

THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST AFGHAN WOMEN IN ATIQ RAHIMI'S THE PATIENCE STONE: A FEMINIST NEW HISTORICISM READING

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Abstract

Domestic violence is physical, psychological, sexual or financial violence that takes place within an intimate or family-type relationship and forms a pattern of coercive and controlling behavior. It is very common: research shows that it affects one in four women in their lifetime. Two women a week are killed by their partners or former partners. All forms of domestic violence - psychological, financial, emotional and physical - come from the abuser's desire for power and control over an intimate partner or other family members. Domestic violence is repetitive and life-threatening, it tends to worsen over time and it destroys the lives of women and children. Domestic violence has long been common in Afghanistan as depicted in Atiq Rahimi's *Patience Stone*. The present article discusses the domestic violence against Afghan Women in the novel through the lenses of feminism and new historicism. It is also combined with Rabindranath Tagore's conception on woman.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is the most pervasive yet least recognized human rights abuse in the world around the world at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Most often the abuser is a member of her own family known as the intimate partner abuse (The Population Information Program, Center for Communication Programs, 1999: 1)

The Population Information Program, Center for Communication Programs has stated in their *Population Reports* (1995: 5):

“Often referred to as “wife- beating,” “battering,” or “domestic violence,” intimate partner abuse is generally part of a pattern of abusive behavior and control rather than an isolated act of physical aggression. Partner abuse can take a variety of forms including physical assault such as hits, slaps, kicks, and beatings; psychological abuse, such as constant belittling, intimidation, and humiliation; and coercive sex. It frequently includes controlling behaviors such as isolating a woman from family and friends, monitoring her movements, and restricting her access to resources.”

Abuse of women and girls, regardless of where and how it occurs, is best understood within a “gender” framework because it stems in part from women's and girls' subordinate status in society. Worldwide, one of the most common forms of violence against women is abuse by their husbands or other intimate male partners.

Partner violence occurs in all countries and transcends social, economic, religious, and cultural groups. Although women can also be violent and abuse exists in some same-sex relationships, the vast majority of partner abuse is perpetrated by men against their female partners. (ibid: 3)

These phenomena have occurred throughout the world including Afghanistan. Located at a crossroads between Central Asia, Iran, and the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan emerged as a buffer state between the British Empire and Czarist Russia during the Great Game conflicts of the 19th Century. Fragmented along ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural lines with a predominantly rural population, its history has since been characterized by weak state-society relations, the enduring strength of the tribal periphery, chronic underdevelopment compounded by decades of war (Cortright and Persinger, 2010: 3)

Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* (2010), of which the original title is *La pierre de patience*, portrays a reality of life of an intelligent woman under the oppressive weight of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The woman takes care of her husband lying brain-dead with a bullet lodged in his neck. Sitting by his side each day, she speaks to him opening up her deepest desires, pains, and secrets and never knows if he really hears. It reveals that her husband has never understood her, mistreated her, and showed her no respect. Her confession releases the weight oppression of marital, societal, and religious form.

Atiq Rahimi, who, after writing two novels in Persian, *Earth and Ashes* and *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*, won the *Prix Goncourt* in 2008 for this novel, *The Patience Stone* originally written in French. He captivates the reader with his crystal clear prose and a gripping account of the appalling condition of his country, Afghanistan, wracked by war, atrocity, and under-development (Qantara.de, 2009).

The present paper is going to mainly concentrate on the representation of violence against women, notably the intimate partner abuse, during the oppressive regime of Taliban in Afghanistan as it is portrayed in Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone*. The paper also looks particularly on whether the depiction reflects the values of women in the Afghanistan society from the perspectives of the New Historicism criticism, the Feminist Philosophy, and Rabindranath Tagore's conception of *Women* as theoretical lenses.

New Historicism is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period (Barry, 1995: 172). From the perspectives of the New Historicism, literature must be read within the broader context of its culture, in the context of other discourses ranging over politics, religion, and aesthetics, as well as its economic context (Habib, 2005: 760). Both approaches are employed in the present study since the novel reflects the obstacles that militate against her are such that are mounted to frustrate the woman from living a fulfilling life. These obstacles include socio-cultural practices that do not work in favor of women and totally discriminate against them and contribute to their subjugation; whereas the Feminist Philosophy is employed since Rahimi in this novel has strongly condemned the constant exploitation and oppression of the nameless woman by her male counterpart. This is going to be approached from Rabindranath Tagore's vision and views on women as he devoted considerable thought to women. Women had been at the core of his many poems, songs, essays and paintings (Rai, 2010: 69).

