



Journal of
**Conflict
Transformation
and
Security**

Vol. 10 | No. 1 | 2023

ISSN: 2045-1903

Biannual, peer-reviewed. Published by CESRAN International

Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security



Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security

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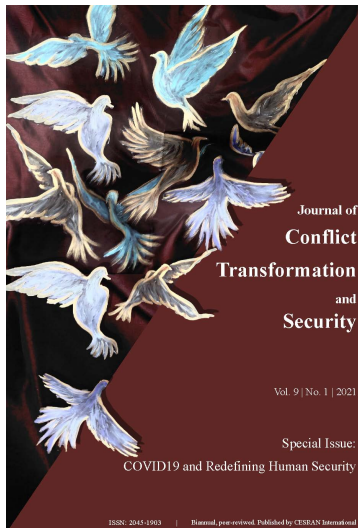
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Editor's Introduction to the Special Issue on The Protracted Crisis in Afghanistan: Decolonial Perspectives

Susanne Schmeidl and Mujib Abid

Biographical Notes:

Susanne Schmeidl is a transdisciplinary critical peace researcher and practitioner with nearly three decades of experience working at the intersection of conflict, peace and development. Between 2002 and 2014, she worked in Afghanistan with two grassroots organisations she co-founded on civil peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive research to inform development, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors. She holds a Ph.D. in Political Sociology from The Ohio State University (USA) and currently works as a research and conflict sensitivity consultant on Afghanistan for swisspeace, ACAPS and the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies. She is also an Honorary Academic at UNSW Sydney.

Mujib Abid has a PhD from the University of Queensland. His research focuses on histories of encounters with modernity in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on modernist enactments of power and subaltern experiences, resistance and tradition. Mujib's work foregrounds a decolonial theoretical sensibility for the Afghan context, drawing on traditional, subalternised Afghan knowledge perspectives. He holds an MA in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of Sydney and a BA from the American University of Afghanistan. He currently teaches as a Sessional Academic at Southern Cross University.

On 15 August 2021, the world changed for many Afghans when the Taliban succeeded in overthrowing the Western-installed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. In many ways, the chaotic evacuation that followed, especially the desperate images around Kabul airport, would serve as a fitting stand-in for the broader politics of the intervention: frantic, violent, and mismanaged. The unexpected blitz of armed conquest, coupled with shrewd negotiations at the district and provincial levels, is perhaps only paralleled by the Taliban's initial rise to prominence in the mid-1990s, and suggests a consistent misunderstanding of context and people.

The subsequent crisis that unfolded in Afghanistan, coupled with a reckoning with what went wrong, is further exacerbated by the persistence of imaginaries of Afghanistan informed by scholarly and expert knowledge that has struggled to disengage from the neoliberal state-building agenda and overcome its own wartime (and modernist) perspectives. Euro-American-centric scholarship and expertise has been a key site for reproducing material relations in Afghanistan, especially over the past two decades, but too often fails to adequately theorise or historicise peace and stability in contexts that do not fit its own. This is a challenge precisely because this scholarship assumes a position of universality as it remains invested in global agendas.

The current situation in Afghanistan is one in which many policy-makers and experts, and of course Afghan citizens, are still coming to terms with the fact that the Taliban have come to power for a second time and have revived their Islamic Emirate two decades after they were ousted by a US-led intervention. This uncomfortable experience of *déjà-vu*, which many did not see coming (or did not want to), reinforces the urgency of the call for a critical, decolonial critique of Western intervention and how we know and understand Afghanistan. It is in response to this context and problematique that we have curated the content of this special issue, questioning how Afghanistan is understood and how and by whom knowledge about the country is produced. Although the

contributions in this special issue do not directly deal with the current situation in Afghanistan, they do provide a window into how to read what is happening differently, with a new *de facto* government that lacks international recognition but nevertheless is busying themselves with building a state after their own vision of Sharia. While the Taliban leadership, as Afghanistan's *de facto* rulers, negotiates political hegemony and pluralism in its own complex and contradictory way, a widely acknowledged humanitarian crisis is unfolding. In particular, women, children and minorities are faring badly under the Emirate's watch. For those who want to know what might be done differently in Afghanistan today, the articles in this special issue invite critical reflection. There is an impetus to think 'differently', to transcend fundamentalist ideological determinisms of various origins and to foreground alternative perspectives of knowledge.

A new way forward

Although we came to this special issue with very different positionalities - Susanne as a white female European, perhaps tempered by having lived in Afghanistan for over a decade, and Mujib as an Afghan male who has only recently migrated to Australia - we shared some common motivations, including a passion for applying a critical decolonial lens that challenges modernist and neoliberal perspectives to the production of knowledge about Afghanistan, and an investment in foregrounding Afghanistan's subaltern knowledge perspectives.

