

## Alla Ivanchikova: *Imagining Afghanistan: Global Fiction and Film of the 9/11 Wars*

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It is only when you read the conclusion of *Imagining Afghanistan*, Alla Ivanchikova's incisive and perceptive study of Western media's representations of Afghanistan post 9/11, that you realise its author is quietly making a political statement, or plea, regarding neoliberal military-humanitarian involvement in what the West would designate as failed or failing states. She writes "Given the tremendous human costs of a third-world state collapse, which are visible in the history of post-Cold War Afghanistan, one should weigh such costs against the costs of such state's *preservation*" (p.233, author's emphasis).

Ivanchikova ostensibly sets out to track the evolving depiction of Afghanistan and its people in fiction, graphic novels, memoirs and film since the fall of the twin towers. Hollywood movies such as *Lone Survivor* (2013) depicting American military exceptionalism, are conspicuous by their absence. However, this is primarily a book of literary criticism which has the following aims: First, to examine the use of humanitarian imagery to "legitimize a real humanitarian military intervention" (p.12). Second, to bring into view anti-socialist biases and post-Cold War aphasia regarding Afghanistan's socialist history before and after the Soviet intervention in 1979. And finally,

to offer "paths towards alternative imageries" (p.12).

She argues that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 writers and filmmakers portrayed Afghanistan and its people, especially its women, as in need of saving, but the attraction of human rights rhetoric began to wane in the second decade of the 9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as their failures became apparent. Ivanchikova chooses the film *Kandahar* (2001), the play *Homebody/Kabul* (2002) and the novel *The Swallows of Kabul* (2004) to show how Afghanistan is initially depicted "as a cultural wasteland – ruined by decades of incomprehensible war that it appears to have brought upon itself" (p.41) and therefore in need of a Western make-over.

She then looks at the novels of Khaled Hosseini, the most famous being *The Kite Runner* (2003). These present the Soviets as monsters and fail to interrogate the role of the West in fuelling the bloody Soviet-Afghan conflict and its aftermath by arming the violent, and frequently feuding Mujahideen warlords who then replaced the Russians after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Ivanchikova feels it is impossible to understand the present situation in Afghanistan without looking at the legacy of covert Western involvement. She counters the myth

of the bloodless fall of communism by reminding us that the “socialist project, at least in this part of the world, was defeated not by liberal democratic forces, but by ultra-right, extremist forces” (p.135). Texts such as *City of Spies* (2015) by Sorayya Khan and *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) by Nadeem Aslam “perform important work of remembrance and recovery” (p.136).

She then analyses the novels of Kamila Shamsie, Qais Akbar Omar and Zia Haider Rahman that push back against the limitations of post-Cold War humanitarian imagery, which “forge new vocabularies for writing traumatic histories” (p.138) and “document past and ongoing violence without resorting to victimisation” (p.138). These novels also place the history of Afghanistan in the context of other non-Euro-American catastrophes, such as the partition of India.

Ivanchikova suggests alternatives by which the humanitarian crisis of Afghanistan can be witnessed by “decentering the human figure, its temporal scale, and its mode of perception” (p.195). She proposes the terms “earth

witness” or “geo-witness” – a type of witnessing by an ecosystem involving insect perception, deep species memory or as geological traces, “different from both human eye-witnessing and witnessing mediated by technology” (p.192).

Her final chapter “Kabubble” focuses on how Western Media in the second decade of humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan evaluate the motivations, failures and unintended consequences of such interventions. Kabubble, being a place where Kabul is re-imagined as a “paradoxical site of transnational career-building, an inflated economy zone, and as a new kind of ruin” (p.199).

In conclusion, this eloquent and quietly passionate book makes a strong case for revising common post-Cold War and War on Terror narratives, and by doing so undercuts the West’s rationale for further imperialistic interventions in humanitarian catastrophes.

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