Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security

Vol. 10 | No. 1 | 2023

ISSN: 2045-1903 | Biannual, peer-reviwed. Published by CESRAN International

Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security

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CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS - CESRAN

Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security

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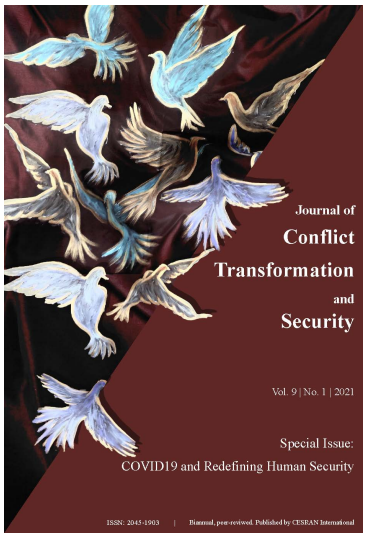
INDEXING & ABSTRACTING



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Peer-reviewed | Academic journal

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Vol.10 | No.1 | 2023

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ARTISTIC INTERVENTION ARTWORK **JCTS** *Volume10 , Number 1, 2023*

Art as Hope, Art as Refuge, Art to Give Voice: Suffering and Hopes of Women in Afghanistan

Tamana Barakzai

The series of paintings presented here are my expressions of what it means to be a woman in Afghanistan, what it means to be forgotten, oppressed and voiceless. What it means to struggle and hope in the absence of a better future.

I found refuge in art when my family and I became refugees and lived in Iran for eleven long years in exile and my brother and I were not allowed to go to school. I started painting to escape the boredom and because the colours and images gave me hope. I painted when I should have been at school and studying, painting became my sanctuary and outlet. What was my life in Iran is now the life of all Afghan girls under the new Taliban government: not being allowed to go to school, not being allowed to learn, not being allowed to express themselves.

Art continued to give me hope after my family returned to Afghanistan when the first Taliban regime fell. At the time, my father was very happy to finally be free from displacement and homelessness. He promised that when we returned to Afghanistan, I would be allowed to study art, and become a professional artist. When we returned home Kabul was in bad shape, we had no electricity, so many houses were still destroyed, many women still wore the *burqa* – and it was difficult to walk. But we were happy; we were home at last. I could finally was able to go to school. I made up for 12 years of education. I worked hard and graduated after five years. My parents were not rich, my mother was a teacher, my father worked for the government, but they put all their money into food and education.

