General Zia’ and was ‘liaising between the Americans who were funding the war and the ISI which was responsible for distributing these funds to the mujahadin’ (Hanif 112). This spawned a new flabby breed of soldier, more interested in money than the welfare of his fellow-soldiers: Colonel Shigri is ordered to abandon a wounded officer and bring back an important suitcase with twenty five million dollars. ‘Do I pimp my men for this?’ he asks his son (241) and burns the money. He is found dead the next day. Bannon says:

‘You know how much money was passing through Colonel Shigri’s hands? Not putting price on the hardware here, not counting the humanitarian aid. Just the moolah in the Samsonites. Three hundred million dollars cash. …So twenty five mil goes missing… No one batted an eyelid our end. Hey, you don’t count pennies when you are fighting the single worst enemy since Hitler. But. But. Twenty five mil is a lot of money for your folks.’ (Hanif 148)

The Vietnam background, the inviolable belief in Communism as the ultimate enemy whose end justifies the means, also emerges in Wasted Vigil’s portrayal of the Americans David Town, James and Christopher Palatine, as does American complicity with appalling tyrants. In Exploding Mangoes Bannon reveals that the Americans knew Colonel Shigri was ‘one of the best’ (Hanif 145) but were unable to investigate his murder, because ‘the orders
came from the top’ and ‘they didn’t want to rock the boat’ (150). Hanif provides an irreverent glimpse of Zia’s closeness with Washington. Bill Casey (Director of the CIA) arrives in Islamabad to visit Zia, without informing the American Ambassador who complains: “Bill was always telling his old chum Ronald Reagan that it was the Wild West all over again, that the Afghans were cowboys with turbans and they were kicking Soviet ass as it had never been kicked before.” (Hanif 67) There is a witty glimpse of a bearded lanky guest ‘OBL’ at Raphael’s party. No one bothers with him, but ‘suddenly the CIA chief… turned towards OBL and said, “Nice meeting you OBL. Good work, keep it up.’ (211)

On September 11, 2001 the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York marked a watershed in America’s perception of itself, its role in global politics—and led to a sudden reversal, under US pressure, in Pakistan pro-Taliban policies. Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* consists of a monologue in which Changez, a Princeton-educated narrator talks on and on to an American stranger at a teashop in Lahore’s busy Anarkali bazaar. The interplay between the two characters is so subtle and so ambiguous—as indeed is the ending—that in a span of 111 pages, Hamid opens out entire debates on the relations between nations, their perceptions of one other and of war, tribalism and terrorism. As a reviewer points out,

> we have in this novel entered not one, but two, ingenious games. One of them, Changez, plays with the American, telling him stories which loop into other stories that change their pattern. The other, Mohsin Hamid, plays with his reader, daring us to separate what’s true from what might not be in his narrator’s confessions. (Hussein *Independent*)

Changez draws many parallels between the cut-throat financial world he worked in and warring tribes and nations. His boss Jim told him: ‘In wartime soldiers don’t really fight for their flags, Changez. They fight for their friends, their buddies. Their team.’ (Hamid 92) At the time, Changez has a lucrative, highly competitive job at Underwood Samson New York valuation firm. He observes that he and his multi-ethnic office team ‘hailed from the same elite universities’ and ‘all exuded a sense of confident self-satisfaction and not one of us was either short or overweight.’ (Hamid 23) In battle fatigue they would have been virtually indistinguishable. Instead of the creativity which had been encouraged at Princeton, Changez is taught *professionalism* and *efficiency* at Underwood Samson and, above all, to *focus on the fundamentals* [original italics]: financial assessment, financial detail. The human cost should not be a consideration. As Bruce King remarks,

> the title has a double significance, since the narrator is trained by his American employers to focus only on economic fundamentals. In becoming a possible terrorist leader he has changed sides from one fundamentalism to another, and, like Hamid, he acknowledges that there is much to be attracted towards in the United States while being against it. Hamid cleverly gives the novel a double perspective and a sensational ending. The narrator converses with an American who may or may not be a military man or secret agent on a mission. During the conclusion it is not clear what is happening, who might be assassinating whom; perhaps the narrator, who seems increasingly insane, is misrepresenting everything. The form and tone of the story is consciously chosen to create such ambiguity. Hamid’s model for this short novel is obviously Albert Camus’ complex novella *La Chute* (King 685).

