

A Stone's Throw: *The Swallows of Kabul* by Neil Wright

This short but eloquent novel, written by retired Algerian army officer Mohammed Moulessehoul and translated from the French,¹ may well be the messenger of a future literature whose object will be to present, in stark and uncompromising terms, life as it is in the war-torn and oppression-ravaged cultures of the west Asian and Middle Eastern world, a world where dictatorships, warring ethnic groups, fundamentalist religious elements, monolithic invasions, deprivation, barbarism, and harsh climes have combined to reduce humanity to the point of constant suffering and despair. It is a story that might be compared to Voltaire's excoriation of war and religion, *Candide*, but that it does not resort to the anodyne of humor; or to Graham Greene's prophetic critique of American policy in Vietnam, *The Quiet American*, but that it does not allow the grim satisfaction of irony in human destiny, the comeuppance of the ideologue, or the consolation of an indigenous culture that will endure despite the stratagems of ruthless and determined men. Still less does it resemble Joseph Heller's absurd novel *Catch-22*, in which war becomes laughable mainly because it doesn't make sense, a circus of crazed performers whose fatal antics serve to deflect the horrors around them, preventing the total collapse of human consciousness; and yet, there is something in *The Swallows of Kabul*, a beautiful lyric of exhaustion unto death, that is akin to Yossarian's fabulous walk through the bombed ruins of Rome²—something like the "eternal note of sadness" that Matthew Arnold heard on Dover Beach, and Sophocles, perhaps, on the Aegean.

The setting of the story, Kabul under Taliban rule, invites comparison with other historic capital cities devastated by war or oppressive regimes: Jerusalem, Carthage, Tenochtitlan, Moscow, Dresden, Hiroshima, Belgrade, Baghdad. Kabul is introduced as a corpse, a dead polis in a dead land:

The Afghan countryside is nothing but battlefields, expanses of sand, and cemeteries. Artillery exchanges shatter prayers, wolves howl at the moon every night, and the wind, when it breathes, mingles beggars' laments with the croaking of crows. Everything appears charred, fossilized, blasted by some unspeakable spell. Erosion grinds away with complete impunity, scratching, rasping, peeling, cobbling the necrotic soil, erecting monuments to its own calm power. Then, without warning, at the foot of mountains singed bare by the breath of raging battles, rises Kabul, or rather, what's left of it: a city in an advanced stage of decomposition. (1-2)

It is here, in a place where “*Nothing will ever be the same again*” (2) that the story occurs, “like the water lily that blooms in a stagnant swamp” (3).

The tale opens upon an event that has become both a symbol and an archetype in world history: the stoning of a woman. On the surface, it is a moral statement, the righteous visitation of divine wrath upon the demonic, in this case upon a prostitute³; but the prostitute is really a stand-in for women in general, since the Taliban regard women as the archetype of sin, depravity incarnate which must be covered by the burqa and ritually exterminated by the purifying act of stoning to death. Hence the mullah rallies the crowd by exhorting them in the name of God, converting murder into a vision of retribution:

He stretches out an arm like a sword toward the mummy. “This woman knew exactly what she was doing. The intoxication of lust turned her away from the path of the Lord. Today the Lord turns His back on her. She has no right to His mercy, no right to the pity of the faithful. She has lived in dishonor; so shall she die.” (13-14)

The “swallows of Kabul” are in fact the women of Kabul, dressed in their light blue burqas.⁴ They are like beautiful birds, but in a stark reversal of terms they have been cast as the embodiment of evil in Taliban Kabul. The author continually asserts, through his description of the city and its environs, that everything has been reversed in Kabul: streets once teeming with small markets and shops are now empty; colorful gardens have shriveled to dust; laughter and small talk have become anxious sighs and frightened whispering; couples who strolled the city have become Taliban policemen wielding sticks and knives. The reversal is complete and irretrievable. There will be no future, no resurrection of the good, the healthy, the true. The city and its soil are “necrotic,” and “*Nothing will ever be the same again.*”

On this day, at this event, two principal characters are present: Atiq Shaukat, the sickened and reluctant jailor who has to bring the prostitute to be stoned, and Mohsen Ramat, a former university student, now out of work and virtually in hiding, who despises the Taliban and normally shuns such spectacles. But today Mohsen falls under the spell of the crowd. Weakened by years of oppression, by the physical and moral decay of the city, by idleness and by the gradual starvation of his soul, he picks up three stones and hurls them at the helpless woman. One of them strikes her in the head, and “he sees a red stain blossom at the spot where his stone has struck her” (14).

The story proceeds from the spiritual and emotional impact of this woman’s death upon Atiq and Mohsen and their wives, Musarrat and Zunaira. A twofold dialectic ensues: first the conflict of husband and wife for both couples, then the tragic agon of the two wives, as they move to counter the impasse of Taliban rule and the murder of women in Kabul.

