

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. Skilfully 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, 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

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, burkas 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 bird songs 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 pain,
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 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."

Kripalini 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 Baluchistan 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. "Thought 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 is 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 Metalwork' 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 Azizullah Shah Vali. 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 1414-14