

# Stillness of star-less nights: Afghan Women's Poetry of Exile

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## **Abstract**

Contemporary English poetry by Afghan women presents a remarkable reading experience. Critical explorations, at ease with post-colonial conditions, minority solitude and feminist readings, have largely remained inimical to the unique, yet chequered history that women poets such as Zohra Saed, Sahar Muradi, Sara Hakeem, Fatana Jahangir Ahrary, Fevziye Rahzigar Barlas and Donia Gobar document in their works. Most of them write in their native Dari and Pushtun languages as well as in English and often their English compositions have smatterings of their native tongues. Even though individual experiences differ, these women delve into the collective memory of oppression, pain and unrest to give vent to their feelings, and seek to reach out towards a sorority of shared angst. This paper seeks to explore the complex cultural contexts which have given birth to Afghan women's poetry in exile.

[**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Afghan, women, poetry, exile]

Afghanistan is one of the most impecunious nations of the world. War-ravaged, beleaguered, Afghanistan has been prone to invasion, internal revolts ever since the time of Alexander the Great. With a dozen major ethnic groups such as Baluch, Chahar Aimak, Turkmen, Hazara, Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Nuristani, Arab, Kirghiz, Pashai and Persian, the dominant notion of a singular identity has been provided by Islam, even though there are tiny Hindu, Sikh and Jewish communities in the country. From the early years of the nineteenth century till date, Afghanistan has witnessed not one, not two, but as many as three major colonizing powers – Russia, Britain and the United States of America, vying for supremacy. The intervention of the British Empire and Czarist Russia in the internal affairs of Afghanistan in the early years of the 1800s jeopardized a country seething with insurgency. The two colonial powers engaged in a fiendish competition amongst themselves over control of land, power over indigenous states and a dogged persistence in meddling in the affairs of the independent states, a contest that was euphemistically named 'The Great Game'. However, in spite of the British interest in Afghan affairs, as an obvious corollary of substantiating its claim over the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan under the leadership of King Amanullah declared independence capitalising on the dramatic wave that witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the other rebellions that swept across Asia at that time. However, Amanullah's reign that started from 1923 initiated reforms in women's status in society and gradual improvement in their position in the familial structure. Needless to say, the reforms met with vociferous, often riotous, protests and ultimately led to the end of Amanullah's rule.

Another period that witnessed a concern for the deplorable condition of women in Afghanistan was when the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), backed by the Communists set off an agenda of social transformation that ultimately would have led

to a progressive empowerment of women in Afghanistan. However, even this initiative received a setback due to the overthrow of the PDPA led government and the birth of the Mujahideen. Afghan women continued to be at the receiving end by being doubly oppressed by ruthless colonial powers, wars and political strife on one side and on the other - stringent, suffocating social strictures that were perpetrated by patriarchal fascists who cried down all pleas for women's basic human rights and privileges. Yet even today, traditional practices such as child marriage, giving away girls for dispute resolution, forced isolation in the home, exchange marriage and "honour" killings oppress and marginalize women. These discriminatory practices are enforced by the menfolk, including some religious leaders by invoking their own interpretation of Islam. In most cases, however, these practices are inconsistent with Sharia law as well as Afghan and international law, and needless to say, violate the human rights of women.

The gender-dynamics of a country that has been in the throes of colonial aggression by two of the major powers of the time – Britain and Russia, coupled with internal strife and forced dissemination of a cult-religion that noticeably veered away from the nobility of Islam in order to keep tabs on women, prevaricated any attempts for setting up of an egalitarian society amenable to women. From the 80s onwards, the United States started taking an active interest in the Islamic fundamentalists and fuelled Afghan unrest by offering militancy training and sponsoring weapon-support to the Mujahideen. However, the U.S. interest fizzled out with the collapse of the Soviets. Burhannuddin Rabbani, the chief of the Northern Alliance and the principal architect of the recent Taliban ouster from Kabul, ruled from 1992 to 1996, unleashing hitherto unheard misery on women. During his reign over 60,000 people were murdered and thousands of women were raped. A new Islamic fundamentalist movement, the Taliban, overhauled the governmental setup in Afghanistan in 1996 with active support of the neighbouring Pakistani Intelligence agencies. Born and nurtured in Islamic schools that had mushroomed within the portals of Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, the Taliban sought to create a theocratic state based on their own interpretations of the Koran. Already severely repressed by the various Mujahideen warlords, the plight of Afghanistan's women reached an all-time apex. The veil became the law of the land, and women were forbidden from attending school or holding employment outside of the home, to leave the house without a male escort and were not allowed to seek medical help from a male doctor. Women, who were doctors and teachers before, suddenly were forced to become beggars and even prostitutes in order to feed their families. Following the September 11 World Trade Center bombings the United States accused Osama Bin Laden of the crime and demanded that the Taliban hand over Bin Laden. On their refusal to meet the U.S. demand, the Afghan United Front together with the United States attacked the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and forced them out of Kabul, but not before shoving the entire country into breathless summers of man-made drought and cruel winters of malnutrition and death. The restrictions on Afghan women were officially withdrawn but even today, the abuse of women continue as the government is too weak to enforce many of the laws, especially in the rural areas, and in what were once Taliban-supported areas.<sup>1</sup>

