

May 06 2005

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A picture in a jigsaw

Andie Miller reviews *The Silent Minaret* by Ishtiyaq Shukri (Jacana) which he describes as an important and striking post-apartheid novel: not the least of which is the stylistic movement back and forth in time and space of both people and texts.

The Silent Minaret by **Ishtiyaq Shukri** (Jacana)

t was Frances, his elderly neighbour who lived above him, who first realised he was missing. She had been apprehensive when she heard a student was moving in, “waiting for the music, the endless cycle of noisy friends to start and never stop” through the paper-thin walls of the Finsbury Park flat in north London.

But she needn't have worried. Issa Shamsuddin was a solitary scholar, with predictable daily habits, that “soon became a comforting, harmonious accompaniment to her own lonely life”, and who kindly stopped to see if she needed anything before he headed out to the shops. That was until the 2am police raid on the Finsbury Park Mosque on January 20 2003.



Disappearance is the central theme of Ishtiyaq Shukri's European Union Literary Award-winning first novel, *The Silent Minaret*. Did Issa go into voluntary exile? Or was he "disappeared"? The story moves from his room, to his bookshelf, to the Baghdad Café — his regular haunt, where he went to write and smoke apple shisha — while those who knew and loved him try to find him, like the picture in a difficult jigsaw puzzle.

Watching from the roof of their building, Issa and Frances, just a stone's throw from the mosque — as "Fucking Hell — Hollywood Vietnam descends into view" — takes him back to another police raid, when he was a student at the University of the Western Cape, during the Defiance Campaign of 1989. Having made it through apartheid, he concludes, enraged: "And all for what? For this? All over again?" "Where are you going?" asks Frances. "To stop them." This is the last time she sees him.

His friend Katinka sees him a few months later at the Baghdad Café near Marble Arch, but he is clearly edgy and disoriented. She offers him a lift home, but he decides to stay a while longer. When he walks out from behind the mashrabeya screen, "a vantage point from which he could see and not be seen", he passes by a waiter on his way out, but the man does not notice his silent departure, "only closes his welling eyes" to the footage on the giant TV screen, of the ancient city, his home town, in ruins.

The novel is reminiscent, in the way that it moves



back and forth between different texts (the Qur'an, final report of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Virginia Woolf, Eminem ...), of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, a book that Shukri has referred to as arguably "the most politically pertinent piece of contemporary English fiction". He has cited Rushdie as one of his primary influences, as a reader and as a writer; particularly *Midnight's Children*. Though since Rushdie came out in support of the war in Iraq, Shukri has become disillusioned with him. "How can it possibly be a good thing?" he asks.

In response to Rushdie's most recent criticism of religion, says Shukri: "Religion is just a set of ideas. And ideas in themselves can't be harmful." As the elderly Irish Catholic Frances says of the raid on the Finsbury Park Mosque: "More enemies made than caught, if you ask me."

While packing up Issa's London bookshelf, his "brother" Kagiso discovers a copy of *Shakespeare's Complete Works*. Removing the dust-jacket, however, reveals Rushdie's controversial book, once banned by the South African government, but smuggled in for Issa by a friend, and then carried back to the United Kingdom. (Kagiso's shoulders will later be "aching under the weight of the five cumbersome, heavy volumes", the "catalogue of crimes" from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in his hand luggage, out of respect for their owner.) The inscription in Issa's copy of the *Satanic Verses* warns: "Don't condemn without reading, don't



support without reading. Always read.”

This is an important and striking post-apartheid novel: not the least of which is the stylistic movement back and forth in time and space of both people and texts. But this movement is still far from free (detained at Heathrow: “What’s your name?” I tell him. ‘That’s why. In here, we all have such names’”) — and Shukri has become “cynical of the promise of the post-prefix”. After all, this is also a post-9/11 novel, and as the SMS from Issa to his mother at home in Johannesburg (the last thing she has heard from him) reads: “The past is eternally with us.”