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** The surnames are listed in alphabetical order.*

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BOOK REVIEW

Sharifullah Dorani

The Lone Leopard

S&M Publishing House, July 2022, ISBN: 978-1-7396069-0-9, 436 pp., £19.99/£10.99, hb.

In *The Lone Leopard* – a well-researched, historical fiction that took Dr Sharifullah Dorani “12 years” (Dorani, 2022: 430) to write – we follow Ahmad, a deeply religious young man, through school in Kabul, then as the Russians leave and the Mujahideen take over the family go to Moscow. After a time in Moscow, they pay people traffickers to get them to the UK. Ahmad later returns to Afghanistan to seek a wife. We are taken through the horrors of war and the tribal and religious feuds as it impacts on Ahmad and the people around him, including the woman he loves, the Lone Leopard.

Dorani in his notes says that taking refuge in the basements of his blocks in Makroryan, Kabul, while the Civil War of 1992 continued, he decided (if he made it alive) to write about what ordinary Afghans went through (Dorani, 2022: 430). He did make it alive, and the result is *The Lone Leopard*. His description of the horrors the Afghan people suffered, the pain Ahmad, and I believe, Dorani experienced, grip the reader, and take you there. One can only feel deeply for the people who lived and died through these times.

The Lone Leopard teaches us a great deal about the Afghan Civil War, which took place when the “pro-Communist” Najibullah regime collapsed in April 1992 and the Mujahideen took over Kabul. Turning Shia against Sunni and vice versa, setting Afghanistan’s main ethnic groups of

Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek against each other, the several Mujahideen parties fought each other on the streets of Kabul (Dorani, 2022: 430). The book describes the recent Afghan history, the Civil War in particular, and it does so from the peoples’ perspective. Russia, the US, Pakistan, and the UK have all played their part, but this story is from the ground. Reading *The Lone Leopard* has given me a greater understanding of the tribes and beliefs in that troubled country and insights into Afghanistan’s religious and tribal groups and their power.

The book also introduces the reader to the origin of the conflict, which has led to decades of war in Afghanistan: the arrival of books in Kabul from Afghanistan’s neighbours and beyond. These books attempt to spread ideologies “foreign” to Afghans, including Communism, radical interpretation of Islam or jihadism, excessive liberalism/democracy, nationalism, to name but a few. For Dorani’s protagonist, Ahmad, those “extreme ideologies were tied around us like chains and strangled our values. Sucked our blood like leeches. Demolished our infrastructure like a bulldozer” (Dorani, 2022: 370). And in the power struggle between those “foreign ways of life”, Ahmad continues, he does not know how much more he will suffer, how much more his people will pay, and what will be next for his country (Dorani, 2022: 370).

Dorani's message is clear: the conflict in Afghanistan is fuelled by foreign interference: different countries have conflicting interests in Afghanistan and that has been the leading cause of the war, insecurity and instability. Furthermore, change that is not originated from the within and is dictated from the outside will not work. Unsurprisingly, the Soviet Union and the US failed in Afghanistan.

But there seems to be some sympathy in writing for America's intervention in Afghanistan when it is distinguished from the Soviet Union's invasion of the country because the former's intervention was "authorised" (Dorani, 2022: 309) by the UN. The below passage is another example of the sympathy which equally (and so powerfully) characterises the US experience in Afghanistan:

"A school [girl] runs towards the American. He [the American soldier] shouts, 'Stop, stop,' but she doesn't know what 'stop' means. He fires by her feet. She freezes – her schoolbag drops. The Afghan soldier finds nothing in the backpack but books, notebooks and pens, telling the American she raced because she was late for school. The American collapses, his body trembling, saying, 'Same-age daughter, same-age daughter'. Another American walks out of a Humvee, gives the crying [girl] chocolates, and tells her to rush for her class. He drags his weeping friend in." (Dorani, 2022: 265)

In his recent podcast interview with USSO,ⁱ Dorani speaks about *The Lone Leopard's* intended reader. In addition to the Western one, he had future Afghan generations in mind when writing the novel. Dorani has a message for them (and arguably us) regarding what needs to be done with those imported books and their divisive intention: "These books have destroyed Afghanistan. Throw them away...We all are meant to encourage a feeling of mutual love and respect, not hatred...[God] has created this world for

living; live in it and let others live." (Dorani, 2022: 11)

Described through the excellent writing is the strength a faith can give a true believer, but also how it can be manipulated to make neighbours enemies and individuals suicide bombers. There is a powerful scene in the book where an Afghan intellectual and a Taliban leader discuss Islam. For the Taliban leader, democracy is hypocrisy but for the intellectual, the "origins of democracy" lie in Islam. The intellectual asks the Taliban leader how a mullah would look after a woman in need of a midwife. "Allah would assist her...", the Taliban leader replies. He then accuses the intellectual by saying that, at the invaders' orders, the intellectual preaches democracy and human rights at the expense of "Sharia law *he will rot in hell*" (Dorani, 2022: 335-37).