The monolithic power of the Taliban and the Mujahideen has effectively homogenized the plurality of experiences of the masses. Therefore, the general consensus about the plight of the Afghan women irons out differences amongst women and the saga of Afghan women almost threatens to become a unilateral narrative. However, the poems of the expatriate women poets present a wide array of thematic preoccupations, starting from a grinding sense of rootlessness (*Nomad's Market: Flushing Queens* by Zohra Saed), lost love (*Promise* by Fatama Jehangir Ahray),

forced exile (*Exile, or My father's elbow* by Sahar Muradi) religious skepticism (*Faith Lies in Worship* by Sara Hakeem) and even eco-feminism (*I am Nature* by Fevziye Rahgozar Barlas).<sup>2</sup> Though Afghanistan – the country of their origins feature in their poems, the responses vary-from a nostalgic yearning for an Edenic homeland to a vivid description of military excess that only evokes terror and revulsion. The poets try to reach out to the members of their extended families who have been scattered world-wide, and memory for them become as much a tool of oppression as of psychic healing. Sahar Muradi calls her memoirs that prefix her collection of poems '*A Bat is a Leather Butterfly, or the Wonder of being Several*'-the subtitle reminding one of the 'Anekanta' doctrine of Indian Jaina philosophy.<sup>3</sup> In Dari, the language in which she learnt to articulate herself first, the compound 'leather butterfly' signifies 'bat' and Muradi finds her own unique position of an immigrant Afghan woman in America as appropriate to the term. Bats, beside being noted for extremely poor eyesight are also migrants, and physically weak and vulnerable- qualities that well may have gone to inspire Muradi's self-nomenclature. Donia Gobar, a middle-aged medical practitioner, and a noted poet and sculptor, romanticizes about the country of her birth, whereby Afghanistan is lovingly named Ariana, a derivative from the Persian word Aryan, and one of the most popular girl-names in Afghanistan. In spite of the disruptions that taint the country of her dreams, Gobar retains a core of belief that Ariana, the helpless child, 'in cold broken houses/On sizzling country roads/ In dark alleys of glorious cities/ In hospital corridors' will yet survive. She endearingly wishes to hear Ariana's whispers,

I will never be gone . . .

I will never be gone . . .

I will never be gone . . . (*Ariana*)

In Fevziye Rahgozar Barlas, one comes across poems which she claims to be written 'for women in Afghanistan': poems such as *My World*, *Waiting for a Miracle*, *I am Nature* and *I am Love*. Daughter of the famous Afghan journalist, novelist and poet, M.Shafee Rahgozar, Fevziye's poems connect women to nature and in spite of occasional despair, her poems transcend the pervasive gloom and desolation that have come to be associated with women's condition across the world. By fusing the female self with the seasonal cycle in nature, Fevziye can put forth an assertion similar to the one rung in by Percy Shelley a couple of centuries earlier, 'If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?'

