

FILM REVIEW

Makhmalbaf's Kandahar: Darkness at noon

Since the US bombing of Afghanistan began, "Kandahar" has received new attention. Prior to this, the film had received awards at Cannes, but was struggling to find distribution. Makhmalbaf recently told French weekly Paris Match, "Last year, I was asked why the hell I was interested in such a country. It's CNN that decides what is interesting. At the time Afghanistan was not in fashion." The fate of 'Kandahar' is a parallel for Afghanistan's fate. For decades, this beautiful land was ripped apart by the great game. Through it all, the world turned a blind eye. As our guide Nafas disappears into shadows, "Kandahar" stands as a testimony to our collective failure, writes Naeem Mohaiemen

RED Cross station in the desert. Two doctors attend to a motley collection of Afghan men. The camera lingers over mutilated stumps. Neither doctor has a stethoscope, but one has a tailor's measuring-tape draped around her neck. As each patient is interviewed, the answers are always the same: "I stepped on a mine," "It hurts so much, I haven't closed my eyes in four months." Like programmed robots, the doctors reassure each man, "It will take almost a year to get a leg for you." No emotions are wasted here.

Suddenly, there is a commotion. We hear the whirling of helicopter blades and the crippled men break into a run. As the camera pulls back, we watch a slow-motion stampede. Skillfully using crutches, the men hop along on one leg, heading towards a hill where the helicopter is dropping cargo. "Stop, stop! What are you doing? Come back!" the doctor's cries reach no one. The race leader's green turban is loose, a floating river in the desert wind. At any moment we expect his crutches to tangle in the cloth and trip him up, but he defies expectations and races ahead.

Finally, we look up at the blue sky, catching a glimpse of the prize. People are floating down from above. As they come nearer, our vision gets blurry. Something seems wrong, parts are missing -- incomplete, unfinished mannequins. With a start, we realise they are artificial legs, attached to tiny Red Cross parachutes. Play-legs bringing salvation to the mine-scarred landscape.

In Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film "Kandahar," images like this haunt us long after the film is over. After crafting sparse tales of contemporary Iran, Makhmalbaf has turned his camera on the Afghan cataclysm. Shot with a documentary realism, the film alternates between



Kandahar is a psychological and physical journey of the protagonist Nafas across the arid desert of Afghanistan

pathos and surrealism. Through it all is the reminder -- these striking celluloid moments are Afghanistan's grim reality.

The film's protagonist is Nafas, an Afghan refugee who escaped to Canada, leaving behind her crippled sister. Many years later, her sister writes that her desperation has emptied her soul. She ends the letter by saying she will commit suicide at the next solar eclipse. Nafas responds by rushing back to Afghanistan. Dropped off at the Iran-Afghan border, she sets off on a trek to rescue her sister's broken will.

'Kandahar' follows Nafas on her journey across the arid desert. Along the way she meets amputees, bandits, cheats, a doctor looking for

God, a madrasa student, and other shards from the shattered mosaic. Through it all, women are a constant presence. They are everywhere yet nowhere. Covered head-to-toe in burkhas, their faces are never seen and their honorific is "black-top." At a border refugee school, young girls are told that when they return to Afghanistan, they can no longer study. But at this young age, they still have the freedom to reveal their faces -- something they will lose with the puberty season.

Fiercely independent Nafas is initially a hopeful contrast to the Afghan women. But once the journey begins, she too has to bend to the desert laws. Nafas is forced to rely on any man she can find -- no matter how low in society, they are

still men and able to move around freely. Her first guide is a thieving boy, a pariah who has been expelled from madrasa for failing Quran recitation. Later, she partners with a cheat who goes to the Red Cross and begs for artificial legs to re-sell. When she becomes sick, she has to submit to the humiliating ritual of describing her symptoms from behind a curtain. Still, there are small sparks of resistance. Women in a wedding procession dare raise voices in song, burkhas of many colours floating across the dry sand. But as peep-holes blot out the setting sun, there is no happy ending, no respite from the total eclipse.