The sense of violence, of disquiet and distrust with which Changez and the American regard each other in the bazaar runs through the book. As Changez reminisces about his years in America, he draws parallels between the urban diversity of Lahore and Manhattan.
and describes his first day at Underwood Samson on the ‘forty-first and forty-second floor.’
(Hamid 20) He says: ‘while I had previously flown in airplanes and visited the Himalayas, nothing had prepared me for the drama, the power of the view from their lobby.’ (20) The events of 9/11 emerge almost half way through his narrative and change both its mood and its pace. Increasingly each chapter is underpinned by the lengthening shadows in the Anarkali bazaar, the approaching darkness and finally, night. In glittering Manila on a business assignment, Changez starts to ‘behave more like an American’ and make assertive demands, to share the respect that Filipinos accord his American colleagues (despite the Filipino chauffeur’s silent dislike which Changez notices), until he sees the 9/11 attacks on television: “At that moment, my thoughts were not with the victims of the attack… no, I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (Hamid 43).

He then recalls that his girlfriend, Erica, is in New York. He begins to share the shock, anguish and concern of his American colleagues, but is soon disabused of this sense of belonging, of solidarity. At Manila airport, he is separated from his American colleagues and searched; on arrival in New York, he is taken aside by immigrant officials and interrogated. His unfulfilled relationship with Erica suggests her gradual breakdown, her inability to cope with the present and her longing for the boyfriend Chris who died many years ago, and she becomes a metaphor for America itself. Earlier, Changez had found that Erica—and Americans—appreciated his old-fashioned politeness and Anglicized accent (he never adopted an American speech) but now he becomes aware of ‘the growing importance of tribe’ and finds himself abused by strangers as a ‘Fucking Arab’. [Hamid 70]). The American bombing of Afghanistan, ‘Pakistan’s neighbor, our friend and fellow Muslim nation besides,’ reduces him to trembling fury - one of the very few indications of a religious identity in Changez’s narrative, unlike the recent novel Snow by Orhan Pamuk, in which religion is pivotal to its central debate on the East-West encounter, terrorism and modernity in Turkey.

In Reluctant Fundamentalist, Changez rushes back to Lahore as India and Pakistan stand on the brink of nuclear war, amid accusations and counter accusations, following a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament. Changez blames America, Pakistan’s ally, for not doing more to help Pakistan. He says: ‘I felt powerless: I was angry at our weakness, at our vulnerability to intimidation of this sort from our—admittedly much larger—neighbor to the east.’ (Hamid 76) Changez returns to America, but grows a beard which flaunts his ethnicity and draws much hostility. His disillusionment culminates in Valparaiso where he needs to assess a publishing company and meets its manager, the elderly Juan Bautista.

‘What do you know of books? he [Juan Bautista] asked us. ‘I specialize in the media industry’ Jim replied. ‘I’ve valued a dozen publishers over two decades.’ ‘That is finance,’ Juan Bautista retorted. ‘I asked you what you knew of books.’ ‘My father’s uncle was a poet,’ I found myself saying. ‘He was a well known in the Punjab. Books are loved in my family.’ (Hamid 85)

In Exploding Mangoes Obaid’s love of literature embodies subversion, while in The Wasted Vigil books, literature and art embody the soul of mankind. In Reluctant Fundamentalist, Changez discovers Neruda in Valparaiso, but it remains uncertain whether this
leads Changez to a discovery of soul, or adds to his litany of resentments, or even teaches him the importance of words as power. Juan Buatista asks him:

‘Have you heard of the janissaries? … They were Christian boys… captured by the Ottomans and trained to be soldiers in the Muslim army, at that time the greatest army in the world. They were ferocious and utterly loyal; they had fought to erase their own civilizations, as they had nothing else to turn to.’ (Hamid 91)