One cannot help but help to be drawn into this debate. On reflection, we can see the Afghan situation has many features of so many religious wars: Pakistan and India – the Hindu and Buddhist, Ireland – Catholics and Protestants, the Crusades in Europe of the Middle Ages. The list is long and continues. Is religion used as a tool, corrupted, to motivate people to fight for land, resources and power to be held by their leaders? As far as Dorani is concerned, "Islam", "democracy", "human rights", etc., have been used ("as a means, not a goal") for decades by different Afghan parties and their foreign backers to achieve "their ulterior objectives" (Dorani, 2022: 245).

This argument takes us to another powerful (and timely) scene between a conservative Afghan woman and a progressive Afghan girl, the Lone Leopard or Frishta, in which they debate the value of education for women. While they agree that education for women is valuable, the conservative woman adds that she has to be "realistic" as young women need husbands for financial support. Parents won't be around all the time. The best future for young women is to have their *own* homes. The progressive girl replies that they can have their own homes but after they finish

university. But the conservative woman claims that university will take away that opportunity from them because some Afghan families won't marry a young woman who has been to school, let alone university. The progressive girl's mother chastises her daughter, telling her that her views are not for everyone (Dorani, 2022: 33-4).

Dorani in this scene evidently explains that some changes require time, that is, some preconditions must be met before they are introduced, and changes must not be rushed, especially from the outside. In other words, did NATO and the US try (and still do!) to impose changes on societies which were not ready for them; societies that were thousands of miles away from the West; societies that the West had little knowledge of and yet attempted to impose Western culture?

The author does not seem to put all the blame on the shoulders of invaders, though; there is some blame that the locals must also bear. Through the protagonist, Dorani writes that sadly Afghan politicians opened the gates for those foreign ideologies to enter Afghanistan. Except for a few, all Afghan politicians after Daoud Khan have been "shopkeepers", selling what foreign intelligence agencies needed in return for money and power. Ironically, adds the protagonist, they all invoked national interests or Islam for selling their people and country (Dorani, 2022: 370).

In reading *The Lone Leopard* I am reminded of T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*,ⁱⁱ which was later turned into a critically acclaimed movie *The Lawrence of Arabia*. He describes how during 1916-1918 the Western powers, led by Winston Churchill, wanted to secure the oil from the Middle East to support the war effort by taking the territories from the Turks. This was achieved in large part by lying to the Arab nations about the Allies plans and Lawrence's efforts working with the Arab leaders.

"The Arab Revolt had begun on false pretences. To gain the Sherif's help our Cabinet had offered, ... to support the establishment of native governments in

parts of Syria and Mesopotamia, 'saving the interests of our ally, France'. The last modest clause concealed a treaty (kept secret,) by which France, England and Russia agreed to annex some of these promised areas, and to establish their respective spheres of influence over all the rest." (Lawrence, 1997: 266)

At the end of the First World War, and this deception, the Allies divided the Middle East taking little account of the societies in those lands leading to the turmoil that has followed.

As I read *The Lone Leopard* and was reminded of the French, American, British, and Russian attempts to impose their ideas on Afghanistan I could not help but think "Do we never learn?"

The Lone Leopard has taught me a great deal about Afghanistan and, by extension, the region. It has made me realise how little we in the West know about Afghanistan and the Greater Middle East. *The Lone Leopard* is a powerful book that tells a story I will never forget. It is an emotional roller coaster. And it is an eye-opener. The book has the potential to become a classic over time. Owing to its extensive information on recent Afghan history from the locals' perspective, the book can be an ideal choice for university/college courses on Afghanistan, South Asia and even the Greater Middle East.

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ⁱ Dorani S (2022) 017 – Narratives of America in Afghanistan (W/Sharifullah Dorani). USSO.cast, [Online] Available at: <https://ussocast.podbean.com/>.

ⁱⁱ Lawrence T.E. (1997) *Seven pillars of wisdom*. Wordsworth Editions; New edition.

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