In 1985, National Geographic published a cover photo of an Afghan refugee girl that is still the most recognised image from the region. The girl with fierce eyes of impossible gray transfixed everyone with her haunting beauty. In "Kandahar," Makhmalbaf has composed a visual poem of similar stunning beauty laced with intense sadness. Wrapped within the shifting sands of this film is a forceful indictment of the Afghan women's plight.

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Poignant image of Afghanistan's grim reality

POEMS

Two poems of Rabindranath Tagore

Translated from Bangla by Fakrul Alam

The Fountain's Awakening

Nirjharer svapna-bhanga

O, how did the sun's first ray
Into my heart find its way?
This dawn, how could birdsongs pierce my heart's dark den?
After all this time, why does the heart suddenly stir again?
The heart stirs again.
Like a river swelling and bursting its banks in the rain
No longer can I my desires contain.
The very foundations of mountains throb as if in pain,
Hail keeps showering down time and again,
Waves keep foaming and leaping,
And in their fury keep roaring.
Like a madman whirling about
My passions run riot.
My feelings roam around but can find no way out.
Why is God going to be forever stony-hearted?
Why am I by His chains everywhere bounded?
Break heart, break all chains,
Devote yourself this day to your own desires.
Flinging wave after wave
Keep striking blow after blow.
When the heart is on fire and intoxicated
Why fear darkness or the one who is stony-hearted?
When desire overwhelms
What in the world can one fear?
I will stream down compassion
I will smash this stony prison
Overflowing my banks I will flood the world.
Spreading passionately my song of deliverance
Letting my hair flow, gathering all fallen flowers,
And spreading rainbow-colored wings,
I will pour out my heart till the sun's rays start smiling.
I will dart from peak to peak,
I will ransack the very foundations of mountains,
I will laugh out loud, sing soulfully, and clap rhythmically.
There is so much to say, so many songs to sing, so much life in me,
Such feelings of bliss, such desires my heart is so full and free
This day, what could it be that has made my heart sway?
From afar I can hear some mighty ocean's song play.
What is the cage that would restrict me on all sides?

Break all bars, heart strike at whatever strikes.
What is the song the bird sang this day?
The sun has finally found its way!"

"There is a pun here since the word for sun in Bangla, "Rabi", is also part of the poet's name.

Life

Pran

I do not want to ever leave this beautiful world,
I would like forever to live amidst humankind
If only in this sunshine, in this blooming garden,
I could always be a part of your heartbeats!
On earth, life dances away like waves in endless play,
Full of partings and unions and of smiles full of tears
If only by weaving tunes out of our joys and pains,
I could compose works that would live on endlessly!
Even if I fail in this goal, I hope that as long as I live,
I will find a place amidst you all the time.
I will blossom new tunes for you incessantly,
Hoping you will gather them mornings and evenings.
Take my flowers with smiling faces, but if, alas,
Throw them you must, do so only when they wither away!

The background to *Nirjharer svapna-bhanga* can be found on page 103 of in Krishna Kripalani's *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (Viswa-Bharati, Calcutta, 1980): (Shortly after Rabindranath took up residence in a house in Sudder Street, Calcutta with his brother Jyotirindranath and his sister-in-law, Kadambini) It was in this modest house in the very heart of the new metropolis that the young poet had his first deeply felt spiritual experience which burst upon him with the force of a vision and which he described at length, both in his reminiscences and later in the Hibbert Lectures at Oxford University in 1930. Early one morning as he was standing on the balcony of the house watching the sun rise behind the fringe of trees at the end of the lane, "all of a sudden a covering seemed to fall from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side." All the gloom and despondency which had weighed over and oppressed his spirit, forcing it to turn upon itself in a morbid relish of its own disease, fell from him like a garment tripped from end to end. Nothing in the outside world seemed trivial any more. "The invisible screen of the commonplace was removed from all things and all men, and their ultimate significance was intensified in my mind." Kripalani goes on to record that this experience lasted for four days "during which he saw and heard everything not only with his eyes and ears but with his entire being" but that on the first day he wrote this poem and that it came to Rabindranath in a flow.