I am waiting for a miracle  
Till the scent of the dried leaves  
Sings the melody of rain  
To the ears of the wind

I am waiting for a miracle  
The green miracle of spring. (*Waiting for a miracle*)

In an interesting re-working of the Fanonian thesis, these Afghan-born U.S. based women poets have circumscribed the disciplinary regimen of their parent-country by taking up writing as acts of cultural self-definition, at a time when Taliban oppression had receded and emergent nationalist consciousness was making its presence felt, sometimes even in distant shores.<sup>4</sup> It is important in this regard to understand that though they are displaced, both in space and time from the blood-curdling acts of torture that many of their unfortunate sisters had to suffer - sometimes the poets themselves had oppressive personal memories of air-strikes and acts of horror as in Zaheda Ghani's fictocritical work, *Afghanistan* – the main thrust of these women is a persuasive presentation of an authentic Afghan experience. As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out,

specialness is expected of these subjects.<sup>5</sup> The Western world wishes to dust aside the monotony of sameness and therefore these expatriates have to paint themselves 'thick with authenticity'. To the elitist reading world (primarily First World), the Afghan women poets in question are the brand ambassadors of the 'real' Afghanistan, and should oblige the modern sophisticated reading public with the 'truly different' experience rather than dabbling in issues of hegemony, racism, feminism and social change, which again these women cannot avoid due to the current trend of using liberal discourse. Minh-ha correctly observes that the Japanese looks more Japanese in America than in Japan, and hence, any hint of inauthenticity with regard to representation of thoughts and experiences may be read as a loss of origins or a gross deviation from non-Western values and thoughts. This in turn engenders a crisis of a different order for the women, because of their concurrent locations in two worlds, one utterly and irretrievably lost, and the other, too dissimilar and distant to be assimilated with. This dilemma is maturely dealt with in Sahar Muradi's verse paragraph, *Pushing*, where the protagonist Shabnam, a young Americanized Afghan girl, practices aerobics, as all American teenagers do, while brushing past comments, concerns, images that juxtapose her mother's concern over Shabnam's supposed loss of virginity, TV shows that graphically depict human love-making, the 'madar' (sic) dutifully setting 'padar's chai' (sic) on the coffee table and the girls' swim in the nearby lake wearing long t-shirts.

Shabnam is on the floor of our room, blooming brown globes out of her little  
Black lycra top, and counting. Twentyfive, tewntysix, twenty seven in  
Hot, heavy breaths . . .  
Past the bathroom where madar is convinced the tampon absorbed her  
Daughter's purity . . . past Olsen Middle School and the girls  
Who didn't inherit two unwieldy worlds beneath their shirts or the skin of  
Animals on their arms . . .

The poem also includes a reference to the typically Eastern practice of old-aged relatives, 'arriving with month-long suitcase from another son's house and a face full of sickness and complaint and judgment' at the Hollywood International Airport. The climactic point in this work is the father's sudden scornful outburst at the young girl, as if her skimpy casual workout-wear lacerates his composure and reveals the sullen patriarch ready to chastise women, even if it be his daughter, ostensibly because even in a new, liberated ambience, the young girl's actions are not beyond censure and her latent sexuality that has already defied the black veil for the black lycra top needs to be controlled. In another poem, *Nomad's Market: Flushing Queens*, Zohra Saed analyzes the tug of the roots for those people who had to flee away from their bleeding motherland to set up residence in the American shores, yet whose feet start tapping in glee when they watch pirated videotapes of Afghan singing sensation, Ahmad Zahir. The second generation of Afghan settlers, including the poet herself, can just watch in detached awe 'my mother and all seven aunts / danced in the living room./ In the next room,/The children were hypnotized / by Bugs Bunny'. The dance of the mother and the seven aunts to express their heartfelt joy is in stark contrast to the televised images of

musical videos of beautiful women  
singing folk songs from Jalalabad  
and Kandahar, decked in gold,  
eyes swept with surma.  
They keep their eyes averted  
and carry themselves as if being arranged in a marriage  
There is no dancing here

Most likely, it is their husbands who play  
 The tabla behind them  
 Strands of home dance through  
 Aisles of Pepsi and Heinz,  
 Chocolates and cigarettes.

