

The Creative Launcher

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Title of the Book: *Earth and Ashes*

Author: Atiq Rahimi

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Atiq Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes*: An Appraisal

Contemporary Afghan literature rests upon a rich and versatile heritage of oral and written traditions. Afghanistan has suffered many relentless ordeals since its foundation as a country. In an ambience of tumultuousness since the last three decades, Afghan writers have produced literature in exile. Atiq Rahimi is a prominent literary figure in contemporary Afghani literature. His reputation lies in his writing of war stories and he begins his literary career with his first novel, *Earth and Ashes*. Originally written in Dari (one of the two main languages of Afghanistan, other being Pashto), it has been translated into English by Erdag M. Goknar. Afghan literature, in these two languages, has unfortunately remained marginalized and unstudied. First published in France in 2000, the book received a huge applaud and distinction. Born in 1962 in Kabul, Rahimi fled to Pakistan in 1984 and is in political exile in France. In 2008, he has been awarded France's highest literary prize, the Prix Goncourt for his novel in French and the novel has recently been translated into English as *The Patience Stone*.

In *Earth and Ashes*, a reference has been made to the splendid eleventh-century culturally significant Persian epic, the *Book of Kings* (Shahnama) written by Ferdusi. The mention of the characters like Rostam (Son of Zal), Sohrab (Son of Rostam) and Zohak, the

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tyrant adds charm to the narrative. In the novel, Rahimi makes the story of the armed conflict of Sohrab and Rostam as the framework for narrating the armed conflict in Afghanistan. One of the critics labelled it as “Novel, short story or fable,” while others label it as a Beckettian tale of thwartedness about the old man and his grandchild. It is the story of an exalted magnitude on a small canvas.

The story is set during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan and Rahimi has successfully narrated centuries of Afghan history of three different generations into this short fable. Dastaguir represents the old generation strictly adhering to tradition and culture, Murad represents the second generation of the Mujahedeen (Rahimi’s generation) and the deaf Yassin signifies the future generation which is crippled by the war. The book is poignant and leaves the readers heart-broken. It is a great fable portraying the evils of war and its devastative effects on family, home, culture, and tradition. The novel is a saga of pain and loss.

The novel narrates the story of an old man (Dastaguir), who along with his grandson (Yassin), sits at a deserted landscape amidst dusty roads and large mountains. Dastaguir and Yassin are the only survivors of the Russian bomb attack that wreaked havoc upon the village. The old man is leaning against the iron railings of the bridge in order to reach the Karkar coal mine. They are going to the mine where the old man’s son, the boy’s father (Murad) works in order to tell him what devastation has fallen upon their village and also about the death of all other family members. Murad had left his village to earn money. Dastaguir narrates the story in second person. In order to divert his mind from the horrible memory of the bomb attack, he intentionally busies himself with apples, stones, tobacco, etc. Yassin has been deafened by the attack. The book is written in disconnected paragraphs. Dastaguir’s story is highly pathetic as he has lost everyone in the family, his grandson doesn’t understand anything, and his apprehension of how to narrate the story of the carnage to his son makes him more worried. Rahimi has universalized his short novel by writing the story about the relationships between fathers and sons, and the harsh effects of war upon families.

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The old man feels very much alienated and lonely despite the passionate listener, Mirza Qadir (shopkeeper) and Shahmard, the driver who takes him to the mines.

The lines spoken by the shopkeeper to Dastiguir, “You know, father, sorrow can turn to water and spill from your eyes, or it can sharpen your tongue into a sword, or it can become a time bomb that, one day, will explode and destroy you” are full of poignancy. The first part of the book describes the old man’s wait for Yassin at the roadside, waiting for the ride to take him to his son’s mine and the part second deals with the old man’s journey and his reaching to the mine.

The book is a tragedy where innocent civilians are caught in-between a war spanning decades. The author vividly describes the ambience and landscape of the area. The book is written in beautiful prose. Rahimi reflects the horrors and devastation of war and the bitter experiences of people who survive it. The author aptly makes the shopkeeper say that, “These days the dead are more fortunate than the living. What are we to do? We’re on the eve of destruction. Men have lost all sense of honour.”

The book contains some heart touching quotes describing the atrociousness and horridness of war. “The law of war is the law of the sacrifice. In sacrifice, there is either blood on your throat or on your hands” and “Zaynab continues to run in front of the truck. The dust gradually settles on her white, damp skin. A veil of black dust covers her body. She is no longer naked...” are such soul touching examples. The book carries an autobiographical touch. In the book, the author seems to mourn for his brother who died when Taliban took power in Afghanistan. His own father was like Dastaguir.

The novel contains various symbols and Rahimi has taken the symbols from a collective culture. The apple symbol signifies the first fruit of man and woman (Adam and Eve). The symbol has been used throughout the text as it is the only fruit the old man gives to his grandson. The “naswar” (a kind of tobacco) acts as an anaesthetic for the old man at the time of the pain which attacks him when he remembers his past. It also signifies an ethical code, a tribal honour for the old man. The apple blossom scarf which was gifted to the old

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man by his wife symbolises female chastity and honour. The novel is a memory text which “rethinks” history. Daydreams and hallucinations appear into Dastaguir’s mind, but soon he remembers to forget the horrific past. He intentionally wants to bury it completely. Women in the novel appear as silenced victims and symbols of male honour. Rahimi has literally attempted to portray the real picture of excessive sufferings of Afghan people during the Russian occupation. In the canon of resistance literature, the book is a must read.

Work Cited

Rahimi, Atiq. *Earth and Ashes*. United Kingdom Vintage, 2000. Print.