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PEOPLE & PLACES

Afghanistan's forgotten heritage

Afghanistan's history as a nation spans little more than two centuries, although in the past it has been part, or even the centre, of great empires. Zoroastrianism started in the sixth century BC. Later, Buddhism spread west from India to the Bamiyan valley where it remained strong till the tenth century AD. Islam reached Afghanistan in the seventh century AD. The country has often been ruled by local kings or invaders that have included Alexander the Great, Mahmud of Ghazni, Ghurids, Ghenghis Khan, Tamerlane, Timurids, the Russians and the British, writes Raana Haider

"Kabul is a most bustling and populous city. Such is the noise in the afternoon, that in the streets one cannot make an attendant hear... The great bazaar is an elegant arcade, nearly 600 feet long and 30 broad... There are few such bazaars in the East and one wonders at the silks, cloths and goods which are arranged under its piazzas... In May one may purchase the grapes, pears, apples, quinces and even melons of the bygone season, then 10 months old... Kabul is famed for its kababs or cooked meats... Few cook at home."

-Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turistan and Baloochistan by J P Ferrier, 1857.

J P Ferrier was Adjutant-General of the Persian army in the 1840s. He wrote the above book while posted at Pondicherry, India in 1856. John Murray published the book in London in 1857 and a second edition appeared in 1971. Ferrier wrote of his caravan of more than seven hundred people leaving Persia for Central Asia in April 1845 through a terrain that was undulating and the surface arid and stony. "Though only the 2nd April, the heat was intense; the centigrade thermometer stood at 35 degrees in the tent, and the flies and mosquitoes left us no peace... A social feeling pervades all the members of a caravan: they have their food in common; the noble, the tradesman, the peasant, and the *fakheer* (beggar) sit in the same circle and eat out of the same dish, and this without the least possibility of offence being given or pride being wounded; it is sufficient that they are Muslims and pilgrims... A horse is to the Turcoman what a ship is to the pirate; it carries himself and his fortune. In his saddle, he is in his fortress; in truth, it is on horseback that he fights..."

Afghanistan's history as a nation spans little more than two centuries, although in the past it has been part, or even the centre, of great empires. Zoroastrianism started in the sixth century BC. Later, Buddhism spread west from India to the Bamiyan valley where it remained strong till the tenth century AD. Islam reached Afghanistan in the seventh century AD. The country has often been ruled by local kings or invaders that have included Alexander the Great, Mahmud of Ghazni, Ghurids, Ghenghis Khan, Tamerlane, Timurids, the Russians and the British. In 1774, the Kingdom of Afghanistan was established. The monarchy was overthrown in 1973 in a military coup. The Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan from 1979-1992. Civil strife continued. In October 2001, what has been declared 'The First War of the Twenty-first Century' started in Afghanistan. In these times, everyone has seen a map of Afghanistan in the international media with the names Ghazni, Herat, Kabul, Kandahar... dotted on the map. Yet few know that these dots locate cities that can trace an artistic and cultural heritage that dates centuries if not millennia.

The half-minaret of Masud III (1099-1115) in Ghazni is all that is left of the elaborate mosque complex that once stood there. Somewhere along the distant past, the top half of the cylindrical and fluted shaft had fallen off. The lower shaft has an eight-pointed star base. Masud III's name is inscribed in tall Kufic writing at the top of the lower shaft. The mosque of Bahram Shah in Ghazni was built in the late eleventh or early twelfth century. Here also only the brick minaret, star-shaped in plan, remains of the original mosque. The Ghaznavids, a dynasty of Turkish origin ruled the region from 962 to 1001 and had as their capital the city of Ghazni.

In an inaccessible mountain valley and standing in isolation in a narrow gorge is once again the surviving minaret of what was once the Great Mosque of Jam constructed in the late twelfth century. The surviving brick structure soars four stories high, gradually tapering, some seventy metres high. The outer surface is extensively decorated with terracotta plaques and Kufic inscriptions from the Holy Quran. Turquoise glazed bricks create an illusion of fragile filigree work. Turquoise was the first and most popular colour used for glazing in Islamic architecture. This construction took place during the rule of the Ghurids (1148-1215) whose capital was Herat. Herat was an ancient Silk Road oasis at the crossroads between Persia, India and China -- a stopover on the world's oldest highway for travellers and their horses as they crossed steppes and deserts. The Qutb minaret in Old Delhi is said to have been inspired by the minaret at Jam.