Changez becomes a university lecturer in Lahore amid more Indo-Pakistan hostilities and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Perceiving himself as an ex-janissary of the American Empire, he uses the skills he learnt there for his anti-American rhetoric and violent anti-American demonstrations, referring to his students as intelligent idealists who call each other comrade. This provides an interesting link to Lahore’s left wing, anti-American student movements in the 1950s and 1960s. The difference between then and now is that Changez’s student is implicated in the planned assassination of an American charity worker, though Changez appears on television to assert the boy’s innocence. He says darkly that he has been told Americans will soon send someone to intimidate/silence him. One of the most interesting aspects of Hamid’s ambiguous novel is Changez’s reversal of the traditional colonial narrative. Changez vocalizes, the American does not; the American remains nameless; he is interpreted through Changez’s monologue and thus appropriated. The novel begs the question: Who is in control here? Where does power lie? In words? Or in a calculated silence?

*Exploding Mangoes* and *Reluctant Fundamentalist* both refer to the power of English in Pakistan and the doors that it opens. In both books, the narrators are products of Pakistan’s elite institutions where English remains the medium of instruction. *Exploding Mangoes* begins with Shigri’s report to his superiors on Obaid’s disappearance, in a clear cut English, but Changez’s narrative and his encounter with the American begins with the flowery words:

‘Excuse me, Sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard. I am a lover of America. I noticed that you were looking for something: more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a mission, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services.’ (Hamid 1)

Changez’s ornate words and the somewhat subservient tone reflect the ‘typical’ intonation expected of sub-continental. This is the voice Changez employs whenever he addresses the American, but Changez employs a more precise language when he speaks of America. Describing his interview with Jim for the job at Underwood Samson, Changez recalls:

‘I watched him watch me, trying to understand what he was looking for… His eyes were cold, a pale blue, and *judgmental*, not in the way that word normally used, but in the sense of being professionally appraising, like a jeweler’s when he inspects out of curiosity a diamond he intends neither to buy nor sell.’ (Hamid 4)

Changez’s two different voices can be interpreted as an embodiment of his East-West dichotomy, his cultural duality. As a New Yorker, he likes to talk Urdu to Pakistani cab drivers and eat from the Pakistani Deli; in Pakistan he subscribes to the Princeton Alumni and holds imaginary conversations with his ex-girlfriend Erica. Nevertheless it is still unlikely for a Pakistani of his background to lapse into an ‘oriental’ English in the company of an American.
Changez comes from a well-placed Pakistani family which is not rich in terms of American dollars. He is embarrassed to be on financial aid at Princeton, though he graduates summa cum laude and lands himself a coveted job. Changez's narrative centres on the inequality of nations and people, but the quieter sub-text is the long colonial history that he carries. Changez comes from a professional elite created by the British Raj. Even if they continue to love Urdu and its literature, English and Anglicization was their pathway into the corridors of power—dogs, swimming pool, cricket, hill stations, cucumber sandwiches: alas none of this brought the hoped-for equality with the British. Changez's intelligence, his education at Princeton and his job at Underwood Samson were but a continuation of this dream: to be where you rightfully belong—on par with a global ruling class. (Changez has very little to say about Pakistan's social iniquities and political oppression). Therefore Changez's over-effusive, 'oriental' language and deference towards the American, following Changez's alienation from America, is likely to be a studied, calculated way of mocking the occidental Other.

