

The traditional setup of political upheavals is ripe with corruption, hypocrisy and the degeneration of human civilization. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan also bears witness to certain events that left the country distraught with cries of agony. The Taliban originally created as Mujahideen to drive out the Soviet Forces, which invaded Afghanistan in 1973 under the pretense of restoring the country's crumbling economy, although successful in its feat, soon took a rather dark turn. The people who were once seen as saviors of Afghanistan, lifted their veil and unleashed the demon within, and I quote "The Afghan sky, under which the most beautiful idylls on Earth were woven, grew suddenly dark with armored predators; its azure limpidity was streaked with powder trails.... War had arrived. In fact, it just found itself a homeland." (Pg-12)

This paper is an attempt to examine the lives of people buried under the ruins of their country; a country that now exists in fragments of their memory through Yasmina Khadra's novel, *The Swallows of Kabul*. The novel explores the gradual destruction of millions of lives that once thrived in a free country, but were robbed of their will to live through the misappropriation of the *Sharia* and ruthless killing of those who refused or failed to adhere to their ideals of religious and political beliefs. It deals with the issues of violence and trauma caused during the reign of Taliban over Afghanistan and brings forth the agonies of oppression and becomes an indictment of politics behind war/invasion and its oppressive modus operandi.

Unlike, the Taliban, the characters betray themselves which results in their gradual destruction and condemning them to a life in hell on earth. The characters are trapped within the walls of their minds; a never-ending maze that refuses to offer them any respite.

While the centralized power is evil, the characters aren't evil, per se. They have shades of gray but it is important to understand that their conscience and psyche have been

deeply affected by the circumstances and the times they are living in. Mohsen Ramat, a university graduate who aspired to be a diplomat, Zunaira who wanted to be a magistrate and succeeded in becoming one, but as she says and I quote “dismissed by the obscurantists without a hearing and without a compensation.”(Ch-6; Pg-77), which demonstrates how an ambitious, modest, feminist Zunaira’s identity is canceled out by the conservative and fundamentalist Taliban, and Atiq Shaukat who has internalized the ‘wretchedness of his profession’ and his involvement with deaths of innocents can be seen somewhat as a moral flaw. We have characters who are leading a life which even when thought about sends shivers down our spine. But one thing that is common amongst all of them is that none of these characters is inherently evil.

Mohsen Ramat, whose identity is now fragmented, was looking forward to a diplomatic career, just before the Taliban rolled in. When a student he is described as a “straightforward, decent, moderately religious man”.The man has changed drastically and that is because the society conditioned him to think in a certain way and I quote “**The** thoroughgoing upheaval provoked by the Taliban completely unsettled him. Mohsen’s former points have all disappeared, and he hasn’t got the strength to invent any new ones.”(Ch-6, Pg-79) The dichotomy of Mohsen’s character pre and post-Taliban brings out how we all have an evil side buried within us which perhaps overpowers when we are victimized because Mohsen hates public executions and still, it’s at one such execution that his iniquitous side comes out. It is there that he joins the frenzied crowd and ends up throwing three stones at an adulteress. It is perhaps at only this point in time that Mohsen feels he has some power over the other and he ceases what at the time seemed like an opportunity but immediately regrets it. His guilt won’t leave him alone until he confesses to someone what he has done. His regret is evident from what he says and I quote “**I must** have gone mad Zunaira. How could I dare

to do such a thing?... I don't have any confidence in **the man I've become.**"(Ch-3; Pg-37)

It's from Mohsen's character that we can vividly see how the trauma which violence inflicts on your psyche is such that you turn into someone you would have despised if the times were "normal".

But times are worse than ever and the credit for this goes to the Taliban, the same Taliban which when came in were thought of as harbingers of peace and people thought of them as progressive thinking, liberal intellectuals. But as they say "Hope is a strange thing." Their ideology of converting Afghanistan into a nation-state for the Pashtuns, the act of imposing "Sharia", making '*burqa*' a mandate for women and the 1998 Hazara massacre at Mazar-i-Sharif and many other instances to prove what kind of ultraconservative and orthodox mindset they carried and how they converted Afghanistan into a living hell, which is portrayed vividly in the novel. Taliban was what we may call 'sheep in wolf's clothing'. The Taliban is what has made the Afghan countryside to be as the author says and I quote "Nothing but battlefields, expanses of sand and cemeteries."

We have another character whose pragmatic approach to his job and complying with Taliban's ideology comes across as a moral failing. Yes, Atiq Shaukat, the jailer is a character whose despair is evident from his face. Mirza Shah says and I quote "In fact, it's the first thing one notices about you. As soon as I saw you, I said to myself, "Tsk, tsk! That poor devil Atiq, all is not well with him." Years of torment and deprivation have shaken Atiq's faith in the mullahs and their promises. His job as a jailer requires him to kill his conscience every day and swear allegiance to the Taliban. He is thought of as someone who is I quote "losing his mind" and by the end of the novel, he actually does. Mirza Shah tells him to divorce his dying wife but he thinks of what would happen to her if he does that and chooses not to but in all his conversations with Musarrat his tone is very condescending. The

reader is made to believe that it is only out of gratitude that he is living with her. Also, Atiq knows that most of his prisoners who are stoned, or shot dead or are hanged are innocent and I quote “Which proves that there are some things one can never get used to. I am angry at myself, and I am angry at the universe.”(Ch-14: Pg-167) and it is only when Zunaira becomes his prisoner and he falls in love with her that Atiq’s conscience awakens. It is only now that he begins to reflect upon how those who serve justice are themselves unscrupulous and wicked and I quote “He embodies the common evil, and he will die of it. They will all die of it, without exception.”(Pg-160: Ch-13) But we can’t judge Atiq too harshly. His conditions and circumstances alleviate his culpability and he does what the state asks of him.

Sadly enough, it's not only Mohsen Ramat and Atiq Shaukat whose life has been altered by the Taliban rule. Mohsen’s wife Zunaira is immensely affected by what all is happening around her. Zunaira Ramat, a former lawyer, who worked for the rights of women now prefers to stay in the confines of her home. She can no longer roam in the streets of Kabul without an escort or unveiled and in the world, she is living in maybe only the Taliban can roam in the streets freely with their whips. Her intolerance for what is happening around us, her steadfast refusal to wear a *burqa* saying “It cancels my face and takes away my identity and turns me into an object.” but giving in to her husband’s insistence on going out shows the aspect of empathy in her character and her love for him. But what happens when they go out fills her with indignation and turns her completely against Mohsen and their marriage collapses. She ends up killing her husband accidentally and escapes knowingly that someone else has sacrificed their life for her. But we can’t judge Zunaira too harshly either. The question arises did she have any other choice?

The conditions in Kabul demand the suspension of ethical rules and modifying customary judgments while evaluating the characters. It is only if we look at the characters

with empathy, think of the human impulses we all tend to have and be somewhat compassionate that we can have a better understanding of the world they are living in and the trauma inflicted upon them. And it is only then that we can think that perhaps there is a scope of redemption for them. But that is one thing, we can forgive these people because we have only read about them but would it be possible for the people of Afghanistan to forgive the Taliban if they would ask their actions to be redeemed?