We have both struggled, in our own ways, with Western forms of knowledge production about Afghanistan and how a majority has failed to adequately capture the complexity of the country, relying on the romanticisation of "wild tribes," extensive "othering" based on a racialised antipathy to liberalisation, and the reproduction of tropes such as "graveyard of empires" and "war-torn land." In both scholarship and fiction, "'Afghans' have been alternately described as treacherous or chivalrous, egalitarian or fanatical,"¹ or "as a sort of deadly *deus ex machina*, whose only role

¹ Foschini, "Creating the 'Idea' of a Country", 15 Sept 2022, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/dossiers/creating-the-idea-of-a->

country-the-afghanistan-in-world-literature-dossier/ (Accessed 20 Dec 2022).

in the drama was to mete out bloody punishment to the Europeans whose deluded antics always take centre stage.”²

Susanne worked for over a decade with two local organizations in Afghanistan, strengthening local knowledge production and exploring forms of knowledge co-production, reflecting on the ethical and professional dilemmas of this kind of oppositionality. Mujib wrote his PhD on the history of encounters with modernity in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on modernist enactments of power and embodied subaltern experiences, resistance, and tradition.³ The contradictions of training and working within the Eurocentric academy, and then critiquing that very institution, continue to animate his theoretical inquiries.

In order to equalise and democratise sources of knowledge and philosophy on Afghanistan, we feel it is necessary to break away from Euro-American-centric thinking and open up spaces for different ways of thinking and knowing. In order to break new ground, we have deliberately reached out to authors of Afghan origin, from the region and/or with lived experience of Afghanistan to ensure a more nuanced narrative that differs from the usual Western gaze. The contributions to this special issue reflect this diversity.

We are proud that the authors are by and large of Afghan origin and female (Morwari Zafar, Zarlisht Sarwari, Mejgan Massoumi, and Tamana Barakzai). Co-editor Mujib Abid is also of Afghan origin. Other contributors include Sepi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, a UK-Iranian national who has spent considerable time in Afghanistan since the 1990s, Sari Kouvo, a Danish national who worked in Afghanistan for several years, and Jeremy Simpson, an Australian national who worked in Afghanistan for a couple of years.

Featuring voices from Afghanistan, especially female voices, either by authorship, art or through reviewing stories written by them, is our way to demonstrate that voice is nearly impossible to suppress. Citizens of Afghanistan – both men and women – have voice, and they are willing to raise it. Afghans were “talking

back”⁴ during the difficult years of American-led occupation, to counter the discourse and praxis of the “war on terror” and now, even under an autocracy such as the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate, they strive to maintain that agency. All we need to do is listen.

The special issue contains four original articles, two review articles covering three books (two of which are written by Afghan authors), a longer interview piece with two Afghan writers and an artistic intervention, presenting a form of non-verbal communication/knowledge production about Afghanistan. The strength of all the contributions is that they are based on lived experiences – many on extensive (auto)ethnographic work and/or qualitative interviews. All the contributions are in conversation with each other, as they seek to offer counter-narratives of Afghans, Afghanistan and the Western perspective. In this sense, they each explore a different facet of the central problematique of the special issue. Together they offer a critical reflection on how to understand Afghanistan differently, from the lens of gender, power, identity and change.

Morwari Zafar’s article “The Old West and the Wild East” critiques the dangers of a narrow Western view of a complex country like Afghanistan, driven by a simplistic frontier mentality. She thus brings out the need for reflection by world powers (in this case the US) about the countries they seek to change in their image. She presents a compelling analysis that shows how US policy, driven by US analysts, has consistently essentialised Afghans and Afghanistan into a cultural caricature, often to justify its own failures. Her article exposes a country that has yet to come to terms with its own settler-colonial history – and thus engage with other cultures in much the same way as it did with Native Americans – perpetually stuck in an image of the Wild West and a frontier mentality where the white man is the saviour.

Jeremy Simpson’s article “Failing to Decolonise Knowledge Production in the Periphery” focuses on the negative impact that US-led or ‘metropolitan’ intervention has had on the way research is conducted in Afghanistan and the failure to strengthen local knowledge

² Morrison, “Twin Imperial Disasters”, 254

³ Abid, “Resurgent Histories of Afghanistan: Encounters with Modernity”.

⁴ Hooks, “Talking Back”, 123.

production through support for higher education. Inspired by what he observed while working in Afghanistan, he outlines the subordination of Afghan knowledge production to Western expertise, where Afghan voices are treated as raw data and Afghan researchers as data collectors rather than analysts, resulting in inadequate knowledge about Afghanistan. He then examines Afghanistan's higher education sector and how the past twenty years of the international state-building project in Afghanistan have failed to strengthen the necessary institution that could have strengthened local knowledge production. His article invites reflection on the inadequacies of Western development aid priorities and the short-sighted emphasis on replacing rather than building research capacity.