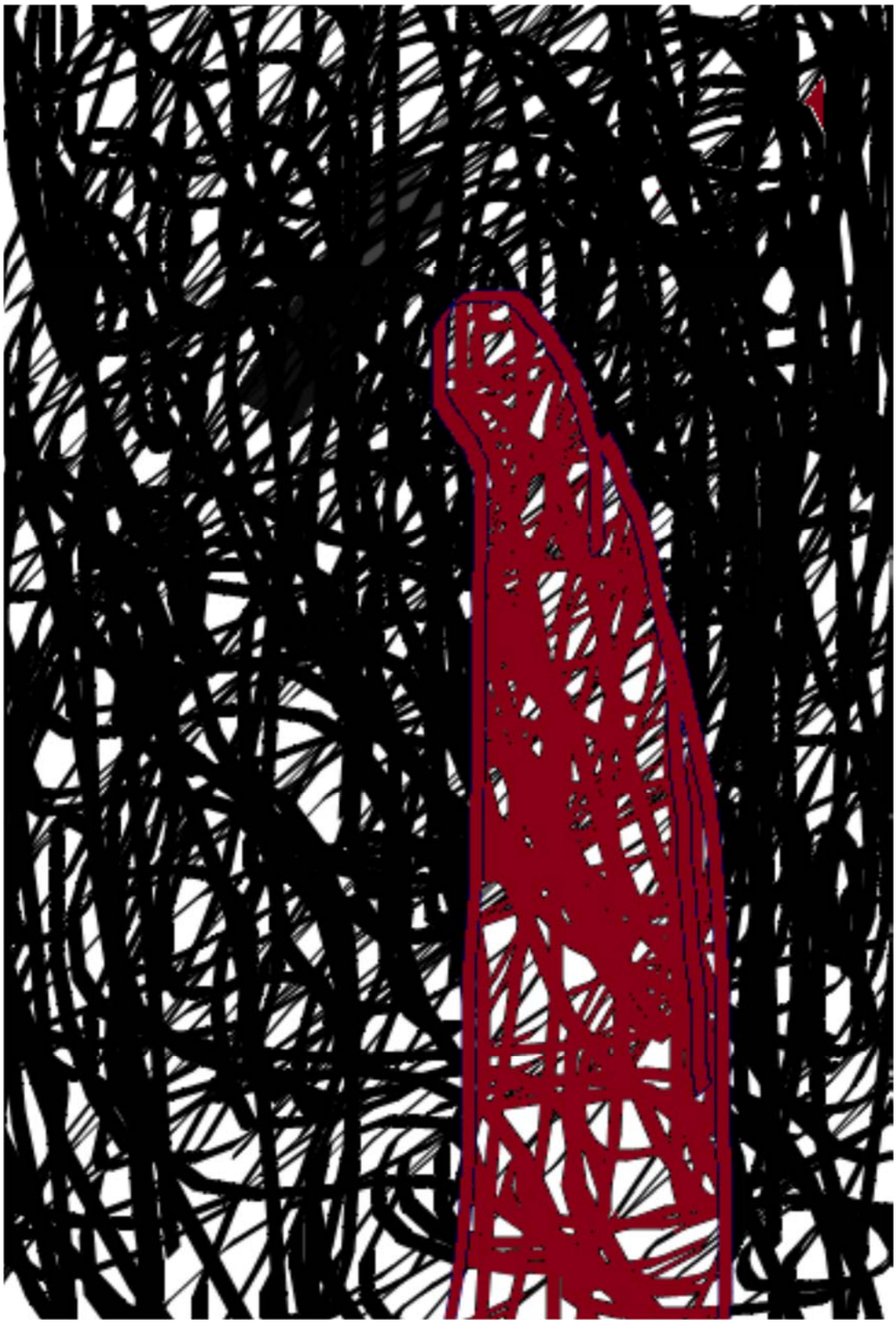
Those years when I was home in Afghanistan were both the best and the worst of my life. As the security situation deteriorated, we never knew if we would return home alive. So we said goodbye to our families every day as if it might be our last. I experienced war, poverty, violence, insecurity and illiteracy. Still, we had hope and we believed that **one day** the darkness would end and a better future would come. But it did not, the situation changed and the return of the Taliban to power took us back to square one. This is the fourth time that I have had to rebuild my life from scratch.

The more I learned, and the more difficult life became, I realised that women are the worst affected by all this. My mother is a good example. She lost her father, mother, four brothers and a sister during the civil war; she spent her entire youth in displacement (Pakistan and Iran) and poverty, and then worked as a teacher to give her children a better life. She always hoped that one day she would be able to retire and spend the rest of her life in peace. But she had to flee again, and now she worries every day about her son, my brother, who is left in Afghanistan. So her soul cannot be a peace. Life is still a struggle.

That is why I made women the subject of my paintings, to bear witness to what I see and feel in my heart: the physical and emotional experience of women in Afghanistan, who have been crying out for years, but whose voices have never been heard. But I also paint, to give hope, to break out of oppression and loneliness, and to give women a voice. This hope is also what I tried to give to my students, especially the girls, when I taught at the Institute of Fine Arts in Kabul.