The two men meet in the bazaar, that embodiment of the exotic orient in the western imagination. Changez appropriates an orientalist terminology when he throws out remarks such as 'Your shrug is inscrutable' (Hamid 10). He manages to regale the American with stories for hours. Is he playing the role of a male-Sheherezade entertaining the tyrant American to illustrate the error of his ways? He certainly goads the American often with his 'frank' and 'open' discourse (a stereotyped attribute of the American character) about 9/11 and the graphic details of his sexual relationship with Erica (confirming another cliché—oriental male bragging). The American's responses are reported by Changez, not quoted or heard. Changez declares him to be 'a certain type of American' (1). His suspicion of bearded men, his response to Changez's scar, his surprise at Pakistani girls in jeans not hijab and other such details, all reveal stereotyped attitudes that Pakistanis expect of Americans: Changez reinforces the widespread South Asian notion that all Americans are CIA agents, with references to the American's satellite phone, the bulge beneath his jacket (a gun?), and even the American's ability to listen and edge the conversation forward without revealing much about himself. Changez comments that the American has the bearing and build of a soldier or sportsman similar to Jim. The analogy between Jim and the American is continued in several instances: thus the American becomes a mirror image—the embodiment of a man whose philosophy Changez has adapted and turned into his own. Perhaps in the Anarkali bazaar (‘named after a courtesan who was immured for loving a prince’ [1]) Changez tries to assert the power of narrative in contrast to the largely silent/silenced/appropriated American. Changez likes to harp on history and the past glories of his people: he would be very aware that he has been named after a World-Conqueror, Changez (Genghis) Khan, which in turn would feed his aspirations/fantasies.

The importance of names and their absence runs through all three novels discussed here. Both Hanif and Aslam refer to the ninety-nine names of Allah in Islam; Aslam adds that Buddha had ninety names too. In both instances these names embody the many attributes of the Divine, and Aslam ends his novel with intimations of realization and new beginnings in a chapter called ‘All Names Are My Name’. Hanif comments on Ziaul Haq's assertion that only his version of God was the true Allah. Referring to the fact that the traditional Pakistani goodbye Khuda Hafiz—God be with you—was replaced by Allah Hafiz because the Persian word khuda was perceived as reference to a god instead of The God, he states: ‘in the name of God, God was exiled from the land and replaced by the one and only Allah who, General Zia convinced himself spoke only through him.’ (Hanif 34).
The American and Soviet engagement with Afghanistan was but a new phase in the old rivalry between Tsarist Russia and Colonial Britain immortalized as *The Great Game* in Kipling’s *Kim*, to extend spheres of influence in Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Middle East. In 1893, the British created the Durand Line dividing Afghanistan from the North West Frontier Province of British India which became a province of Pakistan in 1947. However, Afghanistan refused to accept the Durand Line and claimed the province. (Rashid 187) This, together with unending Indo-Pakistani hostilities and Pakistan’s ‘war of attrition in Kashmir’ (Rashid,184) made Pakistan anxious to ensure a friendly government in Kabul. Pakistan developed favored factions among the US-backed mujahadin and also fostered the Taliban—the Afghan orphans of war in Pakistan refugee camps. The Pakistani military ‘assumed that the Taliban would recognize the Durand Line… [and] would curb Pashtun nationalism in the NWFP and provide an outlet for Pakistan’s Islamic radicals, thus forestalling an Islamic movement at home… In fact just the opposite occurred. The Taliban fostered Pashtun nationalism, albeit of an Islamic character… Worse still, the Taliban gave sanctuary and armed the most violent Sunni extremist groups in Pakistan…” (Rashid 187).

*The Wasted Vigil* by Nadeem Aslam provides a biting criticism of Pakistan’s involvement with radicalized groups, but unlike the novels by Hamid and Hanif, his is set in Afghanistan and treats the NWFP and its major town, Peshawar, as a contiguous periphery, except that Afghanistan has been ravaged by thirty years of war and Pakistan spills over with factions, mullahs, warlords, and spies. In *Wasted Vigil*, the quest for a lost child embodying the future generation, the terror of Soviet occupation and mujahadin warlords, the horror of arbitrary Taliban ‘justice’ and their victimization of women engage with *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, the Afghan novelist. However, *Wasted Vigil* has a much larger canvas than the works by Hanif, Hamid and Hosseini, and is a contemplation of war, civilization, history and art—themes influenced by Michael Ondaatje’s novels, *The English Patient* set in war-torn Europe and *Anil’s Ghost* about Sri Lanka brutal civil war. Aslam portrays the scars of war on individuals and nations, but celebrates the spirit and creativity of mankind, and those who survive great ordeals with their humanity intact.