One account for the legacy of surviving minarets is provided for in 'Islamic Art and Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait'. "Dozens of stone and baked-brick minarets survive in Afghanistan, Soviet Central Asia, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, sometimes independent of any adjacent building. Their inscriptions reflect a wide range of patronage, indicating that to all classes a minaret gave good value for the money... For all classes of patrons, minarets were gratifyingly visible and not as expensive as a new mosque or other building." This argument appears highly plausible -- the builder received considerable recognition without incurring any prohibitive expense.

The Masjid-i-Jami (The Friday Mosque) in Herat "is one of the finest Islamic buildings in the world, certainly the finest in Afghanistan" states the



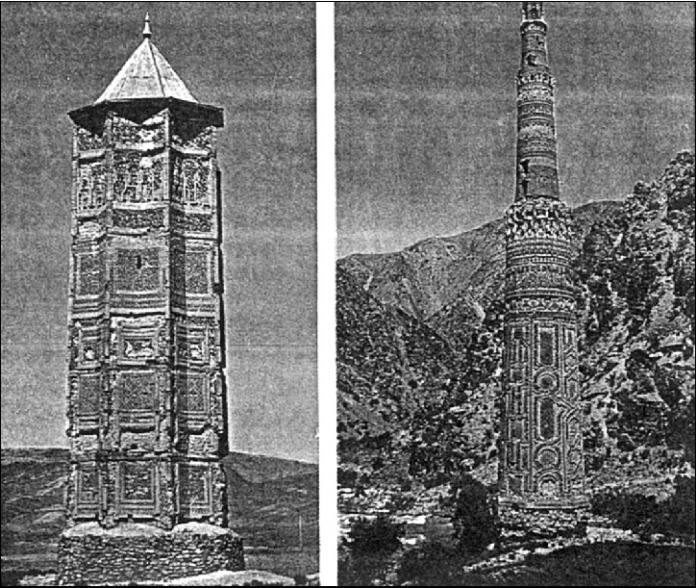
Inscription in tilework from the minaret of Sultan Husein Baiqara madrasah in Herat, Afghanistan. 15th century (1469-1506)

Lonely Planet guidebook in its section on Afghanistan in 'Middle East'. Repeatedly destroyed by different waves of armies in the crossroads of a nation, the current mosque was built in 1498 and since 1943 in a state of restoration, followed by periods of destruction in modern warfare.

One of the brilliant masterpieces in Islamic art is known as the 'Herat Bucket' in artistic circles. It was created in 1163 by the artist Masud ibn Ahmad in the eastern province of Khorasan whose once great cities are now divided between Iran, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. At the time, Herat was part of the Persian empire. Today, Herat is one of the major cities of Afghanistan. It has been simply described by David Talbot Rice in 'Islamic Art' as "It remains unsurpassed in the story of Islamic metalwork," according to Dr Mikhail Piotrovsky, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Russian Academy of Humanities. "It is beautiful in form, in rich colouring, calligraphy and figure composition. It is a fine sample of the different techniques used in the Islamic metalcraft casting, engraving and inlay... The inscriptions on the bucket bear the most interesting information about the world in which it was created, about the masters, customs and owners, about the role of the middle class in the Islamic society. Images on the girdles of the bucket are extraordinary in their artistic value and in exceptional information." The bucket was used to carry water during bathing and is 18 cm. in thickness. Such buckets were used for visits to the *hammams*. "It was ordered by one named individual for presentation to another, 'the pride of merchants', apparently in connection with the pilgrimage to Mecca" notes a lecturer at the British Museum and British Library Barbara Brend in 'Islamic Art'. The Herat Bucket is today part of the Hermitage collection in St. Petersburg, Russia.

