Iranian Studies (2023), **56**, 413–428

REVIEWS

Imagining Afghanistan: Global Fiction and Film of the 9/11 Wars. Alla Ivanchikova (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2019). 259 pp. ISBN 9781557538468

Reviewed by Munazza Ebtikar, St. John's College, University of Oxford (mebtikar@gmail.com)

(Received 29 May 2022; revised 9 August 2022; accepted 26 September 2022)

Imagining Afghanistan: Global Fiction and Film of the 9/11 Wars analyzes the written and visual forms of cultural production that take Afghanistan as their object after the US-led intervention in 2001. Alla Ivanchikova describes Afghanistan, having been cast onto the world stage in the 2000s as a "bright object," in line with the work of the object-oriented philosopher Levi R. Bryant. By contrast, Ivanchikova writes, Afghanistan was a "dim object" from 1989 to 2001, when it did not receive the attention of the international community after the Soviet withdrawal. By "dim object," the author refers to the idea that Afghanistan "emitted no light, attracted no attention, and the eyes of the world were not on it" (1).

Ivanchikova's case studies involve fiction and nonfiction cultural production produced during the post-9/11 period, most of which was created for an Anglophone global audience to satisfy a high demand for knowledge about Afghanistan. Ivanchikova maintains that these two decades saw a proliferation of cultural texts that made Afghanistan visible to a global audience, which required a reckoning with its recent past and a discussion of humanitarianism, Afghan women, and transnational terrorism. *Imagining Afghanistan* attempts to uncover the place of Afghanistan in the global imaginary.

The book gathers around six thematically organized chapters to illustrate three waves of cultural production. The first wave, around the start of the millennium, centered around the humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, which, as Ivanchikova contends, highlighted Soviet barbarity and relied on British colonial imagery. The second wave of cultural production, toward the end of the same decade, moved beyond these representations and offered more nuanced and multidimensional representations of Afghanistan. The third wave, encompassing the second decade of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan in the 2010s, consists of cultural production that moved beyond clichés about the country and its people as timeless, backward, and in a state of isolation. Instead, it made visible its "transnational history and transcontinental connections" (4).

Ivanchikova starts the first chapter by discussing *Kandahar* (dir. Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2001), *Homebody/Kabul* (dir. Tony Kushner, 2002), and the French novel *The Swallows of Kabul* (*Les Hirondelles de Kaboul*; written by Yasmina Khadra, 2002; translated from the French by John Cullen, 2004). All were produced prior to 9/11 but were propelled into global attention to fill the void in knowledge of Afghanistan at the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom. Although they are selectively silent about Afghanistan's socialist past, Ivanchikova argues, these three cultural texts show Afghanistan as an object of distant and long-lasting humanitarian crisis—with its people, especially women, in need of saving. These texts became part of a moral assemblage framing the United States' military operation in Afghanistan as a humanitarian endeavor.

Ivanchikova extends the critique of anti-Soviet sentiment in post-2001 cultural texts in the second and third chapters of her book. In the second chapter, Ivanchikova extensively examines *The Kite Runner* (2003), a widely read novel by the Afghan American author Khaled Hosseini. She maintains that *The Kite Runner* distorts Afghanistan's recent history by representing the Soviet

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Association for Iranian Studies

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2022.59 Published online by Cambridge University Press

occupation of the country as the sole reason for its destruction, not the "jihadi fighters" engaged in fighting the Soviet forces and the United States' role in cultivating these fighters (whom it now fears). She compares this text with *Kabul*, a novel by M. E. Hirsh (1986), which situates the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in a messianic and revolutionary time, whereas Hosseini's novel inscribes the Soviet invasion as "ahistorical trauma" (80). Furthermore, Ivanchikova asserts that Hosseini's subsequent novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), albeit positioned around a narrative of rescuing women, does not demonize Afghanistan's socialist period. Instead, it remains ambiguous about NATO's arrival in 2001, which Hosseini's third novel, *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), critiques by providing a reassessment of the NATO period in Afghanistan.

In the third chapter, Ivanchikova analyzes *City of Spies* (2015), a novel by Sorayya Khan, and *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), a novel by Nadeem Aslam, both of which offer a critical illustration of the United States' involvement in the Soviet-Afghan war. These are contrasted with two other works: *The Photographer* (2009), a graphic memoir by the photojournalist Didier Lefèvre (with graphic artist Emmanuel Guibert and translator Frédéric Lemercier) and *Killing the Cranes* (2011), a memoir by reporter Edward Girardet, which offer a romantic depiction of the "jihadi fighters" during the Soviet-Afghan war. Ivanchikova argues that these works of "humanitarian jihad" offer a one-sided and militarized understanding of the war and the Afghan people, as the fighters are depicted as human rights defenders, whereas the Soviet forces and the Afghan state are depicted as human rights offenders.

