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Writing in a Country at War

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Panel: Writing in a Country at War. What are a writer's duties, privileges and obligations when his or her country is at war?

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Writing in a country at war

By Mujib Mehrdad (Afghanistan)

Writing in eternal battlefields

Afghanistan is country of wars. It has been the center of great empires under the Kushans, Ghaznavids, Ghorids, Timurids, Durrani dynasties and so on... in fact, the Silk Road passed through it. It was not only merchants who were passing through but also empires, extending from one part of the world to another. For example, Alexander the Great founded cities and military bases in Afghanistan, where he stayed for many years, while the attacks by Genghis Khan in the 13th Century resulted in widespread killings, including of Attar of Nishapur, Rumi's spiritual mentor.

Then, in the 19th century Russia and Britain attempted to install the Durrani rulers as their own puppets, and in the 20th century Afghanistan was once again a battlefield during the Cold War. Not long after, the Taliban emerged from Cold War policies, leading to further violence, including the killing of another poet, Qahar Asi, by a rocket in Kabul. All this – coupled with Afghanistan's ethnic and language diversity, which were revealed and exacerbated by the civil war of the 1990s – paved the way for neighboring countries to interfere. War in Afghanistan has always been a proxy war, never our war.

War

Two leaders sleep in two beds

Two soldiers exhausted in two trenches

Two leaders laughing at the negotiating table

Two flags on the grave of two soldiers¹

War is the result of the collapse of moral order. But sometimes I think that when we become violent we return to our origins. War is part of mankind's being, and his will to war is something conscious. Human beings are responsible for the circumstances they or others live in. It is why we all play parts in wars, just as Sartre blamed himself for the Second World War. This illustrates how will to war is the other side of the will to live, with greed as a constant motivator. Throughout history every conqueror has sought wealth for their empire in order to prove their supremacy over all others. The history of mankind is therefore the history of war. Today, mankind remains prisoner to this greed, with the only change being in the way wars are portrayed.

War and literature

Literature is produced in times of both peace and war. War dramatizes life, and these sad dramas are all about mankind's quest for basic rights. War gives literature a special taste and quality, because war

¹ Samy Hemed

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creates special human beings: it destroys the bodies made by God and it creates its own deformed or reformed bodies, giving birth to another kind of behavior.

War has permanent consequences. This is why our behavior today is linked to what happened to our ancestors during the Genghis Khan invasions: our bodies are new but our souls belong to the past.

Writers' positions

Mankind is shameful

With his epics

Even his defense is shameful

For he inevitably shoots at someone

Who has inevitably invaded

Writers take positions in war. This can be for or against war. Writers in the first position totally reject the war and bear witness to its destructive force. This is known as anti-war or peace literature. The other angle is praising war. In this context, war relates to values such as patriotism and the struggle for freedom. In this case, literature is instrumental to the stimulation of the masses.

Resistance poetry can be against war or in praise of war, the latter changing it into a holy war through poetry or fiction. Another kind of resistance literature encourages civil action and struggle against censorship within an autocratic government. But there are also writers who justify government brutality in war. In Afghanistan in the 80s, some poets justified mass killings by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan in the name of preserving marxist-leninist revolutionary values. For them, literature was like an instrument of propaganda and publicity.

The aesthetic effect of war

Two quivering grenades on your breast

How beautiful is your suicide bra²

War creates unique poetry because writers in countries experiencing war are under unique emotional circumstances; they forget about aesthetics. They use poetry as a call to sacrifice and courage. In war, literature also finds itself in the position of recording events, a sort of journalistic function. This widens the distance between literature and creativity. For example in Afghanistan in the 80s, a group of writers who were working to bring down the Marxist government from within came out with a genre I call metaphor poetry. Their poetry was very complicated and full of symbols and signs that only a small

² Shareef Saidi

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circle of writers could understand. It was the poetry of a minority for a minority. They used too many symbols to circumvent censorship and survive. The poets working for the government, those fighting the government and those exiled in Pakistan all produced propaganda literature during that time. Even during the Taliban regime, when they would execute people or cut off their hands, poets were producing work that was full of violence and religious rhetoric.

The poetry produced after the Taliban fell is my generation's poetry. A generation born from the womb of war and raised in the ruins. A generation that abandoned the weapons of the civil war and took up the pen instead.

Even our romantic poems are full of images of war. This is because we have been witness to the deaths of our family members, our childhood friends.