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Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya, *The Watch: A Novel*. New York: Hogarth, 2012. Pp. 290. ISBN 978-0-307-95589-0.

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Warfare in the twentieth century has provided the setting for some of the best literary fiction in the western tradition: Ernest Hemingway, Erich Maria Remarque, Evelyn Waugh, James Jones, Joseph Heller, Heinrich Böll, and Kurt Vonnegut, among others, were all strongly influenced by their military experiences. By contrast, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have produced few works of real literary merit that convey the trials of the men and women whose lives they altered. *The Watch* goes far to change that, offering a powerful commentary on the war in Afghanistan that examines the complexities of the various cultures it has brought into conflict. Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya, who was born in India, studied politics and philosophy both there and at the University of Pennsylvania; his earlier work has been set against the background of political and social revolutions around the world.¹ He has now committed himself to write two cycles of novels set in the Islamic world.

The Watch is the first in a trilogy about the ongoing war in Afghanistan; it is largely based on Sophocles's *Antigone*, written in the mid-fifth century during the heyday of the Athenian Empire. In that play, Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, must outmaneuver Creon, her uncle and current ruler of Thebes, who has ordered an injustice she cannot abide: that the body of her brother, Polyneices, be left to rot outside the walls; he was killed while attacking his own city, defended by his brother, Eteocles (also killed in the battle, but buried with full honors). Antigone, convinced that the gods' law is superior to man's, determines to provide a ritually correct burial for her brother.

The novel begins in the aftermath of an attack on an American compound in the mountains of Afghanistan, where local fighters kill and wound several soldiers before being themselves being pushed back and killed beyond the outpost's perimeter. Learning that the body of her brother and his fellow fighters have been left out exposed to the elements, a badly wounded Afghan woman positions herself outside the gates, intent on retrieving her brother's corpse for a proper Islamic burial.

Besides these similarities in plot-line, the novel is tinged with allusions to Greek literature. One character with a Greek name (49) is a classics major; American soldiers go to Greek movies in their dreams (68) and refer overtly to classical literature; Sophocles's tragedy is itself mentioned specifically (141) and evoked in chapter titles (91) and the quotations (in English and the original Greek) that open and close the book. Further, Roy-Bhattacharya's characters are like actors in a play: their skin is "just another costume" (62), their words spoken "with feeling" (71), occasionally in dramatic monologues (77); and, too, like ancient Greek actors, they sometimes wear masks (238).

The soldiers at their small base in the Afghan mountains are protected against attacks by local tribes and Taliban fighters by Hesco bastions,² beyond which lies treacherous and dangerous terrain, where lurking snipers wait for Americans to get careless as they go on patrols, meet with local leaders, and carry out other missions. But the bastions also serve several literary purposes. In the first place, they delineate the stage for most of the action of the novel. Soldiers who leave that stage open themselves up to greater physical perils and to other, more spiritual or emotional vulnerabilities as well. There, too, the soldiers encounter the defiant, grieving Afghan Antigone, through whom they ultimately enlarge their own narrow perceptions of the war and its costs.

¹ E.g., *The Gabriel Club* (NY: Penguin, 1998) and *The Storyteller of Marrakesh: A Novel* (NY: Norton, 2011).

² "A collapsible wire mesh container and heavy duty fabric liner ... used as a temporary to semi-permanent dike or barrier against blasts or small-arms"—*Wikipedia*, s.v. "Hesco bastion."

Throughout, Roy-Bhattacharya deftly matches the perspectives of his characters to their own individual narratives. Each chapter tells the events of the same one-day period from the discrete viewpoint of one of the major players, revealing more about their attitudes toward the war they find themselves fighting. We view events first through the eyes of the Antigone character, whose whole family has been killed by Americans or their allies, and who only wishes to fulfill her religious obligation to her brother. We then move on to reprocess the same story from the perspectives of the various Americans she opposes: a lieutenant, a medic, a sergeant, the commander, an interpreter, and so on.

While this may seem to be a redundant, even tedious narrative technique, Roy-Bhattacharya rewards the reader with fascinating details and powerful realizations in every retelling of the day's action, as we come to appreciate more fully each character's personal qualities and motivations. The interpreter, Masood, for example, strikes the wounded Afghan woman as flaky, flippant, and arrogant. But, in his chapter, we learn how the suffering he has faced in his own life has led him to the service of the Americans.

For Roy-Bhattacharya, the whole conflict in Afghanistan is a proxy war, populated by men fighting on behalf of people or causes they do not necessarily embrace wholeheartedly. The resilient Afghan villager whose family is killed by Americans (12); the interpreter who loses his family to the Taliban (103); the Americans whose comrades die at the hands of locals, maybe Taliban fighters, maybe local war lords, they cannot tell (43-45)—none would be fighting had events beyond their control not been set in train by the warring factions they represent. As one frustrated soldier memorably explains to an Afghan interpreter,

Dude, we didn't sign up to save your country. Most of us signed up to get a regular paycheck and avoid working at the local supermarket for the rest of our lives. We're grunts. We're just average Joes doing our jobs. We don't get to make ... decisions [about their mission and purpose].... The president makes those decisions; him, and the generals. We follow their orders and do what they tell us to do. If they ordered us to ship out to Eye-ran tomorrow, we'd go. (172)

As we read *The Watch*, it becomes clear that its dramatis personae are seeking, one way or another, to fulfill their own culture's definitions of honor and courage—warrior values more ancient even than the heroes of Sophoclean tragedy—and to do so in ways that make sense to them and seem likely to bring achievable results. Roy-Bhattacharya masterfully explores their anger, fear, and disillusionment through the external conflicts that drive the narrative. Just as the reader begins to identify with one character or perspective, he peels back more layers and makes it impossible to sympathize exclusively with any single point of view.

If the story has a weakness, it is its dialogue, which is too often forced, jarring, and unrealistic. The same can be said for the many dream sequences (e.g., 30), which impede the overall narrative flow. But these are small complaints about an otherwise compelling book. Roy-Bhattacharya's fictional account, like those of earlier generations of novelist-veterans, vividly re-creates the personal and cultural intricacies of war, opening perspectives unavailable in the highly mediated writing found in memoirs or war reportage.