
Counter-Hegemonic Discourse in *the Wasted Vigil*

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Abstract: The novel shows Afghanistan in the state of civil war. In the hegemonic discourses that serve as the packages of consciousness, this ongoing civil war has been read as the result of the country's inability to govern itself. This paper intends exploring how *The Wasted Vigil* (2009) forms a counter-discourse by challenging such stereotyping through its insistence on representing civil war in Afghanistan alongside of colonial invasion and occupation. Drawing on Agamben's theories of both biopolitics and 'states of exception', it shall be argued that the text offers to understand the 'War on Terror' as a version of 'global civil war' that serves to normalize and legitimize the transformation of constitutional democracy into a permanent but unacknowledged "state of exception"

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The Wasted Vigil is a tale of war torn Afghanistan, tracing its political history from the Soviet invasion to September 11 attacks. It exposes the actions of the political powers that have been selfishly pursuing their own interests in Afghanistan for the past thirty years. It is challenge to the post-9/11 hegemonic discourses. The Soviets, the Americans, the Taliban and other local war lords are lashed equally for devastating and ruining Afghanistan. So the Pakistani-born author spares neither side while empathizing with the innocent victims who continually bear the brunt of the ceaseless fighting.

The novel shows Afghanistan in the state of civil war. In the hegemonic discourses that serve as the packages of consciousness, this ongoing civil war has been read as the result of the country's inability to govern itself. This paper intends exploring how *The Wasted Vigil* (2009) forms a counter-discourse by challenging such stereotyping through its insistence on representing civil war in Afghanistan alongside of colonial invasion and occupation. Aslam is of the view that Afghanistan today is not haunted by Taliban and Al-Qaeda sponsored terrorism only, but there are multiple forces at work that have resulted in the destruction and devastation of this country. The novel actually illustrates that instead of civil wars we are now in the realm of what Hardt and Negri have termed as "global civil wars" (4), where no one appears to be accountable for the culture of violence that these civil wars breed. It has become the effect of power and authority that is denationalized, that is not fixed to one place or area, but a normalized permanent "state of exception". The impossibility of civil wars in a colonial or postcolonial nation is greatly stressed. Drawing on Agamben's theories of both biopolitics and 'states of exception', it shall be argued that the text offers to understand the 'War on Terror' as a version of 'global civil war' that serves to normalize and legitimize the transformation of constitutional democracy into a

permanent but unacknowledged "state of exception".

The Wasted Vigil explores the global processes of war, historical and political trauma with lyricism and profound compassion. It narrates the interlinked stories of a cast of geographically different characters that are all drawn, for different reasons, to the isolated house in the countryside near Jalalabad. The house is owned by English-born Marcus Caldwell, who after marrying a liberal Afghani doctor Qatrina, started living as a permanent resident of Afghanistan. His house is the meeting site of four other characters: Lara, a Russian woman in search of her brother, Benedikt, who went missing during his military service in Soviet Afghanistan; David, a former CIA American spy and lover of Marcus' deceased daughter, Zameen. There is Casa, a Muslim fanatic, who is radicalized in Taliban sadistic training camps to fight all things American. There he falls in love with the beautiful Afghan girl Dunia, who is liberal minded and a devoted school teacher. All these characters maintain devoted, sometimes futile, vigils for long missing family members and loved ones. But the vigil or the hope of finding every missing character results in despair because ultimately every relationship is destroyed by death. Each has a quest, and each is essentially thwarted — by circumstances and history. The story moves fluidly between the present, where these characters all live nearby and yet are worlds apart, and the past when they look back and reflect on their journeys that brought each of them there.

Aslam's cast of eclectic characters represents 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 all play their part. They all are representatives of global conflicts and relations, demonstrating the offences and misunderstandings; both historical and contemporaneous that resulted

in the devastation of Afghanistan. Through Marcus we are able to explore the British colonial presence in the region in the late nineteenth century; through Lara it is the decade of Russian occupation and through David we are able to receive information about the subversive American presence in Afghanistan through the decade of Soviet occupation. Likewise Casa stands for the Taliban rule that annihilated Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

Aslam portrays Afghanistan as a landscape that is part physical and part spectral. The first image of the unusual ceiling to which hundreds of books have been fastened with iron nails becomes a metaphor for Afghanistan and its disruption. The image is described as “A spike driven through the pages of history, a spike through the pages of love, a spike through the sacred” (5). These books are nailed to the ceiling by Marcus’s traumatized wife Qatrina in a crazed effort to preserve these from Taliban raids. The second image is of the painted walls depicting “scenes of lovers either in an embrace or travelling towards each other through forest and meadow” (12-13). These images of the romantic love are terribly damaged by bullets, demonstrating the violence inflicted by Taliban and other external forces within the borders of Afghanistan. Lara further reinforces the atrocities inflicted over centuries on this land:

This country was one of the greatest tragedies of the age. Torn to pieces by many hands of war, by the various hatreds and failings of the world. Two million deaths over the past quarter-century. Several of the lovers on the walls were on their own because of the obliterating impact of the bullets – nothing but a gash or a terrible ripping away where the corresponding man or woman used to be. A shredded limb, a lost eye. (14)