Specifically, the present paper addresses the following questions:

1. What kind of violence against women is depicted in the novel?
2. Why does such violence occur?
3. Does it resonate with Tagore's conception of women?

4. Does the sociopolitical relevance of *The Patience Stone* continue to the present day?

DISCUSSION

New Historicism

New Historicist Criticism took shape in the late 1970s and early 1980s as opposed to *New Criticism* and to the critical *deconstruction*. It is also *new* and differ markedly from its former (old) historicism to view literature as a stable events which can be used as “background” of an era, or simply as a “reflection” that refer to material condition (as in early *Marxism*) of particular epoch of literature. It is a movement considerably inspired by Foucault’s work and developed by Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, and others (Hogan, 2000: 158, 166).

Michel Foucault was a French social historian and philosopher of history and best known for his highly influential analysis of power. He addresses a wide range of power relations in a broad range of social structures. In his opinion, power is not merely the strength of state, not merely brute force, but it is a relation in existing in all social structures and it is bound up with thought, study, and systematic theorization (ibid: 179-180).

Hogan (2000: 190) has further stated that every work of literature is firmly bound to its history and culture. New Historicism is therefore a reading of political, legal, literary, and other historical texts through one another, a part of one history or as part of culture, such as its ideological presuppositions, its political implications, its implied manifestations of cultural relations and traditions, its historical relations, to name a few.

New Historicism considers works of literature as historical texts. New Historicism suggests a subjective approach to literature. According to new historicism, identity is fashioned by social institutions. Literature is another form of social construct, which is produced by the society and in return is active in reshaping the culture of that society. Literature is a cultural creation constructed by more than one consciousness. Therefore, social, political, religious, and economic factors of a given society determine the literature it produces and become the means to represent the ideology of the culture through resonant texts. New Historicism ventures this through its suggestion of historicity of texts and textuality of history (Dogan, 2005: 77)

Veeser (2007: 3) cited, “Greenblatt, Montrose, and other New Historicists have insistently highlighted the "atrocities" visited on lower class bodies, have lovingly detailed the "colonial torture" lavished on the starkly victimized, "broken, hapless underlings" who people New Historicist prose.” The New Historicism involves the parallel study of literary text and non-literary texts which make use of some historical data (Barry, 1995: 172).

Feminist Philosophy

Feminism is the movement which is aimed at sensitizing women to win greater equality with men. Feminism is probably the most important influence on social and political literary in the last half century. The term ‘feminism’ covers a range of

feminism. Despite such differences, most feminists agree that women's basic physical rights to health, nutrition, and so forth, as well as their right to exercise control over their own sexual and reproductive lives have been deprived by men. In the course of human history, most men have been deprived those rights often due to race and class, nationality, sexual preference, intellectual capacities, physical disabilities, or less systematic factors, such as personality or appearance (Hogan, 2000: 167-170).

The impact of feminism on literary criticism over the past thirty-five years has been profound and wide-ranging. A host of related disciplines have been affected by feminist literary enquiry, including linguistics, philosophy, history, religious studies, sociology, anthropology, film and media studies, cultural studies, musicology, geography, economics and law (Plain and Sellers, 2007: 15). Goel (2010:403) has further cited:

“Feminist literary criticism is the rebellion of the female consciousness against the male images of female identity and experience. The concept of female identity shows us how female experience is transformed into female consciousness, often in reaction to male paradigms for female experience. It is an ideology that opposes the political, economical and cultural relegation of women to positions of inferiority.”

Feminist philosophy is defined as philosophy approached from a feminist perspective. It employs the methods of philosophy to further the cause of the feminist movements and attempts to criticize or re-evaluate the ideas of the traditional philosophy from within a feminist framework. The feminist philosophy does not claim to search for knowledge for its own sake, but rather for the sake of a political goal: resistance to, and elimination of, the subordination of women (Gardner, 2006: xxiii).