Sepi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam's article "Taliban Performativity through the Distortive Orientalist Looking Glass" combines postcolonial theory and performativity to explore the Taliban as a theoretical conundrum. It discusses the inherent colonial bias in understanding the Taliban and how this has affected 'our' understanding of who the Taliban are, and the need for a decolonised lens to understand their actions. In particular, she focuses her analysis on how the lack of an 'objective, decolonial' lens has consistently led to a reductionist and ahistorical understanding of the Taliban movement, and here she is in conversation with Morwari Zafar, who also argues against the reductionist reading of Afghanistan and the people who live in it. Sepi goes on to argue that many fail to read the Taliban's sophisticated form of performativity, a postcolonial politics that responded to varying degrees of subalternity, but which was "rooted in processes of contestation and subversion against the power/knowledge nexus that had relegated Afghans to permanent subaltern status". Drawing on examples from the 1990s to the present, and through her original analysis, Sepi provides new insights into the Taliban that should serve as new points of research in the future and should be mandatory readings for diplomats wanting to engage with the Taliban.

The themes of exile and diasporic identities are further explored by Zarlisht Sarwari in her article "Beyond Watan: Valency of place among a fragmented Afghanistan diaspora". Zarlisht explores the factors that have contributed to

lack of a cohesive national identity in Afghanistan, and how the diasporic experience as a rupture has led to reformulation of identity. Her analysis reveals the diversity of identities in Afghanistan across decades of conflict and displacement. Zarlisht's research, like Morawi's, thus challenges how outsiders simplify and "other" the people of Afghanistan, denying them complexity. She finds that in fragmented societies, such as Afghanistan, the notion of 'place', especially home (*watan*) can be the glue that binds people together rather than the more contested construct of 'nationality'.

For the Interview, Mujib Abid speaks with two Afghan writers in Australia – Hamid Parafshan and Omer Sabore – in order to explore what inspired their writing journey, the influence of Sufist, traditional knowledge on their writing, and how conflict and displacement have shaped their work and knowledge production. Mujib notes that "both writers respond through poetic writing, to the political imperatives of their adopted homelands". To demonstrate the immense decolonial potential of their work, the interview concludes with written words of both writers in the form of a poem, a widely used and unexplored form of knowledge production in Afghanistan.

For the book reviews, we offered the authors a choice from a list of manuscripts written by Afghans or based on extensive fieldwork, in the hope of highlighting a different understanding of Afghanistan. The resulting three book reviews offer diversity, the first by a young Afghan scholar on cultural diversity in Afghanistan, the second a non-academic compilation of short stories by Afghan women describing everyday life in Afghanistan, and the third by an Italian ethnographer/anthropologist studying masculinity among Pashtuns in Afghanistan.

Mejgan Massoumi reviews young Afghan scholar Omar Sadr's first book, *Negotiating Cultural Diversity in Afghanistan*, and finds that it offers a refreshing alternative narrative of Afghanistan and complicates simplistic views of Afghan identity. Similar to Sarwari's analysis of the Afghanistan Diaspora in Australia, Massoumi's reading of Omar Sadr unpacks the diversity of Afghan identity and the failure of the Afghan state to manage a multicultural society. This highlights the need for those who wish to

govern Afghanistan to reflect upon the ambiguities and gaps inherent within the project of state-building, something the Taliban should consider as they rebuild (and hopefully reimagine) their Islamic Emirate. Massoumi concludes that Sadr's book "focuses on a committed study of cultural diversity while exposing the disjunctures and fissures inherent in the nation-building project from 1992 to 2014".

Sari Kuvo reviews two books that deal with the complexities of gender in Afghanistan, an area she has researched extensively. One of the books is a collection of short stories written by 18 anonymous Afghan women (*My Pen is the Wing of a Bird*) and the other by ethnographer Andrea Chioyenda, based on interviews with young Pashtun men (*Crafting Masculines Selves*). She notes that the books "provide nuance to superficial assumptions about Afghan women as victims and all Afghan men as beneficiaries of patriarchal structures". Her discussion outlines the similar issues and themes that both books address, albeit from different perspectives, highlighting how the lives of Afghan women and men are "constantly constrained by the demands of family, community and culture", although "the consequences of breaking the rules are harsher for women". Her discussion thus challenges often-repeated colonial and neo-colonial myths about Afghanistan's social organization as a solely tribal structure and ethnic hierarchies. She concludes that both books, in emphasizing Afghan voices, offer invaluable insights into the lives of Afghans, beyond grand political narratives.

Last but not least, in the artistic intervention Tamana Barakzai presents her journey as a female artist in Afghanistan, and how her lived experiences as a woman have led her to make women the subject of her art. Her words, and art, are powerful and raw. They show that art is an important form of knowledge production and can transcend language barriers. They show the aspirations of Afghan women that not only the Taliban, but also the West should listen to. Tamana's work is in dialogue here with the book review by Sari Kuvo, giving us a direct insight into women's agency.

Taken together, all contributions offer a different view of Afghanistan and invite readers

to consider new ways of understanding and knowing Afghanistan. Given the dominance of Western knowledge on Afghanistan, we believe that this special issue contributes to the decolonisation of scholarship on Afghanistan and the growing body of work produced by critical scholars of Afghanistan. We hope that our efforts will inspire others to follow suit in promoting critical and decolonial knowledge production that gives voice to indigenous scholars and storytellers.

