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The Watch by Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya: A Review

The Watch, by Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya. London: Hogarth, 2012.

In a recent opinion piece for the *New York Times*, Phil Klay, author of *Redeployment* (2014), warns that it is foolish to “fetishize trauma” and allow only one voice (the voice of the war vet) to speak. “We pay political consequences,” Klay writes, “when civilians are excused or excluded from discussion of war. After all, veterans are no more or less trustworthy than any other group of fallible human beings.” With *The Watch*, Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya enters the conversation with a novel that overlays a classic Greek tragedy across the United States’ war in Afghanistan. Other civilian writers have written well about our wars since 9/11 (*Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* [2012] by Ben Fountain and *Carthage* [2014] by Joyce Carol Oates come to mind), but Roy-Bhattacharya’s work is one of the first to engage the remote warzone of Afghanistan in novel form.

Roy-Bhattacharya’s work transcends war narratives that focus on the traumatized American soldier by placing Antigone in Kandahar (indeed, “Antigone in Kandahar” was the original title of the novel); that is, he opens the novel from the perspective of a young Pashtun woman begging at the gate of an American outpost for the body of her dead brother, the leader of a nearby tribe who was killed while attacking the American base. Like Antigone, Nazim only wants to provide her brother with a proper burial. And, like Antigone, her commitment is unwavering and admirable. By the end of the first chapter, the reader completely empathizes with her plight and her desire to fulfill her duty.

The full strength of *The Watch* lies in the subsequent sections as Roy-Bhattacharya shifts our sympathies, fears, and frustrations from one first-person narrator to another. We follow a Tajik translator (the pleading Ismene figure of this tale) as he begs Nazim (the young woman) to just go away and the American officers inside the fortified base to relent. Creon-like in their recalcitrance to hand over the dead man’s body, the American soldiers are torn between the demands of official orders and the demands of their hearts. As the novel unfolds, each section re-narrates the same events, and we are thus allowed an

invasion into the consciousness of a sergeant, a pair of lieutenants, and the leader of the base, an Army officer named Captain Connelly. Negotiating such narrative framing is a difficult feat, but Roy-Bhattacharya's successful management of these competing perspectives allows him to formulate full and recognizable characters, despite what is—otherwise—a rather shapeless plot. The narrative framing also allows us to see that each character struggles, not with competing ideologies or banal politics, but with the fulfillment of personal and social obligations. This novel shows us how complex various concepts of duty can become during war.

Toward the end of the novel, Captain Connelly claims, "It's important for us to feel normal again." That sentiment is true for all sides of the war in *The Watch*. Some might even say that the United States public, in its collective need to "feel normal again" after fourteen years of war, has willfully forgotten that American, NATO, and Afghan soldiers are still fighting and dying in Afghanistan. The sad reality of this war, however, may be that such normalcy is impossible. Indeed, when Captain Connelly utters his wishful statement, he doesn't yearn for a return to peace or to the life he knew before the war. He merely desires a return to the rhythmic routine of battle and death, a pattern to which he and his men have become habituated before Nazim appeared at their gates. Nazim's presence and vigilance interrupts that cycle and causes the American troops no small amount of anxiety. In the end, Captain Connelly's duty to official protocol trumps Nazim's duty to culture and religion. Connelly sends the woman off to a mental institution in Kabul or Germany, and he ships her brother's body to a military base where it can be inspected, examined, and learned from. When the siblings are gone, the Americans can go back to their "normal" routine of combat, of killing and dying.

The nuanced perspective shifting of *The Watch* is Roy-Bhattacharya's most significant achievement, and one wonders if he is able to bring such diverse clarity and objectivity to the novel simply because he wasn't there. The success of the novel depends on this distance, and it seems to allow Roy-Bhattacharya an effective way to avoid fetishizing trauma. His text humanizes all sides of the war in Afghanistan by depicting—on equal terms—competing conceptions of duty that lead humans to kill other humans in large numbers. This is a difficult stance to assume, but *The Watch* assumes it quite well. *The Watch* blurs the line between propaganda and pure decoration by simultaneously challenging and applauding all individuals who seek to fulfill a duty or a social obligation, in whatever forms those commitments may take. The result is a healthy ambivalence in the larger discussion of contemporary war that exists in literature.