Lai (2006) has suggested that New Historicism should be reconciled with the mainstream postmodernism, which is more diverse, affirmative and ethico-political than the formalistic and pessimistic theory advocated by Greenblatt. There is the possibility of a feminist new historicism to show how New Historicism can revitalize its critique, cross its limits and thus reach beyond its traditional domain as well.

Rabindranath Tagore's Conception of Women

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a “myriad-minded man”. He wrote extensively in various creative genres, e.g. poetry, drama, fiction and non-fictional prose; composed numerous songs; painted over 3,000 pictures; thought about rural reconstruction, environment and nature; took an interest in science, and established a university in West Bengal (Rai, 2010: 69). He is one of the foremost thinkers in the world Chauduri, 2010: 550). Much has been said about the way Tagore views his women in his poems, essays, novels and drama. In Tagore's 2003 essay *Nari* (Woman), he expressly articulates that men and women should live in harmony (Tagore, 2003: 625).

He cited that women were not only passive subjects of a nation under colonial domination and active agents of change, therefore simultaneously enacted and troubled Indian nationalist notions of culture and art. This shows his feminist orientation in the politics of woman's emancipation in the nationalist era.

“Woman is endowed with the passive qualities of chastity, modesty, devotion and power of self-sacrifice in a greater measure than man is. It is the passive quality in nature which turns its monster forces into perfect creations of beauty.” (619)

Women also have their own desires- emotional, physical and spiritual, aspirations, the ecstasies and agonies, dreams and frustrations deep down inside their hearts. To be a wife and a mother are their natural traits. Tagore then urges women to find an identity of their own, and realize that wifehood and motherhood are but fractions of their whole being. Women are by nature disposed towards giving love. Otherwise children would not grow up and the family would not exist.

“...woman still occupies the throne given to her by Nature ...all its deeper bonds of relations are hidden and held firm in the soil and this help to live...” (619)

They should liberate themselves from a repressive culture or power that negates her identity, self worth and female desire. It serves as a vital tool in the process of identity formation in women. He does not see any reason why a woman should be deprived of that opportunity.

“And at last the time has arrived when woman must step in and impart her life rhythm to this reckless movement of power.” (619)

He also urged women to step out of the precincts of their home to pursue education and cultivate their intellect stressing the importance of their autonomous self development (Bhattacharya, 2009: 22). It is necessary to impart knowledge for intellectual development of women. They should see themselves as a human being in their own rights and learn the meaning of dignity – they learn what it is to be a woman, to serve others as an equal and as water give the power to give life and nourishment to thirsty travelers. The greatest service to humanity is to respect human beings. Where there is knowledge, there is no difference between men and women.

“I do not mean to imply that domestic life is the only life for a woman. I mean that the human world is the human’s world, be it domestic or be it full of the other activities of life.” (621)

However, in the realm of practice there are differences. What Tagore hints at in narrating the woman is that women are living on the fringes of human society. Women are chained by social degradation that are bound their soul. This reveals the unequal social structure that oppresses women. The inequality exists between men and women. Men must accept the responsibility for sustaining this discriminatory practice of the past.

Rai (2010: 69) has stated that Tagore’s short stories can be seen as representing three facets of women’s lives: 1) the romance between men and women, 2) social oppression of women (brilliantly portrayed in stories like *Haimanti*, and 3) the birth of the “new woman” – that is, a woman who challenges convention and seeks to make decisions about her own life. In his early thinking, women had two principal roles – mother and lover. The loving nature of mother has been portrayed in many of his stories. In addition to the roles of mother and lover which Tagore attributed to women, he had discovered another facet of women as well. He did not give it a name,

but we know what it was. It was the “new woman” in a new age. These women had started to fashion their individuality and to assert their independent ideas.

The Violence against Women in Afghanistan

The term “violence against women” refers to many types of harmful behavior directed at women and girls because of their sex. In 1993 the United Nations offered the first official definition of such violence when the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. According to Article 1 of the declaration, violence against women includes:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. (444)

Violence against women and girls includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. It is often known as “gender- based” violence because it evolves in part from women's subordinate status in society. Many cultures have beliefs, norms, and social institutions that legitimize and therefore perpetuate violence against women (The Population Information Program, Center for Communication Programs, 1999: 3).