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The Old West and The Wild East: Cultural Biases in Contemporary U.S. Afghan Policy

Morwari Zafar*

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: The collapse of the Afghan state in August 2021 to the Taliban has ushered many explanations to account for the United States' (U.S.) and international community's failure to anticipate and prepare for the eventuality. Many Afghans, who fought socially, politically, or militarily against the Taliban under the umbrella of the international community, have been left to deal with the retribution. Looking specifically at the American context, I argue that Afghans were essentialized into cultural caricatures, which enabled the senior U.S. political leadership to absolve America of any further obligation to its allies. By deconstructing the cultural knowledge upon which American military and political strategy revolved, this paper will uncover the deep-seated biases that instrumentalized Afghan culture into a reference point for America's victory in the country as well as its failure.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, knowledge production, colonialism, culture, and counterinsurgency*

Biographical Note: Morwari Zafar is an adjunct professor of Afghanistan's Political History at Georgetown University. She has worked in both the international development and defense sectors, focusing on diaspora engagement. She served as a Next Generation National Security Leaders Fellow at the Center for a New American Security in 2016, and is currently a research fellow at the University of Oxford's Rothermere American Institute conducting an ethnographic study of militias and gun rights activism in the state of Virginia. Morwari is the founder/CEO of The Sentient Group, a human-centered research, education, and training consultancy. She holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Oxford.

"I have never been of the view that we should be sacrificing American lives to try to establish a democratic government in Afghanistan — a country that has never once in its entire history been a united country, and is made up — and I don't mean this in a derogatory way — made up of different tribes who have never, ever, ever gotten along with one another."

-Joseph Biden, President of the United States of America, 2020-present¹

President Biden's comments in the wake of the United States' haphazard withdrawal from Afghanistan perhaps came as a shock to many Afghans, largely because the myth of endemic discord belied the truth. Surely, the sitting U.S. president would recall the stretches of peaceful governance and relative economic growth prior to the long-term destabilization incurred by the U.S.-Soviet proxy war in Afghanistan from 1978 to 1989. However, President Biden's comments resonated with my observations from an ethnographic research project on American-led cultural knowledge production and the U.S. war in Afghanistan, which forms the basis of this paper. Five years prior to Biden's statement and the withdrawal, I sat across a desk from a U.S. Army Captain during an interview, watching his features animate in thought under the sallow light of his office. An Information Operations Specialist, he presented me with various pre-deployment training materials that aimed to help U.S. military personnel navigate Afghanistan's complex social landscape. He reflected on the futility of America's venture, arguing that "you can see how everything is related to the tribes and the power play between [sic] them [...] But the more you read about how they think and why they think that way, you realize that we're fighting a never-ending war."² Such ideas informed my main finding – that U.S. military and civilian leaders I interviewed pointed to reconstructed notions of Afghan history, culture, and social customs as a frame of reference for the failures of America's ambitions in Afghanistan. Biden's and the Army Captain's beliefs replicated the idea that despite

Western attempts at progressive governance and accountability, Afghanistan's perceived inherent characteristics rendered conflict a *fait accompli*.

This article, by drawing upon a thematic analysis of fieldwork interviews and literature produced on Afghanistan, answers how and why America has been able to sidestep its political responsibility in Afghanistan. Specifically, the article elucidates the elements of the relationship between Orientalized reconstructions of 'Afghanistan' and 'Afghans' and the disastrous denouement of America's war in the country. I argue that the U.S. national security and foreign policy apparatus, buttressed by the U.S. military-industrial complex, systematically privileged Westernized historiographies over the realities of Afghanistan's political history, engineering revisionist narratives as touchpoints for policy justifications that infringed on Afghanistan's national sovereignty and, most importantly, the lives of the Afghan people. I will first discuss the content of U.S. military pre-deployment training materials through which Afghanistan's socio-political history was continually reconstituted and address the concepts and ideas that emerged through such reproductions.

Secondly, to emphasize the latter point, I highlight the trope of 'Cowboys-and-Indians' rhetoric in the way the U.S. military demonstrated their understanding of Afghans and Afghan culture. The image is as emblematic of the U.S. government's and military's desired subjugation of Afghan tribes and communities, as it has been of its prior attempts to defeat First Nation confederations. I conclude the paper by underscoring how such tropes and essentialized narratives has allowed America to excuse itself for the unabashed betrayal of its Afghan counterparts to the Taliban, while continuing to oversee the erasure of Afghanistan's social memory and civil society.

Background & Methodology

In the years following the 11 September 2001 Al Qaeda attacks in the United States, the U.S.

¹Biden, Joseph, "Terror attack at Airport," 26 August 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/26/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-terror-attack-at-hamid-karzai-international-airport/>

² Zafar, Morwari, COIN-Operated Anthropology: cultural knowledge, American counterinsurgency, and the rise of the Afghan diaspora, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. University of Oxford, 2017.

government's response in Afghanistan increasingly resembled neo-colonial mythmaking to justify occupation. While Afghanistan was not directly involved in the attacks, the presence of Osama Bin Laden, Al Qaeda's senior leader, in Afghanistan compelled the U.S. to launch strikes against the Taliban, his protector, whose Islamic emirate presided over a draconian anti-West theocracy – a regime that re-emerged in 2021 with America's support. In the bewildering negotiations of war and peace, the U.S. government, especially during the U.S. military's counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign from roughly 2009-2012, generated an entire industry around knowledge production that could seemingly decode Afghanistan as the mythical graveyard of the empires, aloof to the reality of Afghanistan as a functioning state for decades prior to the Soviet Invasion in 1978.

