

Earth and Ashes

■ A review By Nadia Ali Maiwandi

We meet Dastaguir and his grandson, Yassin, by the side of the road, dirty, sullen, and exhausted. They have a bundle of sour apples tied in a scarf, the tattered clothes on their backs and each other. One is an old man, grief-stricken and hardly able to think straight; the other screams and wonders why the world has lost its sound. These two are the only survivors of a village-levelling Soviet bombing in Atiq Rahimi's debut novel, *Earth and Ashes*.

Dastaguir left the decimated village with his grandson to deliver the news to his son, Yassin's father, who works in a nearby mine. As they wait out the morning for a passing car, the old man is haunted with flashbacks of the bombings, jarring dreams, and hallucinations. Dastaguir's solitude cripples him with thoughts of powerlessness, immense grief, and survivor's guilt. He fears what he has come to tell his son will kill him-- that his wife, mother, and brother have been slain, and Yassin, his only child, has become deaf from the bombings.

In a time where Afghanistan's vast history amounts to six years of Taliban rule in the eyes of the world, Rahimi takes us back 10 or 15 years earlier to the Soviet invasion. History shows the decade of Soviet occupation is one of appalling consequences-- 1.5 million Afghans dead, and millions more fled the country, making Afghans the largest population of refugees in the world for the next 25 years. Recent images of bearded men with black turbans, throngs of women silenced in sky-blue chadaris (burqas), and the attacks of 9/11 have obscured Afghanistan's past. Victim has become perpetrator in the post-9/11 world-- "freedom fighter" is now "warlord," "rebel" now "terrorist." As Rahimi says, we cannot understand Afghanistan's Taliban or civil war eras without first understanding its predecessors and the terror done to the Afghan people.

Soviet soldiers enter the small community of Abqul, Dastaguir's village, to forcefully seize boys and young men for war. The boys in the village flee or hide,

and the military promptly takes to looting the homes. Subsequently, Mujahideen from a neighbouring village come to Abqul and ambush the soldiers. Seeking bloody vengeance, the Soviets return with fighting jets and heavy armoury and wipe out the entire village, except for our two lone survivors who manage to survive.

Earth and Ashes, originally *Khakestar-o-Khak* and written in Dari, explores the aftermath of war and terror using very few characters and almost no action in real time. Minimalist in style but gripping in its pain, *Earth and Ashes* helps paint a more complete picture of what happened in Afghanistan. The account is a study in grief and its many shapes. Dastaguir's only real company while waiting for the passing car in the desolate surroundings is a shopkeeper, Mirza Qadir, who serves as a voice of reason to the bewildered old man. Mirza explains the effects of sorrow upon hearing Dastaguir's story:

"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...."

The horror is so fresh; Dastaguir concedes to himself that his grief has not yet taken shape.

The author evokes ancient Farsi/Dari poetry in his prose, from the heavy symbolism to his exclusive use of second person. The effect is one that puts a Western reader off balance initially:

You take an apple from the scarf you've tied into a bundle and wipe it on your dusty shirt. The apple just gets dirtier. You put it back in the bundle and pull out another, cleaner one, which you give to your grandson, Yassin, who is sitting next to you, his head resting on your tired arm....

The voice offers an air of surrealism: You don't quite know if the author is placing you in Dastaguir's exhausted old body, or if he's talking directly to the main character and at which point the narrator becomes the character, or takes on the

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knowledge of Nature, Fate, God....

It's a shift that most any creative-writing instructor in the United States will instinctively forbid, yet the shift of narrator, along with the voiceover (another no-no in Western writing), presents another dimension to the story. Knowing Dastaguir in such an intimate way gives war a face that telling a story alone cannot do. As several pages pass, the reader begins to find Rahimi's flow and sees his clever switch of the narrator and audience, which are nearly seamless.

The novel makes subtle commentary on some of the socio-political issues that still plague the country. Women are present only in Dastaguir's dreams, where much of this story takes place. Rahimi explains this shows the patriarchy of Afghan society and how women, who had been gaining rights steadily since the 1950s, found themselves pushed into the background and out of society.

Earth and Ashes adds to today's dialogue of the country's misfortunes. Because of recent headlines that explore Afghanistan's issues with such a microscopic approach, old information has been abandoned. Rahimi's draws his scope back to show us when the atrocities began. It is a chapter in Afghanistan's history that is crucial to understanding the Afghanistan--and the world --of today.

The novel has been translated into 20 languages, winning the 2004 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and top reviews. Rahimi, a documentary filmmaker, crafted this novel with a film in mind. From a book that is so literary, steeped in symbolism, internal dialogue, and poetry of past, it is difficult to imagine it as a film. But it was released with great success, as the film has been a buzz in international film festivals this year, taking home Best Film at Osian Cinefan and Cannes. *Earth and Ashes* will be showing in the United States at various film festivals, although the film has not yet been scheduled for wide release in the U.S./

(Lmar- Aftab)