It is apparent that a small part of Afghanistan has been imported in this downtown Asian settlement of Flushing in Queens, Manhattan, New York, but the original experience does not match the resultant performance in sheer *joie de vivre*. In an odd reversal, the expatriates enjoy more mental freedom as far as societal restrictions are concerned, whereas in the featured music videos, the 'beautiful women . . . decked in gold, eyes swept with surma' can only avert visual contact, for their zealous, watchful husbands keep a tab on them, in music as well as in life. Dance, an art form that momentarily succeeds in obliterating inhibitions of any kind is embraced by the immigrant women whereas the Afghan women singers, featured more publicly in music videos can only demurely sing without looking up and having any visual contact even with the camera, the eye of the public. Yet, the young, second generation Afghan settlers, here the poet – a young girl, can allow the shopkeeper's son to 'circle around me, pretending to rearrange layers of velvet prayer mats', an intimacy that is challenged in the very next line – 'he has spotted another exile'-an index of distance and displacement. The condition of double exile that the young poet experiences alienates her as much from her parent country-where she does not belong, as well as her surrogate-country, America, where she can never be naturalized and will always be designated in her special status of an exile.

The condition of being an exile is further grappled in the poem, *Exile, or my father's elbow* by Sahar Muradi, where the young daughter of an Afghan expatriate low-scale hotelier recounts how her father often loses himself in his storehouse of memories, even while his elbow is still placed on the counter-top. The split in his self-his mind in his motherland and just his elbow is in America unnerves the daughter, just as it does the mother who is busy in her newly nurtured culinary skills of preparing sandwiches, sub rolls, large or small salads, while at home she dishes out ladles of 'qorma challow' and chunks of 'chabli kabobs'. At home, amidst references to the white snaking pattern in the mountains of Mazar-i-Sharif that signified the spirit of Hazrat Ali and Zohake Mahran, the father educates his children on a staple diet of Afghan myths, a trove of knowledge he knew no one in America would care to learn. And then, unlike girls in Afghanistan, when his daughter goes to attend an American college, he requests her to photocopy old archived maps of Persia and Baluchistan, countries that had ceased to exist except in his dreams. The adamancy of the father in clinging to his roots is thrown into relief by his worldly-wise wife who wishes her husband to unlearn old, irrelevant dates and details of their Afghan past and instead nags, 'Why don't you learn the prices?' In this poem that is significantly polyphonic, Sahar Muradi also includes a typically Western voice, that of Bob, who queries about father's elbow repeatedly, as if that is the only part of him that is visible in America, while the rest of him rests at peace in Afghanistan - the land of his dreams.

Every night he goes online, elbow on the desk, hand at his lips, glasses  
 Dripping down his nose, and reads the latest news.  
 You will wear down the skin, Bob teases. (*Exile, or my father's elbow*)

While the horrendous details of a strife-ridden country are deliberately eschewed in favour of a romantic, desirable motherland one has been constrained to quit, in Zaheda Ghani's work, *Afghanistan*, the crude journalistic precision with which every detail has

been worked out calls for closer scrutiny. Part of a major work entitled *Fragmentations*, Ghani uses an avant garde form of fictocriticism beside using experimental language in this verse-paragraph. Following the New Journalism models of Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion, Ghani shares her memories of an actual air-strike that almost killed her school-teacher mother and etched a deep scar in her young mind about the life-threatening hazards of a nation being coerced to submission by external forces, in this case, the Soviets. This event was a decisive one in determining the course of the young girl's life, because the first thing the mother whispers to her daughter in a reassuring embrace after surviving the air-strike is 'We have / to get away from here.' Ghani grew up to be a journalist, engaged in her leisure in writing poetry and associating herself with women's charity group. In fact, she is the only poet who is settled not in U.S.A. but in Australia, countries differing in geographical location but not in offering refuge and peace to turbulence-hit souls like Ghani.