The inaccessibility of Afghanistan both as a complex terrain and as a culture so divergent from the West became referent point for the challenges America faced in winning the war against the Taliban and instituting a government supportive of U.S. interests in the region. To better access Afghanistan, the U.S. military-industrial complex took charge in marshalling indiscriminate expertise that would ultimately distort the U.S.-led war as internecine warfare among Afghans, who have “never, ever, ever gotten along.” Led by defense contracting companies and funded by the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. effort centered on the Afghan-American diaspora as local proxies of Afghans in Afghanistan³. As contractors, some Afghan-American were cultural and linguistic interlocutors, tasked with helping the U.S. government communicate across a culture divide. In much the same way, local Afghan translators also assisted U.S. forces against the Taliban, earning Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) to immigrate to the U.S. due to the risk of retribution in country.

The research upon which this paper is based was partly auto-ethnographic, as my initial research questions crystalized while I worked as a consultant on a military pre-deployment training program. With my doctoral inquiry as a point of departure, I was compelled by the collapse of Afghanistan to the Taliban regime in

August 2021, and America's political maneuvering as it As an Afghan-American woman, I became fascinated by the wildly differing narratives of Afghanistan that emerged from other Afghan-American contractors, the U.S. military and foreign policy communities, and Washington D.C. think tanks. Absent amongst us was the voices of Afghans local to Afghanistan. The experience culminated in a four-year doctoral research project on cultural knowledge production for U.S. counterinsurgency operations, through which I examined the U.S. government's use of Afghan-American contractors as translators, cultural advisors, and role-players. Afghan-Americans were asked to interpret for their American supervisors yet denied an equal and meaningful voice in American foreign policymaking. From 2013-2016, I conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 58 Afghan-American contractors from the San Francisco Bay Area, California, and the Washington D.C. metro area (primarily northern Virginia); the largest diaspora hubs in America. In addition, I conducted interviews with 45 U.S. military personnel across the military services. During that time, I also made observations of 10 training events to better understand the production, application, and performance of knowledge about Afghanistan as part of U.S. government-sponsored cultural education programs. The term U.S. military-industrial complex is employed throughout this paper to define the public and private sector entities that develop, implement, and/or fund American security initiatives domestically and internationally. The original research, produced for a dissertation, has been adapted here by adding some textual analysis of influential documents to address the evolution of biases that has allowed the U.S. government to ignore obligations to the Afghan people after 20 years of a protracted war.

Literature Review

In analyzing my findings for this paper, I drew on Talal Asad's pioneering work on colonial encounters to explore the relationship between knowledge, power, and the creation of colonial subjects⁴. Generalized anthropological representations of colonial subjects were as

³ Monsutti, “Anthropologising Afghanistan,” 269.

⁴ Talal Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*.

indispensable to colonial rule in the nineteenth century, as they have been in the post-colonial Western security state, and is an apt overarching framework for the analysis of the cultural knowledge production discussed in this article. Asad views cultural translation, as a facet of knowledge production, 'is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power [...] Given that is so, the interesting question for enquiry is [...] how power enters into the process'.⁵ Asad's critique offers a vantage point for the relationships between contractors elicited as experts and vested with the authority to define Afghanistan and the military and government structures that appropriate and instrumentalize such knowledge. In the administration of U.S. political and economic power in Afghanistan, the military-industrial complex was part and parcel of constructing a new Afghan imaginary. And in articulating its control, the U.S. government co-opted Afghan-American contractors as neo-colonial mechanisms and the closest proximation of a distant civilization. During my fieldwork, the decision-makers in the U.S. government and military I encountered would often sidestep and legitimize biased descriptions of Afghans and Afghanistan. Pointing to the inclusion of a handful of Afghan-Americans who had provided 'native' expertise, policymakers remained blind to the dynamics of the diaspora, such as migration experiences, class, and social status, that might compromise the objectivity of their knowledge and observations.

Such "comprador intellectuals" are at the heart of Hamid Dabashi's critique in *Brown Skin, White Masks*. Drawing on the experience of Iranian and/or Muslim thinkers in America, he exposes the problematic effect of race and neo-colonialism in the way knowledge is produced and performed. Said's discourse on Orientalism is useful in understanding the essence of Dabashi's argument. Said illuminates the relationships that enable the articulation and reconstitution of distant places and people. He writes:

For decades, the Orientalists had spoken about the Orient, they had translated texts, they had explained civilizations,

religions, dynasties, cultures, mentalities [...] The Orientalist was an expert [...], whose job in society was to interpret the Orient for his compatriots. The relation between Orientalist and Orient was essentially hermeneutical: standing before a distant, barely intelligible civilization or cultural monument, the Orientalist scholar reduced the obscurity by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard-to-reach object.⁶

Dabashi's native informers are effectively Orientalist scholars, lauded and rewarded by the American government and institutions specifically because they choose to reify, legitimize, and perpetuate the machinations that extend the reach of Western imperialism⁷. Dabashi's and Said's arguments aptly contextualize my observations and findings. Devoid of influence in the U.S., Afghan-American contractors specifically capitalized on cultural knowledge and translation opportunities as an entry into a sphere of power and authority, otherwise unavailable.

