

# The Cabool cotillion

## Ahdaf Soueif hails an epic portrait of an earlier fight for Afghanistan in *The Mulberry Empire* by Philip Hensher

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### **The Mulberry Empire**

Philip Hensher

Composing the final sentences of his novel on Good Friday 2001, Philip Hensher could not have known that by the time *The Mulberry Empire* was published, the name of the place he was writing about, the "jewelled city of Kabul", would once again be on everyone's lips. And while postcolonial awareness means that London isn't dancing the "Cabool Cotillion" as it did some 160 years ago, the progress of history also means that today's power reshuffle has cost thousands more Afghani lives than the ill-starred British adventure of 1839.

The novel, starting some few years before that date, moves between Afghanistan on the one hand and Britain and Russia, the two powers vying to possess it, on the other. Alexander Burnes, who is on a geographical expedition, waits in a Kabuli house for an audience with the Amir Dost Muhammad Khan, prince of the Afghans. When Burnes returns to London and publishes *Travels into Bokhara and Cabool*, he is received by royalty, feted by society, loved by Bella Garraway and crystallised into an apologist for "benevolent" and expanding imperialism. He returns to the east as an agent of empire.

The counterpoint to the triumphal, public, outward-bound - and ultimately disastrous - movement of imperial expansion is the disgrace and retreat into the countryside of Bella Garraway. But in her banishment, with her life pared down to essentials (among which, tellingly, are 500 books and a sofa on which to read them), Bella finds true love and happiness. The story of Bella, in her ruined, moated castle, its unused rooms still with false memories, chimes with the story of an Afghani woman, Jamila (also "the beautiful one"). And the story of Jamila, whose lover loses her by going out to seek wealth before returning (too late) to claim her, is in its turn a contrast to the story of Akbar, who acts - and quickly - to claim what is his.

The novel is full of such deft, patterned echoes, such hints at similarity and contrast. The princes of the Amir Dost Muhammad's court are humiliated by his weekly audience with the common people, because "what honour could possibly reside in being the noble designed by ancient custom to hand the Amir his rice, if

any Kabul ironmonger could just as easily whisper in the Amir's ear, simply by turning up on a Friday morning?" Reading this, we are reminded of the thoughts of Londoners dressed up for a grand society salon some 50 pages earlier - that you drew "what satisfaction you may from the fact that when you have to go home, outside there may be poor people who may be prepared to gawp, who, you hope, are eaten up with envy of you; because if no one in London envies you in your party-going plight, it is hard to see why you should continue the exercise."

In one throwaway moment Hensher offers us an image: a river and in it "a table, upturned, floating down. And in the table stood a man with a long pole . . . the table drifted along, pushed by the current. The man in his makeshift boat stirred confidently, ineffectively at the river . . . and the river drove him onwards."

If this is a metaphor for life, then the image of "the Amir's empire, so carefully subdued and brought together, like a basket weaved of Jew's-hair thread" will serve as a metaphor for what art does to life. And *The Mulberry Empire* does this with delicacy and gusto. There is pleasure here, in passion and in absurdity, in landscape and in conversation, in costume and in food. There is pleasure, I think, above all, in writing. The novel pays elegant homage to Shakespeare, Austen, Tolstoy, Balzac and many others. It puts forward brilliantly realised minor characters then allows them to sink back, out of sight, into their unobserved lives. It offers odd little aperçus and improvisations: one character breaks off from the Persian he has mastered to count in English. "...Nine, 10, 11 - that was the thing you never got rid of, the counting in your first language."

The action of the novel is framed by two narratives: Burnes's account of his first journey to Kabul and a circus performance of the reunion of General Sale and his wife Florentia at the end of the campaign. The first, as we know, had dire consequences. The second, as we also know, was a sentimental falsification - but the audience loved it. Are there tricky questions here about writers, representation, responsibility?

It has been said that artists are the antennae of society. So perhaps Hensher did sense, early last year and the year before that, that Afghanistan was floating, once again, into the sights of the powerful. In an afterword to *The Mulberry Empire* he acknowledges his indebtedness to A S Byatt for telling him "bluntly" that he had to write a long novel. We, too, are in Byatt's debt, for Hensher has given us a delightful entertainment, a timely social and political commentary, and a highly literary and ambitious novel.

Ahdaf Soueif's novels include *The Map of Love* (Bloomsbury).