

***Born under a Million Shadows*, by Andrea Busfield. London: Black Swan, 2009.**

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In April 2009 the publishers Black Swan brought out Andrea Busfield's first novel, *Born Under a Million Shadows*. It has since been translated into a number of different languages, including Spanish, Chinese and German and, unusually for a first time author, it is being heavily publicised. In Spain, for example, *El Periódico de Catalunya* has carried half page advertisements promoting the book, most recently on October 10th. Both the advertisements as well as the cover of the novel itself depict a young Afghan boy running with his head over his shoulder, presumably flying a kite. The background is layered in yellow, brown and green, and the title is printed in a shiny brownish gold script resembling unjoined up handwriting. Anyone familiar with Khaled Hosseini's bestselling novels *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), both of which have been filmed (*The Kite Runner* was released in 2007 while *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is scheduled for release this year) will immediately be alerted. The similarity with the cover of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, with its title printed in a shiny brownish script resembling unjoined up handwriting and its picture of a girl walking against a layered background of yellow and brown is clearly no coincidence. Despite Andrea Busfield's assertion, then, in *The Observer*, in April of this year that "I don't think you could find two more different books than *The Kite Runner* and *Born Under a Million Shadows*," her publishers clearly disagree: Black Swan are making every possible effort to sell Busfield's work on the back of Hosseini's runaway success.

But are the novels comparable? Hosseini's, written in deceptively accessible prose, are carefully crafted to expose the horrors of life for many Afghans in recent decades from the point of view, mainly, of children. *The Kite Runner* takes place both in Afghanistan and the USA, though mainly the former, and describes the friendship between two boys of different social class and ethnic origin. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, meanwhile, traces the tragic lives of two women, Mariam and Laila, as they struggle to survive under the oppressive political and religious regimes dominating Afghanistan for the last fifty years. Much of the power and authenticity of Hosseini's narratives would seem to be attributable to the fact that he was born and spent the first twelve years of his life in Afghanistan before the family moved into exile, first in Paris, and then the United States.

Andrea Busfield is a British journalist whose experiences over a three year period in Kabul provided her with the material for her book. Both authors, therefore, have first hand experience of the country, one as a native, the other as a foreign resident and indeed, this is how the novels are focussed. Fawad, the child protagonist of Busfield's novel, moves into a house occupied by three foreigners: James, a drunken journalist, May an engineer and Georgie who works for an NGO. Busfield says that:

I wanted to show that members of the international community are not just people looking to earn filthy money and not giving a damn about the country. A lot of them are very

committed, very trustworthy, honourable, fantastic people. They do mix with locals and locals do mix with them and everybody does get on to a certain degree (*Observer*).

The three expatriates' characters are carefully chosen to demonstrate that, despite the apparent moral weaknesses of the West, Afghanistan is fortunate to have them. James, the drunkard, who introduces Fawad to beer with predictable results, is, despite his unislamic propensity for alcohol, really both a good man and a good journalist: the freedom of the press being, of course, one of the bulwarks of western civilisation and sadly lacking in ideologically totalitarian societies such as Afghanistan. May, as well as being an engineer, is a lesbian, and why not? Except one rather suspects that Busfield is heavy-handedly pointing out that women can be both engineers and lesbians and be perfectly wonderful people proving that if only the Afghans would wake up to this fact they would be much better off. As no doubt they would. Georgie, one of the central characters of the novel, is also a bit of a drinker, and something of a feminist (with an Enid Blytonish boy's name, just to make sure the reader is aware of her refusal to satisfy traditional gender specific expectations). She is a woman determined to live life under her own terms, just as one can in the West, unlike in Afghanistan, which is very backward in comparison and thus in dire need of enlightened foreigners whose mere presence is justifiable for their freedom-loving ways.