Extending the context on race and colonialism, the literature on the language and imagery of America's colonization of Native Americans, also provides a framework through which to view the discussion in this paper. The U.S. military-industrial complex, over the course of the Global War on Terror and thereafter, has straddling the line between fact and fiction in producing material on Afghans and Afghanistan. The knowledge and media needed to sustain the projection of U.S. power formed an idea of Afghanistan firmly steeped in a colonial legacy reflecting Asad's "crisis of representation".⁸ During my interviews with non-Afghan participants, both military and civilian, even creative fiction, such as the acclaimed *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hosseini, was alluded to with as much authority as an ethnographic, academic text. Despite America's stated intentions to support post-war economic development and women's rights, for example, the rhetoric and imagery likening Afghanistan to the early American frontier wars tells of domination, not assistance. In an analysis of the 'Indian country'

⁵ Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," 163.

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 222.

⁷ Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin White Masks*.

⁸ Asad, "The Concept of Translation in British Social Anthropology," 163.

imagery of the 'Wild West,' Stephen Silliman examines the application of such metaphors by the U.S. military in the U.S.-occupied Iraq and Afghanistan.⁹ Silliman's work is important in deconstructing the problematic characterization of individuals such as Noor Afzal, an Afghan tribal elder, as "Sitting Bull," by former U.S. Army Major James Gant in his concept paper *One Tribe At a Time*, a proposal on winning the war in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Sitting Bull was the prominent Hunkpapa Lakota Chief, who resisted U.S. government policies to subdue and subjugate Native American populations. Gant's intention may have been one of respect, but the fact that the framing of the experience and encounter drew upon America's own colonial past is a recognition of the disparity in power and the vestiges of a White Savior Complex. Furthermore, Silliman notes a rhetoric colored by the conquest of the First Nations also affects citizen-state modalities between the U.S. government and present day Native Americans. The use of the colonial terms and eponyms "represents the language of colonization in the present. Summoning this kind of metaphor for a military effort in the Middle East conveys that the occupying troops are agents of colonization, imperialism, and the presumed highest orders of civilization."¹¹ Silliman notes that the comparison is challenging for Native Americans in the U.S. military, whose identities as Americans are so flippantly associated with foreign adversaries, terrorists, and insurgents. In the occupation of Afghanistan, Afghan-Americans have not fared much better. Many contractors within the diaspora have watched as the knowledge they helped circulate to assist U.S. military forces has cannibalized the integrity of their own cultural heritage, enabling U.S. leaders to shrug off any responsibility in the collapse of the Afghan state to the Taliban and its rapid erosion of human rights.

Reconstructing the Wild East

In 2009, the U.S. government, under former president Barack Obama, took concerted steps towards stabilization and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. I was then working as program officer on a U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID) project, based in the capital, Kabul. At the same time, the U.S. military began to work closely on coordinating development projects with aid agencies, a task that blurred the line between security and international development. Recognizing that the provision of aid was a conduit to "winning hearts and minds," the U.S. government's and military's approach morphed from solely counter-terrorism to counterinsurgency from roughly 2009 to 2012 (although a more diluted form of COIN would be sustained once the U.S. mission shifted to training, advising, and assisting the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces.¹² The effect of the evolution was far-reaching. In this section, I will present a thematic analysis of the material representations of Afghanistan produced by the U.S. military-industrial complex and abetted by Afghan-American contractors as 'native' experts.

Among the array of materials developed to elucidate Afghanistan, the Master Narratives developed by the U.S. Directorate of National Intelligence's Open Source Center spoke volumes about the caricaturization of Afghan culture and people.¹³ Sourced from "Afghan experts" in the diaspora and think-tank communities, the Narratives established a new threshold of expertise that relied on the experience of Afghan-Americans as sufficiently reflective of their presumed counterparts in Afghanistan, despite many being born in the United States or having been outside of the Afghanistan for more than two to three decades.¹⁴ The series of documents claims to be the "historically grounded stories that reflect a community's identity and experiences, or

⁹ Silliman, "The 'Old West' in the Middle East," 237.

¹⁰ Gant, Jim, "One Tribe At a Time," <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/one-tribe-at-a-time>.

¹¹ Silliman, "The 'Old West' in the Middle East," 243.

¹² U.S. Department of the Army, "Counterinsurgency Manual," <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf>.

¹³ Open Source Center 2011.

