

Maargir The Snake Charmer

A novel by Bashir Sakhavarz,
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Rs. 195.00

Reviewed by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

Maargir The Snake Charmer, a first novel by Bashir Sakhavarz, a young Afghan poet and literary critic, is an insider's view of Afghanistan in the late 1970's and later. Revolution is in the air: the Russians have a formidable presence, both overt and covert. The forces that later became known all over the world under the collective name of *mujahidin*, and then Taliban toward the end of the civil war after the departure of the Russians, are functioning *sub rosa*, but are slowly gathering their energy for the confrontation that see as inevitable, although the Communists, the 'nationalist' but left-oriented government then, and the 'Revolutionary' government shortly thereafter, are not quite aware of them. Both groups, striving to bring about their own kind of revolution, quietly work on the same raw material: the youth from the middle classes in the cities. This novel is, superficially, the story of two teenage brothers, one of whom becomes a Communist, gains power and prominence after the 'Revolution', the other and the younger one ultimately becomes part of the *mujahidin* who are fast travelling on the road to Talibanism.

There have been many novels about the life and politics in Afghanistan as its tragic and violent story continues to unfold with unabated pace over the last more than four decades. Afghanistan from the 1970's has also engaged the attention of thriller and spy novel writers. Even the well-known Indian-Afghan Sufi Idries Shah wrote his *Kara Kush* in 1986 in the spy-thriller novel mode.

As one reads *Maargir The Snake Charmer*, Khalid Hosseini's two novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* irresistibly come to mind as the nearest paradigms to Bashir Sakhavarz. Both Hosseini and Sakhavarz are insiders, but there is a difference: Sakhavarz looks at the country and its people from below. The forces active there—very nearly all of them destructive and in the game solely for political and economic advantage—are far above; we see

them as they weave and execute their plots, or prosecute their militaristic brutality, or try in their own way to drag Afghanistan into the modern world of the relentless violence of war, the seething whirlpool of westernization, and the tearing apart of the social fabric and the codes of life developed by the Afghans over countless centuries.

Nothing can perhaps match Nadeem Aslam's lyrical and dramatic intensity and the complexity or plurality of effects in *The Wasted Vigil*. Nor is it easy to reproduce the action-filled, murky and suffocating air of the Afghanistan depicted by Hosseini. In *Maargir The Snake Charmer*, the baldness of the narrative style produces its own kind of shock: the characters don't seem to exist in some complex, or even vigorous mode. The plainness of the narrative is in fact a deliberately ironical device: the narrator seems to say that nothing can bring to life the horror and the pity of modern day Afghanistan except narrative detachment as a world rises up and shatters itself.

The people in this novel are puppets, and very insignificant puppets. Their problems are as small as the accounts of their lives, but they assume a near-tragic character as the whirlpool of war and sectarian strife and the play of power rages through their puny existences. Everybody there is driven by their own needs and imperatives. Soviet Russia wants its 'revolution', but actually it wants to play for her own profit the classic game of power and control over Afghanistan; the Arab Shaikh pours money into refugee relief, but also wants half of the money to be used for constructing a *Wahhabi* mosque in refugee camp; the Americans are there first to help defeat Soviet Russia, then later invade Afghanistan out of hubris; Pakistan wants to bring Afghanistan into its sphere of influence, so as to exclude India from there; it also wants American money and American arms to keep coming in for the Generals and the politicians; the warlords want their money and power to increase; the Taliban want to keep out everyone, and keep the women in. There is no one who wants Afghanistan for its people's sake.

Sakhavarz is not exercised about the effects that most novelists writing about contemporary and emotion-charged issues such as Afghanistan would routinely employ. There is no striving after assembling 'facts', or creating scenes full of violent energy or intensity: he is just a storyteller. And this is precisely why he shocks when toward the very end, he reveals himself as some sort of an actant in the drama that we saw unfolding over the previous 200 pages or so:

Long after I had finished writing this book, I wanted to find out what had happened to the people I had talked about...I journeyed back to Afghanistan to try and trace Rahmat, but

could discover nothing.... The last rumour was that he was killed by someone who was both a Mujahid, a government agent and a bandit.

The novel begins with a snake charmer, the traditional healer. He can't really heal anyone, except frighten them with glimpses of the venomous snakes that he keeps in wicker baskets. The novel ends with the snake charmer as a trope for the politician, the war-mongering world power. The world consists of fools and snake charmers. The snake charmer can't deliver anything, but mesmerizes the people into believing that he can. The rest of us are fools, repeatedly cheated and mauled by the *maargir* community.

The novel could do with a little more expert typesetting and a bit of more careful editing. Still, it is worth reading for it is a genuine document, something like Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night*, only cooler, less impassioned.

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