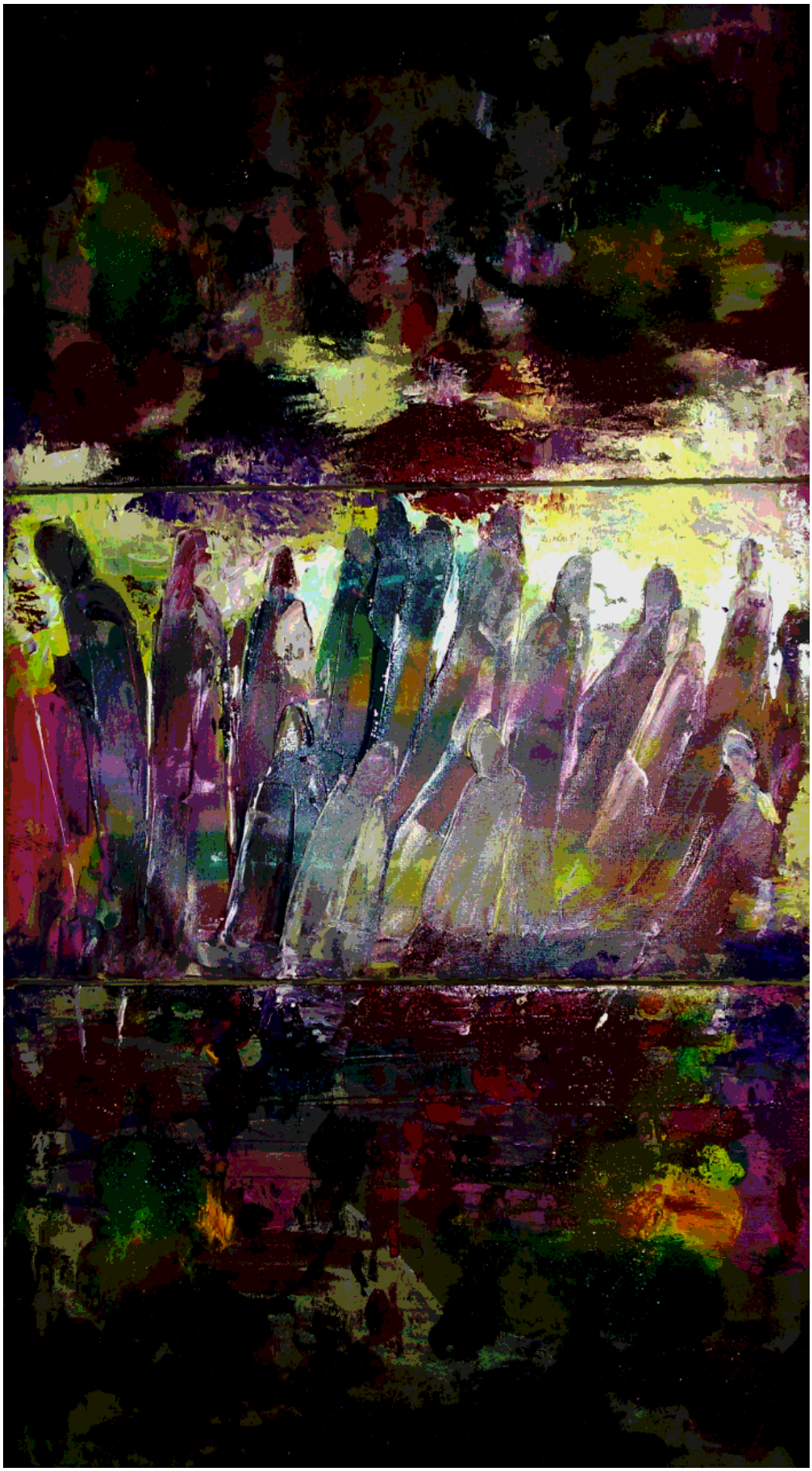
In this art essays, I want to present the lives of Afghan women, both the suffering and the hopes and aspirations, one image at a time. Each picture tells a story and together they provide a glimpse at what it feels like to be a woman from Afghanistan. I wish I could show more of my art, but I had to burn it out of fear after the Taliban returned to power and I went into hiding and then fled. These paintings are all I have left, but I will paint again, because *painting is a glimmer of hope, a way to free myself from a restrictive world of suffering, and a sanctuary for my loneliness.*

Picture 1/ Women's Alphabet: Women are so neglected in Afghanistan that many of us feel like we have come to earth from another planet and speak a different language. No matter how much we express our wishes, needs and desires, no one listens. I express this through women in full *burqa* singing and making music. The letters of the Persian alphabet in the background are written backwards, making them illegible. This is to symbolise that women's voices are not heard.