Violence against women is different from interpersonal violence in general. The nature and patterns of violence against men, for example, typically differ from those against women. Men are more likely than women to be victimized by a stranger or casual acquaintance. Women are more likely than men to be victimized by a family member or intimate partner. The fact that women are often emotionally involved with and financially dependent upon those who abuse them has profound implications for how women experience violence and how best to intervene (ibid: 4)

Afghanistan is widely known and appreciated for its rich history, culture, literature and arts as well as its magnificent landscape. It is also widely known that large numbers of Afghans die, or live wretched lives, because violence is an everyday fact of life. Violence is pervasive throughout Afghanistan. It has diverse manifestations in different parts of the country. Violence against women is widespread and deeply-rooted as well as acute. The violence which scars the lives of a huge proportion of Afghan women and girls is rooted in Afghan culture, customs, attitudes, and practices (Human Rights, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,2009: iv).

Distinct phases of the war, since the outbreak of armed conflict in 1978, have been characterized by events that were particularly dangerous and harmful for women. During the Soviet period, aerial bombardments were instrumental in triggering large-scale population movements that, in turn, had ramifications for the rural poor and agrarian livelihoods and infrastructure including vital irrigation systems. The Mujahedeen period (1992-1996) was marked by ferocious, internecine warfare that scarred all aspects of Afghan life. Women’s rights and freedoms were severely restricted. Grave human rights abuses included extra-judicial executions, torture, sexual violence, disappearances, displacement, forced marriage, trafficking and

abduction. This period represents one of the darkest chapters in the history of Afghan women (ibid: 12).

That contributed to the emergence of the Taliban and their consolidation of power throughout much of the country after their capture of Kabul, September 1996. Following the demise of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001, there was a great deal of hope and optimism amongst Afghans, human rights activists and others, that the situation of women would improve significantly (ibid: 13).

The harmful traditional practices in Afghanistan include (1) forced marriage, (2) *baad* or giving away girls to settle disputes, (3) *baadal* or exchange marriages, (4) child marriage, (5) high bride rice, (6) forced marriages of widows and inheritance rights, (7) restrictions on women's freedom of movement, and (8) "Honour" killings. Such practices are pervasive, occurring in varying degrees in all communities, urban and rural, and among all ethnic groups (UNAMA Human Rights, 2010: 5, 7).

Violence against Women in Rahimi's *The Patient Stone*

1. The Violence against Women

Rahimi's *The Patient Stone* in fact foregoes the ideology of women's liberation to revert to the 'traditional' values of a male-dominated system which represses and includes the women's physical (sexual), psychological, and mental abuse.

"You came back and beat me, in the middle of the night, just because I hadn't warned you that I was bleeding." (30)

Even their *Mullah* ignores what is really going on with them.

"But that stupid Mullah has no idea what it's like to be alone with two little girls." (9)

Mullah is the religious leader. He and his men are always coming to his people's homes to see whether they do the obligatory religious rituals (prayers) or call them to listen to his preaches. They seemingly do not care what is really going on with the people. This shows how conservative political and religious forces play a role in restricting women's rights. The woman is being increasingly ignored as her husband has too often abandoned her and their little children to struggle for the wars.

"I swear I won't ever let him go off to fight again like a bloody idiot." (17)

The man was even away not only on the day of his wedding ceremony but also during his engagement. He and his bride have then lived in separation for about three years after the marriage. During their one-year engagement they had lived far away from each other (29).

This is getting worse when various wars strike the society. Women in the society are subjected to the violence inherent in armed conflict that has intensified in recent years and taken increasingly heavy toll on the civilians.

“The violence destroys a few houses perhaps, a few dreams.” (4)

The possible violence may come from their husbands’ family

“Your brothers have always wanted to fuck me...they spied on me constantly, for the whole three years you were away... spied on me through the little window in the bath house while I was washing myself.” (51)

This circumstance has made the woman in much despair. It can lead to severe depression and low self-esteem in women.

“She is filled with a deep weariness- of her being, and of her body.” (22)

However, they keep on hoping that things will change to be better. They want the men to start to listen and understand them.

“I hope you are able to think, to hear, to see... to see me, and hear me....” (52)

2. The Cause of the Violence

The persistent inequality between men and women in the Afghan society, which Rahimi’s work portrays, has contributed to the general disempowerment of women. The society as the setting of the novel is obviously founded upon principles that negate the rights of women, which would lead readers to believe that no woman could have the type and the strength of the power of the men.

