

## Afghan Women, History, Personhood and Literary Representation

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### Abstract

Even though the written history of Afghanistan can be traced back to the rule of Achaemenid Empire around 500BC, the beginning of the modern Afghanistan can be rightly dated to 1747 with the fall of Nadir Shah. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Afghanistan achieved political independence after a century of European political encroachment (Shaista 101). By the end of the century the country faced economic troubles, which was later met by the Soviet Invasion of 1979. In this paper, I attempt to detail the historical status of Afghan women after the Soviet Invasion in an attempt to analyse their literary representation, especially in and through poetry.

**KEYWORDS:** Afghanistan, history, literary representation, personhood, women

Throughout the changing political scenario of Afghanistan, the condition of women/ women's rights have been at stake, with exploitation of different kinds in the hands of different political and religious groups. Before the invasion of 1970s, Afghanistan witnessed a steady progression in their rights; even attaining suffrage rights by 1919. The period from 191 to 1929 under the rule of King Amanullah saw drastic changes in an initiation to promote freedom for women in public and private sphere. Laws were implemented abolishing child marriages, polygamy and bride price. While a majority of women lived in poverty, very few were educated enough to hold various jobs in society. In an attempt to lessen the restrictions imposed on women, the purdah was abolished in the year 1950 and a new constitution instituting more political rights was introduced in 1960. Strikingly, the position of women began to degenerate soon after the Soviet Occupation and the resultant Civil war between the government forces and Mujahideen groups, and eventually under the Taliban rule. The withdrawal of the Soviet rule was soon followed by the era under the Mujahideen wherein the difficult days rolled back into the lives of Afghan women.

The fact that the life-worlds of Afghan women have been historically determined remains to be explicated by very many like Moghadam who points out that the life-worlds are "constrained by (a) the patriarchal nature of gender and social relations deeply embedded in traditional communities and (b) the existence of a weak central state that has been unable to implement modernizing programs and goals in the face of tribal feudalism"(1997: 76). Venturing in a male-centric society, Afghan women have always traditionally occupied an inferior position. Socio-cultural norms, ethnicity, political conditions etc contribute to the unaccepted status of women with very few educated and employed. After years of struggle, the emergence of Taliban in 1994 resulted in certain enforced denial of human rights. Not only were Afghan women banned from leaving the house without a male chaperone, education and other fields of study and work but also from speaking or showing their skin in public. Soon after, the international intervention in Afghanistan led by the US military campaign cited their intention as a need to improve the rights of women, in an attempt to "save" them from tyrannical rule and unorthodox practises. Nonetheless, injustice against women still continues in all forms.

While tailoring and agriculture remains to be the most traditional work for women across Afghanistan, the end of Taliban rule brought forth women who

gradually became contributors to the national economy and entered different political spheres. The banning of education as another measure of the Taliban was later met with women who made an effort in imparting knowledge and skills to young girls in secret, done so undercover. These historical life-worlds that the Afghan women have experienced together, irrespective of their socio-cultural belonging, have in ways compelled themselves to argue against uncompromising physical, mental and sexual injustices, bondage of forced marriage etc. A renowned Pashtun poet, Safia Siddhiqi points out, “poetry is the women’s movement from the inside”<sup>1</sup>; taking on war, exile, Russian occupation, the hypocrisy of the Taliban and the American military presence. Like most folk literature, landay and other forms of poetry have become vehicles of public dissent for Afghan women. Some poems, being anonymous act as a broader expression of Pashtun women’s social status. Poetry has therefore offered spaces of shared inhabitation, disseminating different stories (personal “life-worlds”/ “home-worlds”). Afghan women’s poetry thus put forward a profound account of their lives in an attempt to negotiate the multiple identities of these women and thus countering the power of generations of oppression.