In *The English Patient* the main protagonists converge by chance in a deserted Italian villa. In *Wasted Vigil*, against the sound of American B52 bombers, Marcus Caldwell, an English doctor, continues to live in his Afghan villa near the town of Usha (Teardrop) although his Afghan wife and fellow doctor, Qatrina, was stoned to death by the Taliban. Their only daughter Zameen is dead. Marcus lives in the elusive hope of finding Zameen’s child, the grandson he has never met. Marcus has lived in Afghanistan since his marriage—his family history in America and the murder by Pathan tribesman of his father, a British missionary, now in the distant past. He embodies the universalism, wisdom and suffering which are the prerequisites to enlightenment, though he subscribes to no religious creed. He formally converts to Islam to marry Qatrina. Marcus, who adopted the Muslim name Majrooh (Wounded), is a far cry from the unworldly llama of Kipling’s *Kim* who needs a streetwise Kim to guide him. Furthermore, Kim’s hybridity, his British paternity, his gender and his years as a Lahore street urchin make him an invaluable British spy. In Aslam’s novel, the hybridity of Marcus and Qatrina’s daughter Zameen (Earth) turn her into an object of suspicion and violence. Inadvertently, she witnesses a ghastly murder, and its perpetrator, a mullah, to save himself implicates her in an anti-Communist massacre. She is incarcerated and raped by the Russians, suspected as a Communist by the Americans and ultimately killed. Her father is caught trying to retrieve some of his stolen property in Kabul and
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accused of theft; the Taliban give Qatrina his wife the choice of scientifically amputating his hand or seeing him shot dead.

_Wasted Vigil_ tells the history of nations through the characters who come to the villa, by accident or design. These include Lara, a young Russian; David, an American; and the Afghans, Casa a suicide bomber and Dunia (World) a schoolteacher. Lara is searching for her brother Benedikt. He disappeared, aged 17, while serving with the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Her story includes parents persecuted by the Communist regime and a husband who served in Chechnya, while David, a gem-merchant and CIA agent, has never ceased to search for his brother who vanished in Vietnam. He knows of Benedikt through Zameen, all those years ago. Benedikt had raped Zameen while she was a Russian captive. Her son Bihzad is Benedikt’s child. She finds her way to a refugee camp in Pakistan, but her old enemy the cleric from Usha recognizes her and challenges Bihzad’s legitimacy. She has to resort to prostitution to feed the child until an aid agency sets her up in Peshawer’s Street of the Storytellers to help Afghan women embroider in secret and earn. It is there that David first met and fell in love with her, but then she disappeared. He pieces together the whole truth two decades later. David’s superior in the CIA, Christopher Palatine, who suspected everyone and is quick to jump to conclusions about Afghans and possible Communists and terrorists, decided erroneously that Zameen was a spy. As a result, when Zameen was carried off, the US ally, war lord and poppy farmer Ghulam Rasool Palatine left her to him—and appalling death.

To date, _Wasted Vigil_ is the only Pakistani English novel to explore the chilling worldview of a religious extremist and the manner in which ‘terror cells’ proliferate. Casa first appears as the ruthless ambitious manipulator of a boy, a fellow orphan, who is tricked into the suicide bombing of a school run by Americans. The successful attack brings Casa and his newly-born organization to the attention of Al-Qaeda and the ruthless warlord and religious extremist Nabi Khan. He is supported by elements of the ISI in Pakistan and the barbaric, renegade ex-Pakistani army officer Fedalla who was outraged by Pakistan’s post 9/11 alliance with the United States and the ouster of Pakistan’s one-time allies, the Taliban from Afghanistan. These groups hope to oust the equally appalling pro-American Ghulam Rasool who controls Usha. Casa becomes an important cog in their plans. Expectations of the impending battle also encourage a pro-Nabi Khan cleric to have a school shut down forcibly by falsely accusing a young woman Dunia, a school teacher, of being dissolute. He acts partly out of personal vengeance because she refused to become his third wife. Marcus provides her with refuge in his villa but James Palatine, the son of David’s one-time superior, Christopher, distrusts Dunia. He is with a special US team to hunt al-Qaeda. He questions her. ‘You’re as bad as he is,’ she says referring to Casa but James says ‘You can’t expect a country to function like a charity.’ (Aslam 318)