Musarrat, wife of the jailor Atiq, is an invalid, in the terminal stage of cancer and soon to die of the disease. Atiq hates to return to his bare and funereal home, but he does so dutifully to take care of Musarrat. He also hates to go to the jail, where he must periodically care for the women who will be stoned. Thus his work life and home life mirror each other as he relentlessly bears the burden of feminine distress and death, on the home front from disease, on the job from the cancer of Taliban rule. Atiq gets upset with his wife and they often quarrel.⁵ Today she has arisen from her bed to clean the house, and Atiq scolds her for expending her energy. She will have

a relapse, he argues, and it will go even harder for him, taking care of her. Musarrat answers that she is only trying to do her duty as a wife. This argument has nothing to do with Musarrat's exertions. Atiq and Musarrat suffer from chronic dysfunction in the face of incurable disease, and Atiq is near despair over her hopeless condition. The condition of his female prisoners is the same, and he cannot help them either. The author presents their dead end situation as an existential black hole. Faith, prayers, the usual religious amenities, are all useless. Religion, even *genuine* Islam, has no answer for this malaise. Even if it had, it would not be alive in the dry and desiccated world of Kabul.⁶

Mohsen and Zunaira are a younger couple, both former university students and both suppressed and prevented from the fulfillment of their careers. They represent the lost hope of the future, but at least they still have each other; they talk privately, they make love, they keep furtive distance from the Taliban; they live with and for each other. But on this day, Mohsen makes a second fatal mistake: he tells Zunaira of his participation in the stoning of the woman. We need to understand this confession. Of course, it is expiatory; Mohsen cannot live alone with what he has done, so he must share his sin with Zunaira, who alone could forgive him. What frightens Mohsen most, though, is his loss of self, his surrender to the darkness of the common mob, led by the old mullah. Mohsen must tell Zunaira in order to recover his very self, his soul. Thus he has no choice, and we cannot fault him for simply being unwise or self-righteous. His very survival as a human being, a man of good faith and honor, depends upon Zunaira's response.

Zunaira's response is the turning point of the narrative. We might expect that she will be shocked by what Mohsen has done yet forgive him, for what can he do without her forgiveness? But Zunaira, horrified by his confession, refuses to forgive him. She withdraws into a private realm of consciousness which Mohsen cannot fathom or penetrate. As the days pass, Mohsen becomes desperate. One day when they go out walking, together in flesh but distant in spirit, they are detained by the Taliban, who force Zunaira to stand waiting in the midday sun while Mohsen attends a propaganda sermon in a nearby mosque.⁷ Mohsen is humiliated, emasculated, and frantic over his wife's welfare, but there is nothing he can do. Zunaira, convinced that her husband is no longer a man, makes her final decision. She dons her burqa, now the symbol of retreat into the female psyche, and refuses to allow Mohsen to see her. This blue swallow is now aloft, remote, unreachable, in some strange sense safe, as she converts the despised burqa from the sign of sin and nonbeing to the emblem of unassailable, immutable virtue.

Mohsen declines into near insanity. His madness matches that of other men of Kabul—the mesmerized veterans of the Russian war who gather on the street to show their wounds and retell their fantastic war stories; the decent old mullah Nazeesh who keeps threatening to run away from Kabul; the ruthless Abdul Jabbar Qassim who stages the executions for the Taliban, a man without a heart. Without some inner resource, some measure of his soul, man is but a beast, a killer, incapable of resistance to evil. Mohsen can no longer survive as the witness of his own degradation, cannot minister to himself; he needs Zunaira and he confronts her violently in their home. Her final decision is judicial, a decree from the bottom of her heart:

Zunaira springs away from the wall and stands very close to him, thrusting her head forward so that her nose practically grazes his face. Her anger is so intense that her veil trembles before her agitated breathing. "I don't ever want to see you again, Mohsen Ramat!" (129)

Shattered and amazed by this pronouncement, cast into utter darkness, Mohsen weeps, pounds the wall with his fist, and tries futilely to assert his male privilege: "I forbid you to say that! I forbid it!" (130). But Zunaira is steadfast, impervious to Mohsen's male authority: "*I don't ever want to see you again, Mohsen Ramat!*" she repeats, hammering the words home, stressing every one." (130).

A third time she utters her decree, remindful of the Islamic tradition that a man may divorce his wife by saying so three times. Armed with authentic virtue and divine indignation, Zunaira completely reverses the priority of man and consigns Mohsen to oblivion. When he attempts to tear off her now triumphant burqa, he stumbles, falls, breaks his neck and dies.