Picture 2/ In Complexity: Sometimes women feel so much heartache, sadness, pain, poverty, fear, anxiety and helplessness that they wish someone would find them and break them like a glass, tearing them apart and destroying them, but for the sake of the people who depend on the women, they will be patient and endure all difficulties. This work represents the inner life of a woman who imagines herself as an audio cassette so tangled that no one can unravel it.

Picture 3/ 8th of March: Women have been neglected for decades, but International Women's Day was celebrated every year during the Western-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The president, ministers and other high-ranking officials appeared on the occasion and made empty promises to the media, but in reality nothing changed for women. Many women, probably my mother, like me, we also went to the celebrations, dressed in our most colourful clothes, wearing jewellery and make-up to appear happy. But we were not happy, inside we carried unspeakable pain because of the hypocrisy we witnessed. Our souls are dead, as represented by the skull, and the green veil with flowers is the outward appearance we keep.



Picture 4/ Rise: This picture is divided into three symbolic frames representing the past, the present and the future of women in Afghanistan. The past was dark, and then women moved into the light (symbolised by the sunrise) and hoped that through education would change their lives, but darkness has fallen once more with the return of the Taliban.

Picture 5/ Search: This painting depicts the experiences and feelings of women when they think they are lost in the desert and are reaching for the sun to warm and guide them (Hope). But in reality it is a mirage, an illusion that disappears the closer you get to it.

Picture 6/ My dream: A woman is the symbol of happiness and she tries to create happiness for every person in the family at every stage of life. But in spite of all these sacrifices, we (women) still feel left alone and there is no one to fulfil our hopes and wishes? So the woman in the painting imagines that she is in another world, and she imagines that her dreams of a better future are being showered on her like a colourful rain.

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Tower Court, Oakdale Road, York YO30 4XL, UK

BOOK REVIEW

My Pen is the Wing of a Bird. New Fiction by Afghan Women
London: MacLehose Press, 2022, ISBN: 978-1529422214, 221 pp.

&

Andrea Chiovenda
Crafting Masculine Selves: Culture, War, and Psychodynamics in Afghanistan
NY: Oxford University Press, 2020, ISBN: 978-0190073558, 274 pp.

Afghanistan has been explained and reexplained, frequently through an outside and Western gaze. Over the past decades, Afghan women and snapshots from their lives have been used to exemplify the backwardness of Afghan culture and its immutable patriarchal structures. By failing to recognize Afghan women's agency and the complexity of Afghan culture, the Western feminist narrative – primarily political, but also academic – contributed to a story where Afghan women needed saving, and where the US and its international allies were able to do it, or at least justified in trying. As Taliban have returned to power, outside observers of Afghanistan risk doing the same again. Skimming, categorizing and failing to see the detail. It is thus refreshing – and important – that different narratives are emerging about Afghanistan such as the two complementary books that I have chosen to review. The first book is *My Pen is the Wing of a Bird. New Fiction by Afghan Women,* a collection of short stories by 18 anonymous Afghan women, published by MacLehose Press (2022). The second book is Andrea Chiovenda's *Crafting Masculine Selves. Culture, War, and Psychodynamics in Afghanistan* published by Oxford University Press (2020). A book based on in-depth interviews with ten men focused on their perceptions about masculinity. The title of the book is somewhat misleading, as Chiovenda's focus is specifically on the masculine selves of men living in or originating from Pasthun communities in and around Nangahar in Eastern Afghanistan and is not a comprehensive analysis of masculinities in Afghanistan.