Aslam’s skill lies in giving Casa and other flawed characters a human face. Casa is an orphan. He has but a single fleeting memory of his mother and has not been to any school, except religious institutions usually attached to military training camps. In Pakistan, an English speaking man names him Casa after Giocante Casabianca, the boy-hero of a poem about Napoleon’s Battle of the Nile. Casa earned the name at the age of six for courageously guard over a prisoner while bombs and rockets went off nearby in the infamous 1988 Ojhri camp incident in Islamabad.  

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4. A warehouse near the capital full of US armaments for the mujahadin mysteriously caught fire amid rumours of corruption and a cover-up.
Casa can strip and clean a gun blindfolded in sixty seconds. He knows how to extract cyanide from apricots. He can make bombs from sugar or coffee. He understands the computer and a little English but knows nothing of family life—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts. His only perception of women is through a religious indoctrination on the inferiority, wiles, and danger of women. On an important mission for Nabi Khan, Casa is wounded in an animal trap and finds shelter near the villa. Aslam reveals with great sensitivity how repugnant Casa finds the people in the villa, despite their kindness to him. His ideas based on propaganda, lies and a somewhat unlettered interpretation of the scriptures are very different from the opinions of Marcus, whose liberal views of Islam and its history led to his quest for knowledge. Casa’s responses are guided by the need to watch his step in the presence of the Other, yet he becomes fascinated by a book of Persian paintings which ‘seemed to be some of the most beautiful things he had ever seen, despite the fact that against Allah’s wishes, they depicted animals and humans.’ (Aslam 299). The presence of Dunia throws Casa into greater turmoil. Dunia is devout, prays and keeps her head covered, but is not veiled. During an amicable conversation, he says ‘Aren’t you ashamed of going about the way you do?… A Muslim woman should keep her face covered.’ (270). He believes it is written in the Quran. She knows that it is not. He is shocked at her anger.

Aslam’s haunting, poetic novel is built through a collage of tales which inform one another and explore ideas of nationhood, and the great ideals become fanatical beliefs in a climate of war and violence, reduced to great crimes in the name of justice and humanity. Aslam’s choice of personal quest themes plays on the peaceful, knightly/religious word ‘vigil’ and the self-righteous lawlessness underscored by its derivative, ‘vigilante’. In contrast to Afghanistan’s violent history, the villa is surrounded by spectacular flowers, and the text is filled with metaphorical references to great works of art and literature reflecting the rich symbiosis of cultures: the lapis lazuli of Afghanistan was ‘brushed by Cleopatra onto her eyelids, employed by Michelangelo to paint the blues on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel’; (16) and the Greco-Buddhist sculptures of Afghanistan bear ‘the features of Apollo’ and the Asian ‘dot on the forehead and the topknoted locks.” (192). The vast statue of Buddha that lies underground alongside the perfume factory Marcus and Qatrina created as an income-generating scheme for local women embodies the buried treasures of the land. The exquisite murals in the villa painted by the last artist of the Persian school, now hidden from religious fanatics by mud, speak of a lost heritage; the ceiling where Qatrina obsessively nails all the books in the house after her mental breakdown become a symbol of the world impaled: ‘A spike driven through the pages of history, a spike through the pages of love, a spike through the sacred.’ (5)

These words are particularly chilling as extremists take over swathes of Pakistan’s northern areas, but as these incisive novels by Aslam, Hanif and Hamid reveal, a new generation of writers which does not flinch from revealing unpleasant truths engage with some of the most pertinent issues of today. Their work is immensely diverse, yet interlinked with a great awareness of Pakistan and the need to hold up a mirror to its troubled society and thus build bridges between diverse cultures, classes and nations, East and West.

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Works cited