The denouement of the novel is a sequel to the tragedy of Mohsen and Zunaira. In a moral wasteland, a world where all authority is evil and where the forms of religion are usurped and misused, the only hope lies in individual acts of love and mercy. These acts, collectively, are what make this story "the water lily that blooms in a stagnant swamp" (3). Zunaira's rejection of Mohsen appears at first to be simple revulsion, the predictable feminine response to male atrocity.⁸ But later, when Zunaira is brought to jail, charged with the murder of her husband, she tells Atiq that Mohsen was a good man, even a "marvelous" man, and that they had loved each other deeply (155). I do not think that Zunaira refers merely to their idyllic moments; it is apparent that she means she loved even the Mohsen who threw the stone, who had long been falling apart in front of her, and who wept, pleaded, and struggled with her in the end. Her refusal to forgive him forced him to be responsible for what he had done, to become a man again. It meant that she would sacrifice him, live without him, in order to restore him, even though it might destroy him. Any man, even a Mohsen, can be subverted by evil authority, reduced to a predator in the ravaging of the pack. Zunaira condemns Mohsen to either throw off his wolfish subservience or die trying. Mohsen dies before he can even try, but Zunaira holds him to a true standard of virtue. Her exile of Mohsen is an act of love.⁹

The final act of the tragedy belongs to Musarrat, Atiq's dying wife. When Atiq shares his obsession with Zunaira, echoing Mohsen's confession to his wife of the stoning incident, we might expect Musarrat to feel disgust or jealousy. Her husband, smitten by the beauty of Zunaira, wants to save her, to keep her in his heart, perhaps even to marry her. He is convinced of her innocence; he cannot sleep or eat; he cannot think or speak of anything else. But again we are surprised by the reaction of the wife. Musarrat tells Atiq that she is thrilled by his ardor for Zunaira, that he must save her, and that she is delivered from despair by the awakening of his heart:

"I think you're fabulous, Atiq. . . . After more than twenty years of marriage, at last you reveal the poet who's been hiding inside you. You can't imagine how happy I am to know that you're capable of speaking from your heart. Generally, you avoid such words as though they were pools of vomit. Atiq, the man with the eternal frown, the man who could walk past a gold coin without deigning to notice it, this man has tender feelings? That doesn't simply amuse me; it revives me. I'd like to kiss the feet of the woman who's awakened such sensitivity in you in the course of a single night. She must be a saint." (151)

It is but a short leap of imagination to the solution that Musarrat will propose: she will take Zunaira's place in the jail and go to death in her stead. Does she do this for Atiq, as the final spousal duty, or does she do it for Zunaira, as one woman to another, preserving the healthy life at the merciful expense of the dying? Perhaps it is for both, and for herself as well, since her suffering is extreme. Again, it is the wife whose fatal act of love redeems the time.

In spite of the redemptive gifts of Zunaira and Musarrat, the close of the story is anything but happy. Zunaira tries to refuse Musarrat's gift of mercy. She does not see any hope and would prefer to be executed herself. When Atiq says, "I won't let them kill you," she replies, "We've already been killed, all of us. It happened so long ago, we've forgotten it" (164). But Musarrat holds the last card, and she plays it deftly. Abdul Jabbar and his guards never know the difference, because the burqa conceals Musarrat's identity. The burqa, first a mark of sin, then a badge of honor, finally evokes the mystery of female identity, the secret souls of women, the Eternal Feminine that men long for but can *never possess*. Musarrat dies swiftly, a bullet to her brain, as Atiq looks on in horror. Zunaira disappears in the crowd, liberated to life in death, bereft of all save her memories of Mohsen and her terrible consciousness of nonbeing—a fourth and final significance of the burqa. Atiq roams the streets in dementia, wildly, in search of Zunaira, tearing off the burqas of all the women he sees:

Soon the scandalized crowd fans out to contain him. The women scatter, screaming; he manages to seize a few, tears their clothes, lifts their heads by the hair. The cudgel is followed by whips, and these by fists and feet. The men who have been "dishonored" trample their women to get at the madman. (195)

Atiq and Mohsen die pathetically. They are not tragic heroes because they are not Promethean. They cannot withstand the assault of the eagle, the ripping out of their innards, the loss of their souls. They are hollow men; they fail. The tragic figures of this water lily tale are Zunaira and Musarrat. They disappear never to be found, known, violated, analyzed, exposed. They fly away, the swallows of Kabul, in their sacred garb, burqa, under cover, "as unfathomable as the secrets of the night" (195).