In *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, Abdul R. Jan Mohammad talks about two terms: 'petrification' and 'catalepsy'- both situations of dilemmas faced by a colonized individual.<sup>6</sup> If the individual decides to remain loyal to his native culture, he decides in favour of staying in a 'calcified' society. If on the other hand, he opts for assimilation, he runs the risk of being trapped in a form of 'historical catalepsy'. Jan Mohammed talks of the native losing his sense of historical direction as well as his initiative. Though Jan Mohammed has focused his attention on the African colonial situation, the ambit can be widened to include the predicament of the poets in discussion. These women, now ladies, have had to relinquish their native milieu in which possibly they would have remained nameless, expressionless, as thousands of their sisters and mothers were. The pain, of being thrust in an alien cultural climate as a consequence of displacement, had possibly been overcome, but not so the sympathy for the suffering sisters. They cannot afford to be calcified just for the sake of their existence, and neither can allow historical catalepsy for the sheer alienness of the two cultures. In keeping with Jan Mohammad's argument, these women in exile start nurturing ambivalence: she is attracted by the superior colonizing culture and repelled by the indigenous system that subjugates and humiliates her. And, this ambivalence often colours the religious predilections of these women as well. For instance, a mere schoolgirl of a poet – Sara Hakeem (All of fifteen years and a junior at Clements High School, Texas) in her poem *Faith('s) Lies in Worship* rues her absence of faith in religious observances, in this case, Muharram, and also thinks that the beat of drums fails to resonate with her heart beat. While the devout worshippers remain inconsolable mourning the untimely death of the martyrs, the young poet, conscious of her necessity to conform to her professed religion, remains skeptical of the loss. For her, the loss of the martyrs portend the loss of innocence, and tangentially, loss of 'free thought and individuality' because the religious pundits have already spelt out the emergent consequences of the catastrophe and precluded the possibility of any other interpretation. This kind of religious cynicism would have been strongly dealt with in her native country, Afghanistan and she could have easily hit the headlines for her ears/nose being chopped off or worse, beheaded. But, enjoying the immunity of a country like the U.S., she can and does wonder aloud –

I perpetuate the myth of belief  
They perpetuate the myth of brand-name Worship  
Which is the greater fault? (*Faith('s) Lies in Worship*)

The 'I' narrator is a second generation exile, who cannot align herself to the religion her parents profess and neither can have the courage to own another. The 'myth of belief'

she continues to carry along her therefore becomes a heavy , albeit meaningless baggage that she has to carry along. The 'myth of brand-name Worship' that 'they'- her parents/seniors adhere to so passionately is a symbol of the 'petrification' Jan Mohammed talks about. Interestingly, both these myths coexist in the young girl making her position as an exile even more problematic and vulnerable.

Afghanistan's economic marginalization, social disorder, and political dislocation may have led to large-scale emigration to conducive climes and countries, but there is no denying the fact that these women, uprooted from their native soil, are comfortably ensconced in their new homes. The pain of losing one's hope remains, the clamouring for a stable identity lingers in hearts stamped 'Exile' and the remembered memory of gender apartheid constantly haunts them. Their bodies become the sites of rape committed on their sisters back in Afghanistan – their souls cry out in pain with every act of transgression their Afghan women-friends suffer. Yet, standing on Brooklyn Bridge, the Afghan poet Zohra Saed, possibly the self-same girl 'born on Lailatul Qadr, holy night of Ramadaan' discerns how the coiled umbilical cord that had swallowed up the visions of the city of her birth had magically unfurled that gold-rimmed night and spread its fragrant fog all over the city of her exile, her new, safe haven of peace.

1977, Afghanistan: A girl born on Lailatul Qadr, holy night of Ramadaan  
 . . . Grandmothers tell the story of healing: how the wounds heal only after they  
 have memorized the moment of hurt. . .  
 April 1978: A revolution tangles ribs and spines with iron and steel  
 1998, New York City: When Lailatul Qadr comes again, she is over a bridge  
 between Brooklyn and Manhattan. While the night is threaded in gold, the lost  
 city in her navel  
 Unwinds itself from the swirls of skin and slips over this new city like a fog.'  
 (*What the scar revealed*)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>. See [www.afghan-web.com](http://www.afghan-web.com), accessed on 27.4.11

<sup>2</sup>. See [www.afghan-web.com/woman/](http://www.afghan-web.com/woman/) accessed on 27.4.11

<sup>3</sup>. The theory of many commensurable perspectives introduced by Jaina epistemology.

<sup>4</sup>. Fanon's argument about the emergence of a national culture from colonialism through the phases of assimilation and hybridity is tenable here, but the third phase, that is the fighting phase, is substituted through self-discovery and individual fulfillment. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967; 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1961), p. 179

<sup>5</sup>.Trinh T.Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989, quoted in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, London and New York, Routledge, 1995.p.267

<sup>6</sup>.Abdul R.Jan Mohammed, 'Minority Discourse – What is to be done?' Introduction to Cultural Critique issue on *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II*, no.7, Fall 1988, co-authored with David Lloyd, quoted in *Avenel Companion to Social Theorists*, ed.Pradip Basu, Kolkata, Avenel Press, 2011, pp.82-94

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