Fawad, of course, is fascinated by these strange yet liberated people and inevitably his contact with them slowly opens his eyes to his own ignorance and prejudices. None of this, however, is the real plot. The novel is really a love story, a romance in the finest Mills and Boon tradition. Georgie, it transpires, is in love with Haji Khan, one of the most powerful and feared men in the land, a man whose "voice was deep and low [which] suited his face which was strong and framed by thick dark hair, a trim black beard and heavy eyebrows" (Busfield 66). In true Byronic style Haji Khan is also described as "the scourge of the Taliban, the son of one of Afghanistan's most famous Mujahedin, and now one of the country's biggest drug dealers" (Busfield 85), the latter charge, of course, proving to be false as the story progresses. He too, is in love with Georgie, but their love is doomed: her principles will not allow her to submit to the degradation of being a Muslim wife, while he cannot allow his position to be undermined by marriage to an immoral infidel: "I'm a Godless kafir, Fawad. Khalid's a Muslim. How is that even possible in today's Afghanistan?" (Busfield 184) asks Georgie, rhetorically. To be fair to Busfield she recognises the melodramatic nature of the story she has chosen to unfold and there are constant references to Indian and Afghan films and television series. According to Fawad, Haji Khalid "looked like an Afghan film star, and I hated him for it" (Busfield 66) while in a later scene he "walked down from his bedroom looking like he'd just got off a film set" (189). At one point Fawad and his mother specifically compare Georgie's problems with "the Tulsi soap opera that came from India", a programme which "finished in another explosion of tears and sad music" (Busfield 250). Not, indeed, that the comparison is unfitting. Later on Georgie is courted by doctor Hugo, an Englishman of the old school, who believes it his duty to inform Haji Khalid that he intends to marry Georgie. Khalid is suitably outraged and screams: "You think you're in love with Georgie? You *think*? Well, let me tell you

something: I *am* Georgie! That woman is my heart; she is locked in my bones, in my teeth, even in my hairs. Every inch of her is me and every inch of her belongs to me,” (Busfield 326) before throwing the doctor to the ground. Clearly, before succumbing to Indian soap opera, Busfield has been brought up on a strict diet of nineteenth century romance (not that, as certain Bollywood films demonstrate, there is much difference). “My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff! He’s always, always in my mind” (Emily Brontë 82), cries Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, revealing the canonical nature of the reading informing Busfield’s writing. And why not? Kate Bush got away with it, after all.

Such a mountain of obstacles to be overcome: how are Georgie and Khalid ever to be united as man and wife? “Do you imagine,” Fawad is told, “even if she converted to Islam, that Georgie could live life as the wife of a high Pashtun man, locked behind the walls of her home, unable to go out, unable to see her male friends, unable to work? It would kill her.” And as for Khalid, if “he left to live with a foreign woman, how could he ever return and still keep the respect he and his family have earned over all these terrible years? He would have to live in virtual exile, and that would destroy him” (Busfield 230). Marriage then, either abroad or in Afghanistan, would kill them. What could be more romantic? As the book reaches the final pages Khalid’s compound is attacked and Georgie shot. With her life “pouring from her body like a river” (Busfield 370), she selflessly makes a deathbed conversion to Islam at the hysterical behest of Fawad, who believes she will surely otherwise spend eternity in hell and then “she closed her eyes and Georgie was gone” (Busfield 371). Except she wasn’t. Severely wounded, it is true, indeed so much so that “she couldn’t give him children because her insides were damaged.” Yes, reader, she married him “because it was a true love story and they had become famous in the province” (Busfield 381).

My reference to Jane Eyre’s quietly triumphant words “Reader, I married him” (Charlotte Brontë 518) is not idle. Only through Rochester’s mutilation – his loss of sight and use of his left arm, together with Jane’s fortuitous inheritance from her uncle – are they able to overcome the social, economic and gender inequalities that have so far kept them apart. Regardless of his marriage to Bertha Mason, Rochester is simply beyond Jane’s reach. Since Charlotte Brontë “can only imagine marriage as a union with a diminished Samson” (Gilbert & Gubar 368), in order for Jane to marry Rochester he must be brought down to her level. Similarly, in order for Georgie to marry Khalid, she must be brought down to his. Conveniently converted to Islam through the intercession of the child Fawad, unencumbered by the spiny question of how to bring up their children, and somewhat slowed down, no doubt, by her injuries, Georgie can now submit to the subordinate role of muslim wife even if “she sometimes worked for a company in Kabul – and, even worse than that, men would come to her home who weren’t male relatives” (Busfield 380).

The contrasting representations of Afghans and foreigners is stark in *Born Under a Million Shadows*. As Busfield says in the Observer article: “I’m still terribly in love with the place; I think it’s fantastic, [...B]ut you can only live there for three years

before you start to lose your mind.” Only by becoming less than the woman she was can Georgie marry Khalid and remain in Afghanistan. The foreigners, despite their carefully selected foibles and eccentricities are the models for a future, more enlightened, happier race of Afghans. The cream of the latter, meanwhile, is a stereotype; the hero of a Bollywood bodice-ripper. To give her her due, Andrea Busfield is right: there is no comparison between *Born Under a Million Stones* and the novels of Khaled Hosseini, whatever her publishers might want us to think. Economic considerations aside, in inviting comparison between her work and Hosseini’s, they have done her a disservice.

References

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