The so called pre-given or pre-known historical life-worlds of the Afghan women (the gendered historical conflicts), have worked its way in producing poems, such as “I’ll Never Return” by Meena Keshwar Kamal, founder of Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. While through the poems before the Soviet Invasion, Afghan woman elevated herself through her songs to the level of a tragic heroine<sup>2</sup>, the period following saw a change, with love and eroticism at its least and an over pervading spirit of nostalgia, distance, exile and battle.

To interrogate history, personhood<sup>3</sup> and literary representation, I follow a threefold contemplation of the existent and non-existent analogy between history and personhood; personhood and its literary representation; and the literary representation of history. Nikolas Rose’s proposal that historical investigations can lead to an understanding of the regime of the self (2) becomes important in this context, not only to elicit the relationship that history holds to the self but also to elicit the history of the self. The self and the idea of the self (a complicated and controversial upshoot of which is personhood) has over the years been processed and regulated by history and not just as an individual phenomenon. Apart from history, the self has been and is being constructed and reconstructed through what Nikolas Rose terms as the psy<sup>4</sup>. It has played a pivotal role in building and constituting the self and its image. The analysis and diagnosis of the self requires one to comprehend the self beyond the

<sup>1</sup> Eliza Griswold in her piece on the poetry of Afghanistan's women for the Pulitzer Center, Afghanistan introduces landay to the public with references to Afghan women poets and their opinion on the poetic movement.

<sup>2</sup> Majrouh in *Songs of Love and War* praises Afghan women and exalts her for all her glory—“She also nurtures her image with what cannot be refused to her—the nature that surrounds her. She is simple and uncomplicated like the pattern of the bare plains. She is pure, limpid, and impetuous like the waterfalls of the rocky valleys. She is beautiful, imposing, and hard, like the mountain with the blue reflection of the Hindukush”(23).

<sup>3</sup> I use “personhood” and “selfhood”, both as distinct and overlapping terms. While both indicate a sense of individuality, I perceive selfhood as the basis of personhood or in other words personhood is constitutive of selfhood for the self leads to the person.

<sup>4</sup> Rose refers to the “ways of thinking and acting brought into existence” by the disciplines of psychoscience, psychology and psychiatry as “psy”. He argues that “psy has played a key role in constituting our current regime of the self as well as itself having been ‘disciplined’ as part of the emergence of this regime” (3).

body, image and mind. Cultural reinforcements, historical allusions, ethical standards and an ever so prevalent imposture of the society compose the self. This requires one to question the difference between the self and the collective. Is the self a part of the collective or is the self a complete and unique entity of its own? If so, under what circumstances can this illusionary self stand on its own and how does history shape this personhood of the self? In the context of Afghan women, how has the history of their nation shaped their personhood and how has it been represented?

The fight for personhood have come a long way across centuries for slaves, women, children and all those who were at one point in time or the other denied the status of a person/ an individual. Perhaps this calls for a definition of personhood. Who or what constitutes a person? Does every individual become a person or are their set standards and requirements for an individual to be a person? This also brings one to question whether all citizens hold the identity of a person. Though these questions may not be answered directly, it is necessary to understand the underlying complexities of being a person or becoming a person. Each person is endowed with a form of selfhood which undergoes a constant formation and reformation. In an ideological conception of events, neither can a person be devoid of a selfhood nor can a self be devoid of personhood. This brings us back to the controversial aspects of personhood as discussed in history and therefore the selfhood of the so called “other”—slaves, women, children, minors etc. From a legal and social perspective, each individual is a person and should under any circumstances possess a personhood and thus a selfhood. Despairingly, this has not been the case of events in and around the world.