Chapter 4 offers an alternative to this humanitarian narrative with three works of writers of South Asian descent: *Burnt Shadows* (2009) by Kamila Shamsie, *A Fort of Nine Towers* (2013) by Qais Akbar Omar, and *In the Light of What We Know* (2014) by Zia Haider Rahman. All three texts situate Afghanistan in the midst of multiple global and regional forces (such as the Soviet Union, the United States, and Pakistan) during the war decades. Chapter 5 examines Nadeem Aslam's novels *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) and, again, *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), which decenter the human figure and instead explore the geological impact of four decades of warfare on earth. The last chapter of *Imagining Afghanistan* looks at three cultural texts that critique the involvement of the international community in Afghanistan: the film *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016), directed by Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, *The Taliban Shuffle* (2001), a memoir by Kim Barker, and *Kabul Disco* (2009), a graphic novel by Nicolas Wild. In her analysis, Ivanchikova discusses the ways in which these cultural texts use comedy to assess humanitarian-military intervention, creating "a new vocabulary" for analysis of texts on zones of crisis in the twenty-first century.

Imagining Afghanistan is the first study that provides an extensive analysis of cultural production on and about Afghanistan for an Anglophone audience since 2001. Ivanchikova's analysis is thorough and accessible to the general public. Nevertheless, the study would have benefited from an extensive explanation on methodology. The introduction states only that the author chose "popular works" and "more obscure texts" and "a combination of visual and written texts and a mix of high and low culture" (15). But the reader is otherwise left in the dark about why and how this particular corpus of texts was chosen, leaving the door open to the idea that the selection was made mainly to validate the author's arguments. Ivanchikova's framing of cultural production on and about Afghanistan into three distinct waves also would have been more convincing had her study offered a detailed methodological explanation of its case studies.

Furthermore, Ivanchikova provides a reductive discussion of Afghanistan's recent history to make one of her main arguments, which centers on the negative representation of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and the country's socialist era in NATO-centric cultural production. There is an important discussion to be had about Cold War biases in post-2001 and NATO-centric cultural production, yet to make her argument Ivanchikova largely whitewashes Soviet atrocities as well as the atrocities committed by the client Afghan state headed by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The author focuses solely on US atrocities and the atrocities committed by the "jihadi fighters," which she equates with current day terrorism within and outside of Afghanistan. Furthermore, Ivanchikova describes the communist era in Afghanistan as one of "universal emancipation and social justice" (64) and "an object of Afghan people's desire" (67). The PDPA government is depicted as the true representative of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2022.59 Published online by Cambridge University Press

people of Afghanistan, when in fact it was highly unpopular, founded by a small group of intellectuals isolated from the rest of society, which took power via a bloody coup.[1] People who stood up against both the Soviet forces and the PDPA government, and who lived and worked during a time of heavy censorship and fear in the communist era, especially in Kabul, are submsumed under the blanket category of "jihadi fighters."

When discussing Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner*, Ivanchikova asks, "Why does Hosseini—a debut novelist seeking to break into the post-9/11 NATO-centric literary market—as well as the film director who further condenses the message for greater effect—resort to such gaudy anti-Sovietisms? Is it because one might expect that, in NATO-centric contexts, the audiences are well primed to see the Soviets as evil?" (65). Ivanchikova does not consider that Hosseini himself, as an Afghan American writer, may have had an anti-Soviet stance. The author also understands the communist era in Afghanistan as one of women's advancement and economic justice, where women were relieved "from traditional customs and gender roles that relegated their lives to the private domain" (93). This is a problematic assumption, as the socialist era only benefited a small subsection of urban women in Kabul. Furthermore, gender policies under the PDPA were imposed from above and did not resonate with the majority of the Afghan people, as they were deemed insensitive.[2]

In her discussions and analyses of post-2001 cultural production, Ivanchikova portrays Afghanistan's contemporary political history through the lens of either the United States or the Soviet Union. Yet being critical of one imperial power in Afghanistan does not mean promoting and whitewashing the atrocities of another. More engagement with Afghan sources and working carefully with the multiplicity of perspectives on the ground are necessary to avoid depicting and reproducing incomplete and inaccurate understandings of contemporary Afghan history, to which we are too often witness in Anglophone scholarship. The country's forty-year political history is long, complex, and requires rigorous and careful analyses. Overall, Ivanchikova is successful in helping us (those in the US Anglophone context) understand the representational "matrices that persist and still structure our perceptions" (236). The book makes a contribution to the field of comparative literature and media studies and does diversify work within these areas of study.

doi:10.1017/irn.2022.59

Creating the Modern Iranian Woman: Popular Culture between Two Revolutions. Liora Hendelman-Baavur (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019). 340 pp. ISBN: 9781108498074 (hardcover)

Reviewed by Elham Naeej

(Received 15 November 2021; accepted 26 September 2022)

Liora Hendelman-Baavur's *Creating the Modern Iranian Woman* is a timely and original contribution that examines Iranian women's magazines published between the Constitutional

[1] Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 8.

[2] Julie Billaud, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 48–51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2022.59 Published online by Cambridge University Press