Both books are well worth reading for anybody with an interest in getting a grasp of Afghan life and Afghanistan beyond the grand political narratives. The books are also relevant to review for this special issue, as they provide nuance to superficial assumptions about Afghan women as victims and all Afghan men as benefiting from patriarchal structures. The two books muddle the clear line between traditional and modern, as they show how individuals – men and women – navigate realities of different and ever-changing norms, values and ways of being. For me, the two books provided an opportunity to reflect on the many years of working in and on issues – including gender issues – relating to Afghanistan. The books resonate well with my learning, both Afghan women's and men's lives are constantly curtailed by the demands of family, community and culture, but the consequences of breaking the rules are harsher for women.

My review is structured as follows: I will first provide an overview of the two books and briefly reflect on them comparatively and in relation to the core theme of this special issue: Afghanistan through a decolonial lens.

Thereafter, I will dig into what I viewed as three common themes or threads in the two books: (1) Gender in Afghanistan is relational and can only be understood in the context of family, community and society; (2) the conflict affects all aspects of life in Afghanistan and has fundamentally changed Afghan society; and (3) the various international presences over the past decades have made Afghanistan into a melting pot or powder keg of different norms, values and ideas. This is primarily a book review, I will therefore be scarce in my referencing.

Introducing *My Pen* and *Crafting Masculine Selves*

The edited volume *My Pen is the Wing of a Bird* was facilitated by the organisation Untold Narratives that is focused on amplifying voices that are not usually heard on the international literary scene.[1] Women – or young girls – are the main characters in most of the stories, except in one story, where the main character is a young man who secretly likes to dress like a woman.

Many of the stories are fictionalized accounts about hope and joy in everyday life, although the hopes expressed are never grand and the everyday we learn about is generally harsh and sometimes deadly. For example, in one of the stories we follow the anxieties of a woman who only gives birth to girl children, and who, when she comes home from the hospital with yet another daughter, has to face the fact that her husband has taken a second wife. In another story we follow a woman who wants to buy a ring for herself and is trying to make some private money by stealing almonds from the family farm, she is burnt alive by her family for this transgression. We meet several women who suffer the consequences of conflict: a woman who survives a suicide attack, a woman whose child is killed in one, and a lonely elderly woman whose whole family has migrated. There are several stories of women who are forced to adjust to the consequences of hardship and injustice, like the blind woman who could no longer wait for the man who went to Iran and who she had promised to marry and who was forced to marry another man, and the woman who lost the contract for an apartment for state employees, as she did not sleep with the person providing the contracts.

Given that the stories are fictional, they do not provide the reader with a 'gender analysis' *per se*, rather glimpses into how gender matters. That is, by dealing with everyday challenges of Afghan women, the texts provide the reader with a sense of how Afghan women experience the joys and many hardships they face. Important to note though, *My Pen* is not a book about women's victimhood, the women in the stories have agency although within limits. Girls and women learn to act within families, at work places and in society in ways that provide them some of the opportunities that they want, but they are also very aware their opinion may not be asked for important decisions regarding their lives and that it might be better to endure harassment and violence than to confront it.

Most importantly, as these are stories about Afghan women, told by Afghan women. It took agency, creativity and time to tell them. Illiteracy rates among Afghan women remain high (and are likely to rise again), and even for many literate women expressing private thoughts in writing might be dangerous business. An Afghan woman poet from Kabul once told me that some of her female poet friends from the provinces only wrote their poems in phone messages that they sent to her and then erased. They were too afraid what would happen if their families found out that they were writing.