The global dynamics have posed problems to the status-quo of women and in particular to their freedom and liberty. The pathetic state of women’s rights in Afghanistan produce a need for an understanding of what personhood constitutes for them, given the historical implications. Afghanistan has time and again been fragmented and thus constantly been under the interference of neighbouring countries, be it because of its topographical and spatial composure or the varied ethnicities which seemed to hinder a nationalistic unity. The invasion of western countries clubbed with fundamentalist Islam interpretations and ethnic rivalries have shaped the country for centuries which under different circumstances brought the question of women and women’s freedom into picture. The history of the nation was concomitantly linked to the history of women’s struggles. To recount the history of women in Afghanistan, one cannot identify a particular point in time of history when subjugation of women began or ended and to claim that women’s freedom was at stake from or before Taliban would be to be oblivious to the rest of history. As far as contemporary thought is concerned, quite often Afghanistan is viewed only in terms of Taliban and Islam fundamentalism. All the more it is necessary to understand that women in Afghanistan were not always under the constraints or oppression of fundamentalism. Ahmed Ghosh makes note of two main junctures of time in Afghan history which fashioned a critical and world-viewed gender dynamics. The first of which has affected the status of women is during the reign of Amanullah in 1923 and the second during the leadership of Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Both leaderships embraced the ideals of social change through the upliftment of women resulting in numerous battles thereafter.

“Rare is the country that has sustained as many blows, and such hard blows, as has Afghanistan since its foundation as a distinct political unit in 1747.”<sup>5</sup> From traditional tribal system of the nation to the Islamic medievalism, the nation has faced military occupation and intervention one after the other and thereby resulting in a state of turbulence and insurgency. As Saikal questions the reason for the continued turbulence within the country and the vulnerability of the nation to external invasions, one becomes perplexed of the nation’s incapability as a political unit to withhold its system of governance. Then again, he identifies three main factors for the domestic instability; the numerous interior disputations of the royal families ruling the nation from the end of eighteenth century to the pro-Soviet period in 1978 regarding polygamy, internal combat and the major external power rivalries which generated a feeble power structure within the conflicts of nation and ideology. Lack of unity, institutionalisation, structures of statehood and modernisation ensued an interesting but versatile trajectory—one which witnessed “sharp tensions between secular radical modernisation and traditional conservatism in 1920s, communism and Islamism from the 1960s to the 1980s and moderate Islamism and regressive Islamic medievalism in the 1990s” (Saikal 3-4). Be it the favourable terrain of the nation or the abundance of minerals and riches, the nation paved a way for imperial domination big powers like Britain and USSR and also captured the interest of other nations like India, Pakistan, Iran, Saudia Arabia, China and others.

Afghanistan therefore witnessed a strong, diverse and variegated journey beginning from the tribal confederacy. The country remained to be a melange of different tribes, namely, Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Aimaks, Arab and Pamiri, each tribe led and ruled by a tribal chief. Soon after, Sher Ali Khan revived the feeling of national cohesion and made efforts to build a system of central governance; which included the introduction of national army, postal service and even the publication of periodicals. As such, the way history has perceived the emergence of modern Afghanistan; it began with the rule of Abdur Rahman Khan from 1880 to 1901. “Iron Amir” as he was called, worked for a centralised state in an attempt to unify the nation. Conquering most parts of Afghanistan, he initiated multifarious social, political, economic and administrative reforms. Afghan’s endeavour to build a strong state was again strengthened by Habibullah Khan for his period of reign generated a nationalist reformist movement. Open to modern changes, the nation consequently moved into a sense of Islamic brotherhood and therefore worked under this umbrella towards progress and independence. With an agenda to create a positive nationalistic consciousness among the public, the period witnessed a gradual but steady “growth of literacy, scientific and vocational training, health care and means of communications within a western-inclined framework of modernisation” (Saikal 44). In an attempt to free Afghanistan from the colonial British, anti-British feeling was complemented with strong nationalistic feelings. Afghan national reformists soon drew inspiration from the struggles of other nations like Turkish Revolution and Bolshevik Revolution and resulted in a national awakening.

In an initiative to place Afghanistan among the modern states, the nation sought changes in its politics creating a radical and stable unit which was accompanied by social revolts and upheavals majorly from the royal families. Leaders like Amanullah fought for independence from the British and laboured for national freedom and modernisation. Though ideals of tribal confederacy and the spirit of

<sup>5</sup> Amin Saikal introduces the nation to his readers with these words in *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (1).