“You don’t suffer! You’ve never suffered, never!” (21)

In this instance, men have treated women unjustly and are the genesis of women’s problems in the society. The society does not give women total freedom to choose on their own man to marry. Women and girls are subjected to systematic discrimination that, effectively, confined most females to their homes.

“Your mother, with her enormous bust, coming to our place to ask for the hand of my younger sister. It wasn’t her turn to get married. It was my turn. So your mother simply said, “No problem, we’ll take her instead!”, pointing her fleshy finger at me as I poured the tea.” (53)

Moreover, the woman has to endure and suffer from the anguish all her life.

Besides, the society seems to pursue and struggle more for power than they do for women.

“Weapons become everything to you men...As soon as you have guns, you forget your women.” (57)

The violence is triggered by the woman’s total dependence on her husband.

“Without you, I didn't have anyone.” (64)

3. Tagore's Views on the Violence

Tagore has showed a remarkable understanding of woman's psyche, perceived the injustice of an unequal social structure, and advocated for greater freedom and decision-making power for women in the family and the larger society. Women are reasoning and desiring subjects who have been constrained by social rules and norms. Men's idea that women are simply beings to be kept and used was not acceptable. Women have particular sensibilities and needed to be wooed not just claimed. It is society which has forced women to suppress their physical desires. In their hearts, however, the flame of desire has existed as strong as that of any man. Equal status for men and women in a marriage is the message that Tagore has attempted to convey (Rai, 2010: 69, 72).

This is in line with Rahimi is trying to hint at in his work that men and women should establish mutual complementarity. Enjoying the presence of silence and quietude is an ethical as well as aesthetic way of life, often regarded even as an ideal in the sense used in virtue ethics.

“It's me who suffers! Me who cries!”(21)

In addition, the images of obedience, respect, and orderliness, when combined with women's position in the tradition, contribute to the stereotype of Afghan women, like all Asian women, as docile, obedient, quiet, intuitive, or timid. Asian female stereotype is either characters exhibiting passivity or the sexualized, exotic image.

However, men should be aware of their quietness which can turn into power more strongly in them than men have.

“The kind of fear that doesn't you from your desire, but instead arouses you, gives you wings, even though it may bring.” (29)

The ignorance of men has led his family to suffer and feel loneliness.

“All my dad cared about were his quails, his fighting quails! I often saw him kissing those quails, but never my mother, nor us, his children. There were seven of us. Seven girls starved of affection.” (57)

It gets worse when the men like gambling and take their quails to fight. They place bets as well. When they lose the bets and came home they beat up their wives and children to release their rage (58). They even give their daughters to live with men who are much older than their daughters as the stakes of a bet (59). When they win the bets they buy a very expensive quails.

4. Women in the Afghan Contemporary Society

Violence, in the public and private spheres, is an everyday occurrence in the lives of a huge proportion of Afghan women. Rape and sexual violence, including in detention facilities, so-called “honor” killings, the exchange of women and girls as a form of dispute-resolution (often in connection with land or property issues), trafficking and abduction, early and forced marriages, domestic violence, as well as threats or attacks against women in public life, are but some of the problems that many Afghan women must endure (UNAMA Human Rights, 2009: 9).

Moreover, armed conflict, which has steadily increased in recent years, exacts a direct as well as an indirect and accumulated toll on Afghan women and girls. In addition to death and injury, Afghan women and men are adversely affected by warfare as a result of involuntary displacement and destruction of homes and property. The ability to enjoy rights, that are fundamental to the safety and dignity of human beings everywhere, is extremely limited.

In addition, rhetoric and empty promises expressing concerns about the plight of Afghan women are common. At the same time the majority of women in Afghanistan remains powerless and at the mercy of a power structure and social order that relates to women as commodities that can be exchanged for commercial or political gain. Peace in Afghanistan cannot be achieved while violence shapes the lives of so many women.

CONCLUSION

Based on the previous discussion, it can be concluded that Atiq Rahimi’s *The Patience Stone* projects the image of the women of Afghanistan who have limited scope to enjoy, or make possible the enjoyment of, their human rights through the nameless heroine of the novel who is a real woman not an idealized one who is at once strong and tormented, confident yet deeply conflicted.