This jewel of Islamic art points to Herat as a principal centre for metalwork -- much in vogue in its day. At the close of the fifteenth century, Herat was still producing huge vessels, like cauldrons in shape but intended to contain water in mosques. A brass jug covered in gold and silver inlay was made in Herat in 1494 by a master craftsman Azzallah Shaykh Vail. An inscription around the neck refers to the days of the reign of Sultan Husayn Bayqara who is effusively referred to as the sultan of the Turks, Arabs and Persians. This magnificent object of art was sold at Sotheby's, London in 1989. A tenth century copper bowl found in Iran has in Kufic writing engraved on it 'He who talks much, errs much'. It is also worth noting that some of the first Persian carpets were woven in Herat. The cities of Herat, Samarkand, Yazd, Tabriz and Kabul were also renowned for fabric-weaving during the reign of the Timurid dynasty.

In the years 1414-1416, the ruler of the day Shah Rukh had his dynastic pride set into the ancient citadel of Herat following renovations -- in the form of inscriptions -- "which celebrates the pure lineage of the Timurids, praising Shah Rukh and his five sons with all the poetical resources of the fifteenth century" declares Barbara Brend in 'Islamic Art'. Also in Herat, the architect Qavan ak-Dub built Shah Rukh's queen, Gauhar Shad a madrasah and a mosque in the 1420s. Both the ruler and his consort were eventually buried under the dome chamber of the madrasah. The Russians in later years blew up parts of the mosque -- as a defensive measure. A Women's Garden



(Left) the tower of Masud III (1099-1115) at Ghazni. This tower and a similar one set up by Bahram Shah are all that is to be seen of the once great city. Originally they had two storeys like the minaret of Jam (right), 1163-1203, which stands alone in a gorge

surrounding the fifteenth century tomb that once upon a time was a sanctuary and cool retreat is today a field of mud.

Set in the foothills above Herat lies the shrine of the eleventh century mystic Khwajeh Abdullah Ansari at Gazur Gah. The main building was constructed at the command of Shah Rukh. Late in the fifteenth century, the ruler Husayn Bayqara made the royal burial grounds within the shrine complex. Architecturally, certain features used in its construction and embellishment would be transferred to Mughal architecture in India such as the use of portal bays and the arched *iwan* as a screen. The finest manifestation of Mughal architecture with its origins in Central Asia is the resplendent Taj Mahal in Agra. The Masjid-i-Hauz-i-Karbus in Herat was constructed in 1441. In a book published by UNESCO 'The Art of Islam', the stated mosque's "*mihrab* in the covered 'winter mosque', is faced with fine tile mosaic of the best quality commissioned by the Timurid rulers."

The art of the book is a branch of Islamic art that reached exquisite heights and peaked in the fourteenth century. There was a reverence for the pen and the written word. There were men of pen and men of sword. The former was a highly esteemed class of secular and literate men distinct from theologians and men well-versed in religion. Ibrahim ash-Shaybani eloquently stated the many virtues of the art of writing -- a skill today highly endangered with the arrival of computer technology. "... the language of the hand, the idiom of the mind, the ambassador intellect, and the trustee of thought, the weapon of knowledge and the companion of brethren in the time of separation." The art of cursive epigraphy is a master skill as much appreciated then as now. Few would argue with the remark by Qadi Ahmad who, well aware that most of his compatriots were illiterate wrote "If someone, whether he can read or not, sees good, writing, he likes to enjoy the sight of it." A finely detailed inlaid brass pen box from Syria or Turkey dating to the early thirteenth century has engraved on its lid "Do not write with your hand except that which will delight you to see on Judgement Day." And who can disagree with the sentiment expressed by the seventeenth century Sindhi writer Tahir ibn Hasan "Everyone, who lives through the Water of Life of the pen, will not die, but remain alive as long as life exists."

Arabic is the language of Islamic scripture -- the Holy Quran. Arabic was also since the seventh century the language of law, philosophy, science and theology. According to Bernard Lewis in 'Islam and the West,' Arabic was "a classical language, the medium of a body of literary, philosophic, and scientific writing which was regarded as exemplary and authoritative not only by the Arabs themselves but by other Muslim peoples; a practical language, widely used in government, society, and commerce. It was thus the equivalent in the medieval Islamic world of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew in the West..."