Islam lurked within the larger framework of nationalism, certain rulers perceived a sovereign state of Afghanistan beyond these principles. At the same time, any form of domestic reform had its connection with the external links of the nation. On the one side when the country tried to free itself from the clutches of Britain and Russia, the other side established relationships with other Muslim nations like Persia, Turkey and Egypt. Apart from diplomatic and political support from these nations, in the course of time, educational, medical and administrative support was wielded. Afghanistan's relationship with other nations also extended to the European circle and later resulted in a strengthened tie with the Soviet Republic. Disputed territories between the two nations were returned to Afghanistan and both sides refrained from military and territorial encroachment. Modernisation was rightly viewed as a direct outcome of independence and the nation witnessed different phases of modernisation, beginning from radical educational reforms to a wider understanding of the advancements across the world and thus establishing foreign acceptance. Quite evidently the reforms which also included certain rights of women took shape and were confined to the main cities like Kabul.

Mohammed Daoud Khan's Primeministership from 1953 became a hallmark in the event of modernisation. His progressive policies were remarkable in its achievements but also were let down by his foreign policies, especially with that of Soviet. Soon, Afghanistan moved along the path of complete dependence on Soviet Union and as erstwhile remained influenced by the policies of the former. The nation's involvement with the Soviets triggered movements from other nations namely, the USA and Pakistan. Although Daoud's reign observed many reforms, the nation's increasing dependency on a large power like the Soviet Union brought about a change in its state of independence and liberty. With the end of his rule, it was perceived that the nation was ready for a constitutional change and to pursue better national policies in view of the need for democracy. It soon gave way to political parties like the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Modelled on the Social Democratic Party of Russia, PDPA soon instigated the Saur Revolution against the self proclaimed President, Daoud in the month of April in 1978. The pro-Soviet PDPA overthrew Daoud and later paved the way for the Soviet Invasion and Soviet Afghan War from 1979 to 1989 against the Mujahideen. The Soviet Union became the longest sustained foreign occupation in Afghanistan resulting in a large scale of refugees migrating to Pakistan and Iran. Not only were there massive destruction of lives but also of the irrigation systems, industrial areas and much more leading the nation to the status of one of the least developed countries in the world. Though the withdrawal of the Soviet Union took place, war did not end. The nation was again faced with a civil war between the Afghan army and the Mujahideen. Soon after, "the Mujahideen declared Afghanistan an Islamic state for the first time in its history, and their takeover was welcomed by many Afghans in the expectation that their war-ravaged country would return to peace and order" (Saikal 2009). Strikingly, the Mujahideen's Islamic rule oscillated with Taliban's Islamic extremism. The Taliban made rapid territorial gains with the support of Pakistan and opened a new phase in the regional and religious politics of Afghanistan; disturbing the nation's governance. The cultivation of poppy and drug trafficking became common with support from many who sneaked into the nation from Saudi Arabia. The objectives of the Taliban were not comprehended by a large part of the world and as such the nation faced strong resentment from the USA. When violence became the order of the day, punishment of crimes was also of greater altitude. A strict interpretation and

adherence to the Islamic law was maintained to administer the general public but was frowned upon by very many.

The Taliban strongly opposed efforts in modernization that eroded Afghanistan's cultural integrity...They similarly resented the erosion of moral values as reflected in Hollywood and Indian films, as well as in television serials. The Taliban felt that the films and serials both degraded women and promoted violence. (Gritzner and Shroder 68)

Taliban as a political group standing for Islamic fundamentalism advocated the return to a purer and strict religious ordinance. With the growing political and economic interest of the US in Afghanistan and the rising gender issues, Taliban faced a gradual decline in 2001. Triggered by the tragic events of September 11, 2001, a strong and impending military action was established in Afghanistan changing the political scenario and the nation receiving wider public attention, constantly under the Western gaze and that of the media. Afghan history continues with its war-torn effects and a dream of political stability.