Crafting Masculine Selves is a very different book. Between 2009 and 2013, the author, Andrea Chiovenda spent 18 months doing field studies for the book. The first chapters in the book set forth the methodological and theoretical frame of the study and provide a background to the situation in Afghanistan. Chiovenda situates his study methodologically within clinical ethnography, i.e., on repeated in-depth interview sessions that take place over several months, even years. Theoretically, Chiovenda is inspired by psychological anthropology, i.e., he is interested in uncovering the bridge between the intrapsychic or the personal and the social/cultural or the structural. Masculinity is the lens through which Chiovenda approaches

[1] Write Afghanistan, http://untold-stories.org/write-afghanistan/ (Accessed 30 July 2022).

his interviewees, i.e. he is interested in how the men think about and perform masculinity in the context of patriarchal Pashtun society. While there is not one way of performing Pasthun masculinity, all the men reflect on key tenants of Pashtunwali, including the notion of *ghairat* that relates to honor and the three sources of power in Pasthun society; women, gold and land.[2] Honor can be defended with or without violence, but it has to be defended if the men and their families want to continue to enjoy respect and social standing within their communities.

The field study resulted in in-depth portraits of ten men. The portraits allow the reader to 'get to know' the men, their background and life trajectory, as well as how they relate to their family (especially the women in the family upon which their honor also depends), community, culture/religion and society. All the men that Chiovenda has interviewed are to some extent privileged, i.e., they are educated and are able to provide for themselves and their families through work or access to 'gold' or 'land'. However, it is evident that privilege is not a constant, but something that needs to be defended through being attentive to opportunities and through making sure that one's honor remains untainted. Failing to defend one's or one's family's honor will have dire consequences. Or as the saying goes, whoever becomes sheep is eaten by wolves.

The decolonial lens provides challenges for both books. For me it was not the fact that *My Pen* is written by Afghan women and *Crafting Masculine Selves* by a European man that made the differences. In fact, I would have wanted to learn more about what influence both *My Pen's* authors and *Crafting Masculine Selves'* interviewees had on the final product, the published books. *My Pen* wants to bring Afghan women's literary voices to the English-language literary audience. While it does so beautifully, the PDF review copy of the book that I read, provided no information about how the texts were written or how they were chosen. I would also have appreciated a few words about the translation: was it easy and evident to translate the texts from Dari and Pashtu to English? Did the authors use words or images that the translators had difficulties in translating? *Crafting Masculine Selves* is a book by a Western man who has spent a considerable amount of time trying to get to know his interviewees. In the discussions he also pulls in himself and discusses cultural differences in views on women, sexuality and family. However, also reading this book, there are a number of issues that could have been clarified: did the men (some who are easily identifiable in the book) have the opportunity to consent to the final text? How is their honor affected by a book that writes openly about their view on their families, community, wives, and sexuality? The assumption may be that the worlds of the men and the readership of the Oxford University Press book never meet.

Theme I: Gender, Family and Community

Women's lives are depicted as more restricted than men's lives in both books. This is evident not only from the women's stories, but also from the men's reflection about women's role in the family and in society. Almost all the stories in *My Pen* do in one way of the other show how women need to adapt to the demands of husbands, families or communities. The stories can be read as if being about how Afghan girls and women are taught – by parents, family, school and society – to become submissive and to almost erase themselves. However, they are also stories about the opposite: about women strategizing, against all odds, to express themselves and follow their, usually modest, dreams.

The men interviewed for *Crafting Masculine Selves* reflect on what it means to be a Pashtun man. Some of the men have crafted aggressive masculinities, as they view aggressiveness as being what pays off in their communities. It is obvious that for many of the men being aggressive is learnt and it is a performance. Others have crafted their male selves trying to be kind and respectable, adhering to what they view as more traditional Pasthtun values. It is obvious from all the men's stories that their honor is deeply connected to how the women of their families – especially their wives – live

[2] For further reading on Pastunwali, see for example: Rzehak, "Doing Pashto", 2011, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/10/20110321LR-Pashtunwali-FINAL.pdf and Glatzer "Being Pashtun-being Muslim", pp. 83-94.

and behave. Given the ongoing conflict, gold and property is easily lost to those who have more power or are more brutal, controlling women becomes then especially important. However, this does not mean that all the men are focused on controlling 'their' women. In fact, they have very different relations to their wives and the women in their household (although all of them seem to do what their mothers tell them to do). Some have a close partnership with their wives, discussing child rearing, household management and professional choices. Others do not see the point in engaging deeply with women as they are deemed weaker and less intelligent than men.