She questions the efficacy and fairness of her social standing and silently rages against the Almighty for this unjustness. Her questionings show her inner consciousness of herself as a human. Thus foreground her agency and power that remains as a latent force inside herself till the tragedy awakens this slumbering, latent selfhood and ignites her passion to take a revenge to him. That ultimately signifies herself as a radical human being.

This has reflected what the Afghan women have undergone. Three decades of armed conflict, coupled with associated lawlessness, insecurity, and weak governance, have had a significant impact on the status and situation of women in Afghanistan as well as on efforts geared to their emancipation and empowerment. However, Afghan women are under a lot of pressure to remain silent as the heroine in the novel.

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Appendix 1

The Synopsis of *The Patient Stone*

Atiq Rahimi's *The Patient Stone* portrays a strong-willed and stubbornly determined Afghan unnamed woman whose rights had been deprived in a male-dominated society all her life. It depicts vividly her hopelessness and undeserved oppression. Her husband was lying motionlessly on a mattress on the floor in a small room with a black-and-white photo on the wall. He was paralyzed by war injuries and fed intravenously through a tube.

What she always did was to beseech Allah to make her husband well again so that he could return to her and their two small daughters. She cared for him night and day, changing the intravenous tube, while she herself suffered from hunger and was threatened by the acts of war that flare up sporadically nearby their place.

The woman seemed to submit helplessly to her fate. On the contrary, she demonstrated astounding strength, enabling her to recount her life of oppression at her husband's side in long, soul-searching monologues. In the process, she became increasingly aware of the enormity of the injustices she had suffered. With increasing bravery and boldness the woman revealed how she resented her husband, her disappointments in him, her most intimate secrets, her desires and hopes, the pains and sorrows she had suffered at his hands through her brave and shocking confession.

During her childhood, her father treated her family in an unrespectable and severe manner. He liked placing bets for the quails fighting. When he lost the bets he came home beating up her wife and their seven daughters. She was a rebel by having his hugely expensive quails or his other pets eaten by the cat. He punished her too often. He even gave his other daughter up to live with an old man as the stakes of the bet.

She was then urged to have a forced marriage instead of her younger sister as it was her turn to get married. She was engaged for almost a year and she was then married for three years to an absent man as she had never seen and touched her husband before that day. She had been so scared and nervous to see her husband for the first time that she got her period a week before the wedding night. Though she was a virgin she was so afraid she did not bleed that night as the blood was the proof of her virginity. She then did not say a word and pretended to be asleep when he began to touch her. After the intercourse, he found out that she got her period. He then got angry and beat her.

He abandoned her to struggle for the war as his honor so often that she felt so lonely. Having left by her husband, she had to live with his family. His brother always spied on her when she was washing herself. Only his father treated her better.

Her husband's injuries rendered him silent permitting his wife to open up more and more and to speak frankly of the problems in their marriage without fearing reprisals. Rather than merely praying, she was able to bare her soul and make the confession. She took a stand against her husband and admitted that she found him repulsive and called him "a monster" for all he did to her.

At the same time, he felt a strong sense of catharsis and it revived her life spirit to finally be able to talk to him about it all, without being interrupted, without being berated. The man, who was just lying there mute but still breathing, was more to her like the "patience stone" in whom she confided everything, who absorbed all her pain, unhappiness and misery until one day it would explode. In the end it all, unexpectedly, came to head in catastrophe.

Appendix 2

About the Author

Atiq Rahimi was born in Kabul in 1962. He fled the country in 1984, living in Pakistan for a year and then receiving political asylum in France. Rahimi studied film at Sorbonne and made several documentaries on Afghanistan. *Earth and Ashes* is his first novel, and subsequently his first film in fiction. He currently lives in Paris. After writing two novels in Persian he won the Prix Goncourt in 2008 for his first novel written in French, *The Patience Stone*.

In the International Literature Festival in Berlin, Rahimi explained how his experiences as a film director had been helpful in writing the novel. He edited the books as he would a film focusing on the composition of each scene while choosing the details carefully. And yet the novel by no means gives a schematic or superficial impression.

His film of the book was in the Official Selection at Cannes in 2004. He is adapting his second novel, *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*, for the screen. Since 2001, he has returned to Afghanistan many times to set up a Writers' House in Kabul and offer support and training to young writers and film makers.