<https://publicintelligence.net/ufouo-open-source-center-master-narratives-country-report-afghanistan/>

¹⁴ Open Source Center 2011: 40-42

explain its hopes, aspirations, and concerns [...] effective communicators in Afghanistan invoke master narratives in order to move audiences in a preferred direction”.¹⁵ During my research, I found that the stories oriented COIN professionals in crafting strategic communications and messaging to influence Afghans in support of American efforts instead of the Taliban. The master narratives presented six audience segments: Central Government Supporters, the Taliban, Pashtun Nationalists, Tajik Nationalists, Turkic Nationalists, and Hazara Nationalists, claiming the “condensed narrative description simulates the voice of someone who believes in the narrative itself, helping communicators and analysts immerse themselves in the mindset of the foreign audience”.¹⁶ The preoccupation with the “mindset” of Afghans not only meant that “foreign audiences” could explain their Eastern counterparts, but that their mindsets were knowable. Six Master Narratives with their corresponding audience segment (meaning who would espouse the ideology) comprised of The Great Game, Liberators of Afghanistan, Preserving Local Rule, Pakistan Takeover, and Right to Rule. Each of these constituted “outward looking narratives” and included an “inward looking” explanation that further articulated the beliefs. For example, the Taliban are noted as the audience segment who ascribe to the narrative Liberators of Afghanistan. The inward-looking account notes that they are:

Afghan freedom fighters [who] have always protected the people and liberated the country. Today the Taliban has inherited this jihad, leading the people against the most powerful army in the world. As their grandfathers and fathers did before them, Afghans must fight against the foreigners and their puppet government in order to restore the Islamic Emirate and Afghan independence.¹⁷

In attempting to capture the sentiments of the Taliban, the document denies the complex regional politics which spawned and

strengthened their movement. It implies that the Taliban see themselves as *indigenous* freedom fighters, homogenizing the group whose roots stretch deep into Pakistan and whose membership consists of the Haqqani Network, a terrorist organization now presiding over the state of Afghanistan.¹⁸ Inherent in the binary categorization of the Afghan psyche, per the narratives, is a denial of the tensions that exist in the negotiation of everyday life after a U.S.-led proxy war with the Soviet Union in the 1980s leading to a civil war, and the subsequent U.S. invasion during the Global War on Terror. That the Afghan population could be so easily segmented gives no consideration to the very real possibility that a Tajik nationalist may also support the central government, or enact different aspects of their identity according to the social worlds in which they had to operate. The profiles generated about Afghans lack the nuance that might otherwise be afforded to those in Western societies. Most gravely they afford an easy means for a foreign government, like the United States, to ambiguously legitimize a violent, extremist organization like the Taliban as a native byproduct of Afghanistan’s endemic turmoil. Consequently, the Master Narratives trap Afghans in simplistic vignettes of a perceived Afghan way of life, while offering limited authentic ethnographic data.

In my study, I also found that the oversimplification was further complicated by Afghan-American contractors who often repeated whatever they heard about the country in the absence of native expertise. Majid, one of my research participants, was an Afghan-American instructor for a large private defense contractor on a pre-deployment cultural orientation program¹⁹. Majid and I spoke after he had taught an hour course on cross-cultural understanding to a group of U.S. Army personnel for which he had donned a traditional woolen *pakol* hat and a *piran tumban*, an embroidered tunic and pants, to lend authenticity to the interaction. In his late 50s, Majid had not been to Afghanistan in 31 years in 2015. During the training, he had presented a slide drawing upon Geert

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Open Source Center 2011: 6

¹⁷ Open Source Center, Master Narratives, [https://publicintelligence.net/ufouo-open-source-](https://publicintelligence.net/ufouo-open-source-center-master-narratives-country-report-afghanistan/)

[center-master-narratives-country-report-afghanistan/](https://publicintelligence.net/ufouo-open-source-center-master-narratives-country-report-afghanistan/).

¹⁸ Thomas Ruttig, Loya Paktiya’s Insurgency.

¹⁹ Names of research participants have been pseudonymized.

Hofstede's *Six Dimensions of Culture* and Edward T. Hall's work on cultural contexts to further explain the difference between America and non-Western traditions.²⁰ A Dutch social psychologist, Hofstede wrote at length about the impact of national cultures on organizational behavior. Hall, on the other hand, was an American anthropologist chiefly concerned with the disparities in behavior and decision-making across the world. He discussed the effect of culture on communication, devising a binary structure through which the world could be divided into the modern and the traditional. During COIN, Hall's research was adapted in various cultural familiarization trainings I participated in and observed to make sense of the security and governance challenges America faced in Afghanistan, leading to conclusions that Afghanistan subscribed to "informal governance," and "collectivist" forms of social organization within a "high-context" culture"; a referent for the perceived insular focus on community, family, and relationships.²¹ Such constructs empowered diaspora contractors to emulate the formulaic generalizations they learned and experienced on the job. In our interview, Majid admitted:

the soldiers know more about Afghanistan than a lot of Afghans. Some of the presentations are so detailed I don't think many Afghans know the information [...] The high-context, low-context stuff was new to me [...] I learned to explain Afghan culture and the way Afghans are in the way that they [the U.S. military] talked about it [...] like explaining the backwards nature of Afghans because they are in traditional societies. But respect is very important to them because they are also high-context people.²²