Almost all the characters of this novel are tormented by different wars in different ways. The interconnectedness of the wars that have so deeply affected these characters is apparent when Lara, having heard David speak of his brother, thinks about Vietnam:

A different war – but may be at some level it was the same war. Just as tomorrow’s wars might be begotten by today’s wars, a continuation of them. Rivers of lava emerging onto the surface after flowing many out-of-sight miles underground. (362)

Lara’s musings suggest that we are too hasty in considering wars in different regions and at

different times in isolation; subtly highlighting the reality of a global civil war in the twenty-first century. Each local war should not be viewed in isolation, but as a part of a grand constellation, linked to other war zones and areas that might not be presently at war. As Nadeem Aslam says about wars in Afghanistan: “Once the Soviets withdrew, and US interest waned, the Taliban rose ... 10 years later 9/11 (and the ensuing War on Terror) happened and half the planet woke up. They had no idea it came out of the cold war.” (Jaggi par 15).

Civil war in Afghanistan is not “the armed conflict between sovereign and non-sovereign combatants within a single sovereign territory” (Hardt 08). It involves a wide range of global actors. It is being funded by foreign sources that had stakes in the region by virtue of former colonial occupation and because of economic interests which ranged from the mining of gems to the production of opium and heroin poppies. As Aslam says: “The years of war and civil war have emptied this country’s museums” (70). Civil war in Afghanistan here is introduced not on its own, but in relation to a more general, more broadly undefined ‘war’. The implication being that civil war has occurred and continues to occur in partial relation to this other type of war, and has been set in motion by the economic interests in the landscape that had such gems buried in its soil. The text attempts to outline this economic interest as ancient, through the image of the diamond taken at some point from Afghanistan, placed in the eye of a statue in India, and then looted to end up in first an Armenian’s hand and then a Russian ruler’s. At one point Marcus ruminates that “The lapis lazuli of their land was always desired by the world, brushed by Cleopatra onto her eyelids, employed by Michelangelo to paint the blues on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel...” (18). Such references underline the fact that Afghanistan has been raided for commodities for millennia, and that the current-day occupation of the country by NATO mimics and echoes earlier invasions and raids.

There is a close relationship between civil war and what Giorgio Agamben says “state of exception”. He says in his ground breaking book *State of Exception* that “civil war is the opposite of normal conditions, it lies in a zone of undecidability with respect to the state of exception, which is state power’s immediate response to the most extreme internal conflicts” (2). Further he says:

...modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be

integrated into the political system. (2)

After 9/11, American government has declared nothing less than a 'global state of exception' through the occasion presented by the 'War on Terrorism'. The phrase 'War on Terror' provided US government enough freedom over time and space. The word 'terror' is not a country, so the war could be taken to different places. And it is very difficult to find out who the enemy really is in War on Terror. As Spivak says that War on Terrorism has been "zoomed up to face an abstraction" (82). Afghanistan has been virtually turned into a "Camp", that according to Agamben is a space where the rules of the world cease to apply, where we have the communities of people without the rights to have rights. It is the "bare life" of these "homo sacers" in Afghanistan that Nadeem Aslam is trying to bring to the limelight to the global audience in *The Wasted Vigil*.

The way the War on Terror has been represented contribute to the construction of hegemonic narratives through which the America came to imagine itself as a beacon light of democracy and a civilizing bulwark against the violent forces of terrorist rogue states. Using the rhetoric of just and unjust wars, the War on terror moralizes rather than legitimizes the use of global violence by putting it outside the realm of reason and critique. The violence inherent in the War on Terror is normalized and dehistoricized. It has changed the entire social and political makeup of Afghanistan and world at large, where a distinction between war and civil society has become obsolete. It is through the disembodiment of this global

violence that the dehumanization of Afghanistan in particular and majority of the globe's population in general, takes on normative and naturalized state of existence.

Aslam's novel thus dramatizes the transformation of the country's civil war into a permanent state of exception. In post-9/11 Afghanistan the state of exception has become a rule. "When state of exception... becomes the rule", Agamben says, "then the juridico-political system becomes a machine which may at any moment turn lethal" (86). It is this lethal machine whose biopolitical motor is the state of exception that is, in Agamben's analysis, "leading the West toward a global civil war" (87). *The Wasted Vigil* presents an extraordinary search for social justice through the narrative and seeks to understand the operative modes of violence beyond their historical and social configurations. Conceptualizing global civil war as being engineered by the Global North, that is, predominantly by the United States and its allied nations, it reveals the ways in which global war deeply invests in and ensures the continuous accumulation of global capital and centralized practices of uneven capital distribution. Global civil war aims at maintaining a historically received global order of unequal power relationships and has also become geopolitics of resource control. It is intrinsic to the formation of new global sovereignty that supersedes colonialism and imperialism. Thus the global civil war enacted in the pages of this postcolonial narrative of war offers a critique that clearly unsettles contemporary configurations of imperial and colonial habits of mind and dismantles the conditions that produce social violence and anguish.

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