Perhaps in view of this research there is the necessity of a historical account with respect to women of the nation. While early writers like Wali M. Rahimi in *Status of Women: Afghanistan*<sup>6</sup>, identifies that the position of women as one being traditionally inferior to that of men, Ghosh traces the history of women in Afghanistan to exhibit that women did not always face oppression and inferior status as it had occurred under the Islamic fundamentalism, namely the Mujahideens and Taliban. History and its impact on Afghan women have been quite brutal, for every battle and struggle took place with a gender agenda, either leading to a complete deterioration of the status of women or an attempt to uplift them. While Islamic fundamentalism was looked upon with much dismay by the rest of the world, it is also important to make note of how the traditional tribal communities contributed to the existing patriarchal system, resisting steps towards modernisation and thus defining the role and status of women within the society. Quite often women were used as the means of establishing the prominence of each tribe with tribal laws which governed marriage, divorce and even prevented them from education. Moving on to the modern monarchies, Amir Abdur Rahman, raised the marriage bar for women, abolished forced marriages and women were also given rights to their father's and husband's properties. Though proving to be a challenge for the tribal systems and kinships, shortly, schools for girls were opened in different parts of the nation. Marking another period of modernisation, King Amanullah, fought against polygamy and the use of the veil. With much resistance from the tribal communities, Daoud also continued in a state of progress by declaring the act of veiling as voluntary. The beginning of the second half of the twentieth century therefore witnessed a development in women's status. Education was promoted to a large scale along with women becoming economically active, entering politics and gaining the right to vote in 1964. With the formation of PDPA, the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW) was also formed, the first women's group ever to be formed in the country and it worked towards the abolishment of bride price, forced marriages and also to promote literacy. With the Civil war and the transfer of power into the hands of the Mujahideen, the lives of women were in a jeopardy. As an Islamic state, women were allowed public appearances only when covered from head to toe and retrieved from public arenas and professions. "The period from 1992-1996 saw unprecedented barbarism by the

<sup>6</sup> A report on the status of women in Afghanistan prepared by Wali M Rahimi as part of a UNESCO project launched in the year 1986 wherein the status of women in seven developing and underdeveloped countries were undertaken.

Mujahideen where stories of killings, rapes, amputations and other forms of violence were told daily. To avoid rape and forced marriages, young women were resorting to suicide” (Ghosh 7). The rise of Taliban intensified the Islamic state of affairs, conforming to the fundamentalist views. Women were confined to their houses and were not allowed to go out except for when accompanied by a male relative. Forced marriages and rapes again became the order of the day and education was banned. Therefore the progressive attempts made by some leaders were overthrown by their successors having faced contestations from different sides of the nation and proved to be at the cost of modernization. The discussion of fundamentalism, Islamic fundamentalism and state control took a complete deviant shape with the events that followed 9/11. The response of the West to the situation spread to a pan-Islamic state when Muslim women across the world gained prominence both in their own nations and elsewhere, mainly through the media. Not only did a conspicuous drift arise between the West and the East, but general definitions of women and their roles led to further controversies on liberty, freedom and issues of citizenship. The marginalisation of women and their roles within the institution of the family became a tool for the fundamentalists. Women were quite often fit into theoretically ideal gender roles, one which was explained and set about within the familial space. The afore mentioned “defined roles” of women, more than being a means of suppressing the voice of women proved to occupy a space which triggered the exercise of patriarchy and all forms of power from the side of men. Social recognition and acceptance of Afghan women were fought for by modern associations like the RAWA. While the west views that the “burqa” poses a threat to the Afghan women, it is of more importance to realize that it is not just within the burqa or the Islamic fundamentalism that the problems lie. The West’s attempt to “liberate” will also not “save” the women of Afghanistan. The socio-political conditions of the nation calls for a deeper understanding of women in a venture for gender equality challenging dominant discourses as voiced by other nations (West). A seeking of the self in history and the willingness to reconstruct what beholds the personhood of a woman in a turbulent nation like Afghanistan should be given greater significance.