Arthur Goldschmidt Jr in 'A Concise History of the Middle East' has recognised the primacy of the Arabic language. He argues that "... Arabic civilisation, emphasizes the importance of Arabic in the development of the culture. Not only because of its prestige as the language of the Quran and of the conquering elite, but also because of its capacity for assimilating new things and ideas, Arabic became the almost universal language of arts, sciences, and letters between 750 and 1250."

The paramount prominence of the art of writing in Islamic arts cannot be over-emphasized. In addition to highly aesthetic and religious role of calligraphy, another perspective is presented in 'Islamic Art and Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait'. "Thus the extraordinary coincidence of the needs of a faith revealed and transmitted through words and of a state trying to hold together a huge empire with very diverse people speaking many languages found its most consistent expression in an Arabic script becoming identified with Islam wherever it occurred." Arabic became the lingua franca of a vast and diverse empire.

The art of the book included bookbinding -- including gilded leather book covers, illustration, illumination and calligraphy. It was through the medium of calligraphy that the sacred words of the Holy Quran were copied and handed down from generation to generation. Different forms of calligraphy developed over time: Ghorab, Kufic, Naskh, Nastaliq and Thulth. Herate and Shiraz (Iran) were major schools of the highly developed and appreciated art of calligraphy. In 'Calligraphy and Islamic Culture' Annemarie Schimmel, a German authority on Islamic calligraphy notes "The Timurid masters in Samarqand and Herat and the Safavid architects in Isfahan and elsewhere invented delightful ornaments consisting of the names of God, His Prophet, and the First Imam 'Ali' or of pious formulas, which were inserted in colorful tiles in the overall pattern of vaults, entrances, and domes... Cursive epigraphy reached its apex in the inscriptions on mosques and minarets. The use of tiles enabled the artists to produce highly intricate, radiant inscriptions of flawless beauty; here, Timurids and Safavids found unsurpassable solutions." One has only to see the sublimely beautiful mosques in Esfahan and Yazd in Iran or Samarkand in Uzbekistan or Hanifah mosque in Baghdad to concur with Schimmel. The Herate school of calligraphy is credited with the formation of the Esfahan school that prospered under Shah Abbas I. The Reza Abbasi Museum in Tehran has an extensive collection of calligraphic works by masters of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries.

Given the absence of reproduction of the human form in Islamic art, floral and geometric patterns were designed to achieve levels of immense complexity and beauty. According to Peter Mansfield in his elaborate study of 'The Arabs', Islamic art tended towards the elaborate development of abstract ornament -- the delicate geometric patterns which can be seen at their finest in the mosques and palaces of India, Persia, Egypt or Andalusia. The Arabic script itself, usually in the form of Quranic quotations, was incorporated into the designs to achieve at its best an effect of exquisite harmony. "The principles of geometry and rhythm appear in repeated pattern in various media; stone, leather, brass, wood, paper, tiles, bronze and marble."

The art of illumination of books is an ornamental painting using gold. Early Qurans were plain in format; gradually illuminated till they reached heights of perfection. Many manuscripts have splendidly illuminated margins representing animals, birds and floral scrolls. Various geometric patterns, sometimes interlaced were devised. The format could be vertical, horizontal, circular or star-like in format. Favourite colours were gold, red and blue. Tinted paper in pale pink, pale gold or deep cream added to the enchantment of the page. An exquisite all-over illuminated page of the Holy Quran in Naskh script is on display at the Islamic Art Museum in Tehran. It is signed by Ziya-al-Saltaneh, the daughter of Fathalishola in 1828. Later on, the illuminated art form was transferred to other objects such as textile, painting and tiles. Another masterpiece at the same museum is the Holy Quran in Ghorab script of the fourteenth century. It remains unsigned. There are thirty match-box-sized *separah* (chapters) of the Holy Quran, each chapter is leather bound and the calligraphy is infinitely minuscule. Bernard Lewis declares categorically in 'The World of Islam' that "In each of its four main aspects -- calligraphy, bookbinding, illumination and illustration -- Persian artists reached the peak of perfection."

To be concluded next week

Raana Haider, a writer on global cultural heritage, is the wife of the Ambassador of Bangladesh to Iran