Both women and men will face consequences if they seek to transgress or alter the norms that Afghan culture or more narrowly Pasthunwali dictates. Even very tolerant families will have difficulties in standing up against the social control of communities. The 'dishonorable' behavior of one family member, will rub off on other family members, especially if families are seen as not doing enough to restore honor. The consequences of dishonoring families tend to be harsher for women, as they may even be killed for their transgressions. However, upon closer inspection Chiovenda demonstrates that men's freedom is not unconditional, men have to carefully craft their private and public selves, without a respected (or feared) masculinity, they are likely to be bullied and pushed around in both the private and public sphere.

Reading the two books shows clearly that gender is relational and that having a purely individual or structural perspective on gender is not enough. The books show that in the Afghan context where life – and survival – is dependent on family and community, the development of gender and power hierarchies need to be viewed also in the light of how a person is situated within a family and the family within the community. Several of the men in *Crafting Masculine Selves* noted, for example, that they would have wanted to marry a literate and educated wife, but their mothers chose differently. Their mothers, illiterate themselves, did not want stepdaughters that could challenge their power.

Education – or the lack of it – is present in both women's and men's stories, and it also influences gendered possibilities. Uneducated women have less power in their in-laws families and men who are uneducated can be pushed around more by their families and in their communities. In *My Pen* many of the stories are about the consequences of not having learnt to read or gone to school and how this results in the women not being able to defend themselves in the family or in relation to public authorities. As noted above, some of the men deplored the fact that their mothers did not want them to have educated wives. There is also reflection on the fact that mothers who do not view the value of education, will also not be able to transmit this value to their children.

Theme II: Living with Conflict

The protracted conflict in Afghanistan is ever present in both the books. Both the women's stories and the stories that the men tell, relate to the direct consequences of conflict, including dealing with armed insurgents and the risk of suicide attacks. However, equally present in both books are the more creeping consequences of conflict. Several of the women's stories provide reflections on the crudeness and opportunism that has crept into social relations, and several of the men express criticism about how violence has become part of even mundane social interactions. The men tell stories about how the only thing that is respected especially when a family member has been dishonored is displaying violent aggressivity – and going overboard with these displays. One of the men tell the story of how he had been beaten up at his own wedding, an act that had truly dishonored him. To get his honor back, he started an even bigger brawl at the wedding of the person who had dishonored him. He noted that he knew that he had gone a little bit too far, but that displays of aggressivity paid off. Another man tells the story about how neighbors took advantage of his family, at a time when there was only very old men and very young boys in the family. The neighbors knew that the family did not have the power to defend their honor violently, and that they would need to wait for the boys to grow up to do so.

Both books show that the threats to physical security do not only come from men with guns and bombs, but because of the power that communities have, rumors can be just as devastating. Certain rumors can turn your community against you and/or make you a person of interest for armed groups, and this can make life for individuals (both men and women) and families impossible, often forcing them to relocate from rural communities to provincial capitals, Kabul or abroad.

Again, education emerges as a sub-theme. One of the consequence of conflict that is lamented in both books is the toll that the conflict has had on literacy and basic education in Afghanistan. Several stories in *My Pen* have main characters who blame the lack of opportunities and injustices they are forced to accept on them being illiterate. All the interviewees in *Crafting Masculine Selves* are literate and have some education, but they often blame the backward customs and violence on the lack of education and on how conflict has changed Pasthun people and culture. The hold that the radical religious leaders travelling from Pakistan have on village youth is also explained by the youth being easily led due to their lack of education. The lack of education is then seen both as a result of the conflict and a factor that keeps the conflict going.