Today the Taliban no longer rule in Kabul, but they are not far away. There has been no sea-change in Afghanistan, only a shift, probably temporary, in the balance of powers as America enters with military forces, economic aid, democratic rhetoric, and oil pipeline dreams of glory. Kabul, like Yossarian's smoldering Rome, will be rebuilt, but all the heroic materialism of modernity cannot erase the tragedy of history, or prevent it from it recurring, borne as it is by the tidal rhythms of human oppression, greed, and evil. Perhaps this is really why Mohammed Moulessehoul, retired Algerian military officer, chose to write this book under the *nom de plume* of a woman, Yasmina Khadra, in the hope of a world not doomed by the follies and vanities of men, a world redeemed by its *anima*, by the graceful ascent of its swallows.¹⁰

Endnotes

1. Khadra, Yasmina. *The Swallows of Kabul*. Trans. John Cullen. New York: Doubleday, 2004. The original, *Les Hirondelles de Kaboul*, was published in Paris in 2002 by Julliard Press. Yasmina Khadra is the female *nom de plume* of Mohammed Moulessehoul.

2. *Catch-22* is the satirical masterpiece of Joseph Heller, the story of the Allied air campaign in Italy and Captain Yossarian, a U. S. Army pilot who is trying to get out of the war because it is insane. His midnight journey on foot through the ruins of Rome is one of the classic *tours de force* of modern literature, a vision of the waste land of modern warfare, an inferno in which the

innocent suffer and die horribly, the nadir of civilization. One might also compare Hiroshima as described in Ibuse's *Black Rain (Kuroi Ame)*, a landscape of charred ruins, of people suddenly turned to charcoal statues frozen in mid-act, or slowly cooked alive by radiation sickness.

3. The stoning of the prostitute, of course, calls to mind the story of the "woman taken in adultery," John 8: 1-11. This story, regarded as an addition to the original text in the Oxford Annotated Bible, dramatically countermands the Mosaic law, according to which the woman must be stoned. But there is no Jesus in Kabul to help Atiq's doomed prisoners.

4. The text itself comments on the metaphor of the blue-clad women as swallows. In most Islamic countries the burqa, if it is worn at all, is black. Only in Afghanistan is the blue burqa the standard dress.

5. In a sense, this novel is a domestic tragedy. The principal dialogues are those that occur between man and wife in the privacy of their home. The dynamics of the marital relation in an Islamic household are therefore revealed in a time of desperate crisis. This crisis is much more intense, however, than with the marital ennui or the adultery motif of Western literature. Both these couples are undermined by sheer oppression despite their dedication to one another, though we find that Musarrat and Atiq have lived for many years in emotional and spiritual estrangement due to their own idiosyncrasies. Mohsen and Zunaira are simply worn down by their inability *to be*.

6. Kabul is a classic modern waste land and could be likened to Eliot's seminal urban waste land, which is also by literary tradition and multiple layers of association derived from the legend of the Fisher King, in which the spiritual demise of the kingdom is due to the wound or sexual deficiency of the king. The dialectic of the inner life and the public life informs the narrative: a diseased polis leads to sick and dying marriages. Neither couple in this story has a child.

7. The sermon in the mosque, delivered by the "elephantine and domineering" Mullah Bashir, is a radical Islamic diatribe against the West: "The West is finished, it's over and done with, its rising stench smothers the ozone layer. It is a world of lies. What you may think you discern in it is nothing but an illusion, an absurd, insubstantial phantom collapsed amid the rubble of its own flimsiness" (95). It is surprising that the Mullah should mention the ozone layer; he must have spent some time in Paris. But one cannot escape the realization that Western literature has said the same thing about the West for over a hundred years. One might say it began with the works of Charles Dickens. Perhaps it is different when one is critiquing one's own culture; perhaps one has the right to self-deprecate. Perhaps one even has the obligation. Oswald Spengler would have agreed with the Mullah about the cultural decline of the West, and Jonathan Edwards might have agreed with his metaphysics. I wonder whether the author assumes the Mullah's sermon to be taken as absurd, or whether he simply affords the counter-theme its moment in the dialectic.

8. In Tolstoy's story *Hadji Murat*, Marya Dmitrievna, a young Russian girl who is mistress to an officer, reacts in horror and disgust when the Cossacks bring back the severed head of the Chechen Muslim leader Hadji Murat, who had treated Marya with courtesy and kindness: "You are just a lot of butchers. You make me sick. Butchers, that's what you are!" (*Master and Man and Other Stories*, Penguin Classics, 262) Tolstoy reminds us that virtually all men at war become butchers. It is hard not to, and only exceptional men or women do not.

9. Does Zunaira know that her rejection of Mohsen is an act of love? I do not think so. I believe that her renunciation of him is a completely conscious act without any awareness of its unconscious origins. She later regrets what she has done and holds herself responsible for his untimely death; but she is then reacting to the death, not to the man whom she loved and who is now lost in the final and most terrible way. She had to do it; she would do it again, in eternal recurrence.

10. The note on the author at the end of the book stipulates that he took the female *nom de plume* to avoid censorship in France, as he had been an Algerian officer; but even if true, this reason does not scratch the surface psychologically.