To go back in thought of how the self exists or does not exist as part of the collective, it becomes vital to comprehend whether one can be independent of the society. Even in the most ideological sense of being, an existence without the collective seems to be impossible. Without much delineation on this aspect, I proceed to what constitutes the personhood. An understanding of the history of the Afghan women naturally propels the question of how far their personhood was accepted and along what lines their rights as persons taken away within these historical junctures. History not just as historical events but also as a narrative, as experienced by Afghan women have in all ways affected and impacted their lives. The self or the idea of the self, which I refer to as selfhood and which is also connected to personhood has been processed and regulated by history not only as an individual phenomenon which stands for itself. As Rose perceives it, a form of historical investigation can lead the self into thought and understanding of the parameters of the self, and the self in relation to others. The self itself is an invention, not fictionally but with respect to truth and suggests ones relation to history. Then again, the relation between history and truth becomes problematic. Not to delve much into the problematization of history, truth and life, I would like to draw upon the link between history and personhood. If in history, every individual is entitled to what may be termed or defined as “personhood” why would struggles of recognition and rights occur in the first place? It is with effect of how individuals are not granted their rights that the

question of personhood arises. From a feminist perspective, it is not challenging to declare the lack of personhood of women. Notions of personhood, not being universal, vary socially and legally across nations and have always been a topic of dispute especially in theology, ontology and medical science. Sarah Bishop Merrill's attempt to define person and personhood though in the larger framework of the clinical care seems to be of importance here:

The personhood of some people was self-evident, usually to those considered similar to the people asserting their personhood. Thus, a model of the standard person grew up unreflectively. It was made explicit by priests, philosophers, mothers, and other teachers answering the curious child about who counts or is important, and why...If all people were recognized and respected as people, the need to quarrel over the meaning of the concept of personhood would be practically obsolete (1).

The women of Afghanistan and their personhood need to be addressed here. For centuries the nation has witnessed girls who were raised only for household chores and as obedient and tolerant wives. Women did not have the right to demand for divorce and were not allowed to earn a living. As one away from Afghanistan, it might prove inauthentic to prove the aspects of their personhood. But from the larger understanding of history, it remains to be understood that these women have undergone much suffering, taking away their legal, political, social and economic rights, and thus to largely frame the idea that they were denied the status of what it means to be a complete person. In many ways, therefore, this denial and rejection are the origins of the impetus to represent their personhood in different forms and perspectives, of which I presume literary representation is one.

Literary representation of history has taken form in different genres across the ages- from drama to novels to poetry. Not to mention, the process has also taken a reverse path with the historicisation of literary texts. Afghan women have, in ways resorted to literary representation of history and historical effects not just in an attempt to record history but as an effect of personal experience and in ways representing ideological conflicts. To bring into thought the relation of poetry and history, one is reminded of Aristotle, who in *Poetics* writes that poetry is more philosophical and serious in nature as it speaks more of the universals than history which concentrates on the particulars.<sup>7</sup> Poetry, as a form of narrative like autobiographies and testimonies can take not only a historical route but also one which presumes to speak as a collective in which the individual and self are brought into place. Every poet consciously or unconsciously tends to resonate past actions, social behaviour and thus historical and social parameters in their verses. Any form of social reality or historical fact therefore does not hold just one direct fact or truth but it reflects many readings on the same event in different angles bringing about a strange but implicit connection between history, psychology and literature.

With the continuous reference to the term history as the factual happenings or social realities, I would also like to bring into picture another aspect of history, the history of the self which has been dealt with in the previous section in an attempt to understand their personal life-worlds. Historical circumstances, both personal and otherwise have transformed the idea of forms of repression (both in the mind of the perpetrator and the victim) evolving in different ways. As such, it is seen how history

<sup>7</sup> Silvia Carli in "Poetry is More Philosophical than History: Aristotle on Mimesis and Form" brings together interpreters who discuss poetry and history in the light of Aristotle's thought.

and personhood remain parallel and take form in literary representation by these women as prospects for comprehending and placing the self within history and thus conceiving different perceptions of selfhood.

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