Theme III: Intervention, Societal Changes and Shifting Selves

A third common theme in the two books is acknowledgement of and/or reflection on external influence in Afghanistan. The foreign influence discussed in the two books includes the Russian and US and broader Western interventions, as well as influences from the countries in the region, especially Pakistan and Iran. Important, especially in *Crafting Masculine Selves*, is influence by radical religious leaders, mainly Afghan and Pakistani, whose seasonal presence is felt in communities in Eastern Afghanistan.

While all the interventionists have had their vision of what Afghanistan should be, most of the interventionist agendas, including the past two decades' Western-led stabilization and state-building project, have not reflected on how the changes and clashes of cultures would be experienced by Afghans. What the two books bring to bear is the deep-felt – positive and negative – consequences that the interventions have had in individuals, families and communities.

The women's short stories reflect on the effects of the quick changes of Afghan society on women's lives by providing the reader glimpses of what it means to go to work as a female journalist and not know if this is the day when one will be killed in an attack or what it means to grow old when one's whole family has migrated. As *Crafting Masculine Selves* traces the men's trajectories in their families and communities, the challenges the men face relating to changes in Afghanistan and how these changes have affected them personally and their families becomes a clear theme. Several of the men seem to live with fundamental conflicts, or very different private and public selves, as they may be quite modern in their families, but fear that the communities can only tolerate traditionalists or vice versa. For example, we meet the former Taliban preacher who become an employee of a non-governmental organisation, now preaching democratic elections, the young man whose whole life is about getting to America and who puts his family in danger by fraternizing with US contractors and missionaries and the man who would like to live in a slightly freer place (Kabul), as he would like to sometimes go out shopping or to restaurants with his wife and daughter.

Conclusion

Both *My Pen* and *Crafting Masculine Selves* are interesting, easy and pleasant reads about complex subjects. Although neither book explicitly addresses the past decades' US-led international intervention, the books do provide revelations about how this, now dramatically ended, intervention, was just one in a series of attempts to shape Afghan society and people with a combination of sticks and carrots. I do not know what stories the women would like to write today and what the men would say about crafting their masculinities today. How do they look back at the 'Western' period of their history? And, how do they relate to the new Taliban era Afghanistan?

Through my career, I have mostly dealt with feminist and gender perspectives, and through these perspectives developed an

understanding of critical race, intersectional and postcolonial perspectives. While I continue to recognize the importance of these critical perspectives, I also recognize that they are somewhat blunt tools for understanding our ever changing societies and especially for coming up with solutions. Critical theories that focus on structures that view gender, race, social class and origin as the main lenses through which realities and identifies are shaped, largely fail to provide a nuanced analysis of the options that individuals have within the structures. Critical theories that draw on postmodern and poststructural theories provide a more nuanced analysis of the complex processes that shape the lives of individuals in society. They also challenge how knowledge is produced and who gets to have a say about what the situation is and what the solutions might be. When juxtaposing my reading of critical theories produced at the European universities where I have worked with the experiences that I have from Afghanistan, I am often left with a gnawing sentiment that 'our critical' fails to really uncover the opportunism, ruthlessness and colluding interests of elites (in most societies), or the strategies that could work to help individuals and communities move beyond being exploited. Maybe a way to sharpen the tools that we have is to actually dig deeper into the experiences from places like Afghanistan, eg places that have faced repeated, radical change and where individuals, communities and institutions constantly have to adapt.

The women's short stories and the men's reflections about their own lives, do in very poignant ways show that somebody always benefits and somebody always looses out. The stories and reflections also express a nostalgia towards older, more decent times and reflect on the glimmers of decency in current times. Past times may not have been as easy as they are portrayed to be, but what is clear is that Afghanistan of the past decades has been a melting pot of often conflicting norms, interests and values and a roller coaster ride of social and economic opportunities. The question to ask might then not be how can we understand Afghanistan, but how can we use the Afghan lens to understand gender, power and change more widely.

Sari Kouvo

Associate Professor at the University of Gothenburg and Policy Officer Justice/Human Rights at the European External Action Service

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