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Book Reviews

Alla Ivanchikova. *Imagining Afghanistan: Global Fiction and Film of the 9/11 Wars*. Purdue UP, 2019. Pp. 259. US$44.99.

Alla Ivanchikova's *Imagining Afghanistan: Global Fiction and Film of the 9/11 Wars* examines how Afghanistan was imagined in literary and visual texts after the 9/11 attacks and subsequent United States invasion. She convincingly argues that Afghanistan after 9/11 became a testing ground for global forces that reflect the moral defects of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-centric humanitarianism, Cold War logic, America's unwitting contribution to transnational terror, and the damage of wars on human and nonhuman environments. The book's innovative central arguments criticize a NATO-centric view of Afghanistan, which portrays it as a primordial, isolated country, a site of suffering that justifies Western intervention. According to the author's astute definition, such a NATO-centric position views Afghanistan through the lens of Orientalism. This book also innovatively deconstructs the prevalent Western Cold War logic of regarding Afghanistan's problems solely as the outcome of Soviet invasion, which disregards Afghanistan's multifaceted history, including its indigenous socialism before the Soviet invasion and the domestic strife among religious factions that had already devastated the land.

Besides her shrewd criticism of NATO-centric views, Ivanchikova studies several authors' alternatives views of Afghanistan in post-9/11 literature, including the view of Afghanistan as a site of global forces and variable history rather than a site of flattened history that accounts for only recent Taliban rule. Secondly, she re-evaluates the Soviet Union's role in Afghanistan: despite massive casualties, the Soviets did restrain Afghanistan's indigenous theocratic violence and bring about a degree of economic equality and women's liberation. Thirdly, she satirizes how the American invasion and exploitation of Afghanistan was masked as humanitarian intervention. Fourthly, she points out America's responsibility in the Taliban's rise, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the global wars after 9/11, citing the US' support of local religious extremist groups during the Cold War to compete with the Soviet Union for influence in Afghanistan.

Chapter One, "Humanitarian Sublime and the Politics of Pity," responds to Nivi Manchanda's questions in *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge*: "[H]ow is Afghanistan thought about in a way such that it is possible to invade and bomb it?" and "[W]hat are the sources

of authority that sanction the discourses that make that act of invasion permissible and possible in the first place?" (Manchanda 5). To answer these questions, Ivanchikova critiques three works—Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Kandaha* (2001), Yasmina Khadra's novel *The Swallows of Kabul* (2002), and Tony Kushner's acclaimed play *Hombody/Kabul* (2002)—which frame Afghanistan as a site of intense suffering and humanitarian crisis that legitimizes US-led invasion. Ivanchikova insightfully points out the cognitive fallacy of this humanitarian view, which relies on "empathy of distant suffering," "the flattening of Afghan history," and "the medievalization of Afghanistan" (16).

Chapter Two, "Imagining the Soviet: The Faustian Bargain of Khaled Hosseini's Kabul trilogy," brilliantly contrasts Hosseini's best-selling anti-Soviet novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) with M. E. Hirsh's *Kabul* (1986) as well as with Hosseini's subsequent novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2006) and *The Mountains Echoed* (2013). Her comparison reveals the intense anti-Soviet stand of the first book that wins the author success as much as Hosseini's inability in his later books to similarly depict Soviet invasion and Western "salvation."

Chapter Three, "Humanitarian Jihad: Unearthing the Contemporary in the Narrative of the long 1979," examines two novels and a graphic novel: Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), Soraya Khan's *City of Spies* (2015), and Didier Lefèvre's *The Photographer* (2009). These works depict ghost wars orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in its support of jihad against the Soviets, which later led to the empowerment of Islamic extremist groups and the retrogression of women's liberation. In particular, Lefèvre's *The Photographer* uses the graphic novel genre to satirize by cartooning the threatening CIA characters.

Chapter Four, "Witness: Modes of Writing the Disaster," discusses texts by South Asian writers: Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadow* (2009), Qais Akbar Omar's *A Fort of Nine Towers* (2013), and Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* (2014). These works depict Afghanistan as a site of the convergence of multiple global forces, including the USSR, the US, Pakistan, and others. Ivanchikova argues that these texts cogently counteract a NATO-centric humanitarian understanding of Afghanistan through their diverse modes of witness and by shining a light on the slow violence and delayed effects of war caused by the US invasion.

Chapter Five, "The Deep Time of War: Nadeem Aslam and the Aesthetics of the Geologic Turn," turns to deep memory, non-human witness, and geological inscription of the war in Aslam's work, which is an innovative, ecological approach to understand the damage of the war. Such ecological concern

is often missing in criticism on war novels, which leads to silence around and ignorance of the long-term environmental effects of war.

Chapter Six, "The Kabubble: The Humanitarian Community under Scrutiny," studies Nicolas Wild's graphic novel *Kabul Disco* (2009), Kim Barker's memoir *The Taliban Shuffle* (2011), and Tina Fey's comic film *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016). Ivanchikova highlights how these works use comedy to bring into stark relief the limitations of the humanitarian mode of representation: they portray Western humanitarians in Afghanistan as opportunists in their neoliberal competition over diminishing resources in the first world. This chapter is scathing but at times seems to err on the side of the author's sympathy for the Soviet Union over the United States.

Overall, the book is well-researched and richly annotated. Its analysis is well-founded and often brilliant. The author's attention to the long span of Afghan history and the complex global forces that have shaped the country is a strong foundation for her arguments. The book's chapters are well-structured, evolving from critique in Chapters One to Three to alternative visions to the NATO-centric Western humanitarian attitude in Chapters Four to Six.

However, despite offering alternative visions, Ivanchikova's study does not suggest any potential geopolitical solutions through the creative works she examines. Perhaps Afghanistan could make the best of the cross-influence of NATO countries and their indigenous socialism and Soviet socialism to get rid of theocratic violence and strengthen their economy and government without subjugating to any hegemonic vision—whether NATO- or Soviet-influenced. The readers could additionally question whether the author is objective in acknowledging hardly any positive influence of NATO, especially the United States. I also question why Ivanchikova includes only authors writing about Afghanistan from outside the country, who bring their own baggage of interest and political positions, and does not include or compare these views with any writers living in Afghanistan who might speak from an insider's perspective. Only by acknowledging both the benefits and harm of Soviet and NATO influence, as well as the indigenous condition of Afghanistan, can the country's issues be truthfully represented and effectively resolved.

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Works Cited

Manchanda, Nivi. *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge*. Cambridge UP, 2020.