Implicit in Majid's view was an 'us' and 'them' characterization that solidified the differences between the East and West, with Afghans constituting the savage masses. Rather than account for the historical forces of occupation and imperialism that have punctuated

Afghanistan's political and economic stability, their "backwardness" in opposition to Western progressiveness is discussed as innate, a product of a fixed social environment. Also missing from Majid's account is any critique of the limitations of the theoretical models so commonly applied to Afghanistan. Nor does it address how Afghanistan, and its urban and rural centers, may have evolved under the pressures of empire-building historically. During our conversation, Majid simply borrowed and reified tropes developed by the U.S. military-industrial complex. In defining what Said deemed a "hard-to-reach" object, Majid and others like him, perhaps unwittingly, continued to paint Afghanistan with a broad brushstroke, producing an essentialized image that could paradoxically justify invasion, intervention, withdrawal, and abandonment.

The fixation with tribes and a bucolic imagery of Afghanistan surfaced throughout my interviews and was reinforced by the rhetoric of senior government leaders. I was struck by the irony of 'expertise' – that it was so commodified by the military industrial complex, and yet often lacked depth and quality. At the height of the war, Steven Pressfield, a creative writer, maintained an influential blog dedicated to answering "how to win the war in Afghanistan [...] It's the tribes, stupid."²³ In my research, I encountered Pressfield's ideas referenced in instructional training materials and presentations to the military, as well as in general conversations (let alone American media channels). Despite his métier as a writer, having had no professional experience in Afghanistan, his musings have been lauded by leaders like General David Petraeus, the former Commander of the U.S. Forces and International Security Assistance Forces in Afghanistan and head of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, for disseminating the idea that "the real force in Afghanistan isn't Islamism or jihadism. It's tribalism."²⁴ The statement is significant because, like the Master Narratives, it shifts the focus from Jihadist violent extremism, a chief import of the U.S. government and international community as a counterweight to Soviet influence in the late

²⁰ Edmund Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*; Edmund Hall, *Beyond Culture*; Geert Hofstede, *Culture and Organization: Software of the Mind*.

²¹ Edmund Hall, *Beyond Culture*.

²² Zafar, "COIN-Operated Anthropology," 231.

²³ Pressfield, "It's the Tribes Stupid," [no date] <https://stevenpressfield.com/ep-1/>. The website also now serves as site to purchase self-help books.

²⁴ Ibid.

1970s and 1980s, to a socio-political problem emanating from Afghan values and social structure. Asma, an Afghan-American who worked as a translator for the U.S. government and had been a doctor in Afghanistan, strongly opposed the heavy emphasis on tribes as a socially constructed issue. She reflected that “this tribal idea is used for everything, but it wasn’t that big of a deal in Afghanistan. The tribes were still supporting the king. Maybe not because they wanted to, but because they knew they had to. But now we just hear ‘oh this is tribal and that is tribal,’ and everybody forgets history.”²⁵ Contrary to Afghanistan’s historical realities, the insular concentration on Afghan social structure perpetuates the belief of an irreparable divide between the East and West reminiscent of Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations,” and posits American influence as a saving grace.²⁶ Following a brief visit to Afghanistan with a Marine general, Pressfield cautions Americans that:

Afghanistan is ancient; it’s not coming into the modern world any time soon. Afghanistan is tribal. We’re not going to turn it into New Jersey in the next eighteen months. The Machine can’t overcome those realities by itself, and it can’t connect across the gulf between East and West, ancient and modern, unless it can bring to bear a dedicated element whose task is to do just that. I’m not a believer yet. I want to be. When I see that dedicated component—and see it in the field, being supported by our unbeatable Machine—maybe I will be.²⁷

In my interviews and personal experience, the gravitas with which U.S. policymaking circles have consistently afforded people like Pressfield validate trite observations devoid of meaningful empiricism. They are not myopic

reflections from an early 19th century thinker, but 21st century opinions clinging on antiquated ideals and a racialized social imaginary. As my research showed, such opinions form the baseline of the biases that shape policy decisions towards Afghanistan as a contemporary “White Man’s Burden,” a sentiment President Biden’s dismissive justification of the U.S. withdrawal, at the outset of this paper, so cuttingly underscored.²⁸

Reproducing the Old West

Among the prime examples of the reductionist framing of Afghanistan in U.S. government cultural familiarization texts is the representation of Afghanistan as ‘Indian Country.’ Former U.S. President George W. Bush employed the trope in a public address in 2007 to emphasize the unruly and savage character of the areas in which Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters hid, explaining: “[T]his is wild country; this is wilder than the Wild West. And these folks hide and recruit and launch attacks.”²⁹ Within the U.S. context, the concept of the Wild West or Indian country has an explicitly racialized political dimension that reaches back to the U.S. wars with Native Americans and U.S. government’s dominion over tribal lands.³⁰ The colonial subjugation of the First Nations and Native American populations in America is a sobering aspect of U.S. history, and it serves as a superficial referent for the U.S. experience in Afghanistan. But in my research, I found documents that discussed ethnographic knowledge in the U.S. military to be replete with such examples. During my fieldwork observations, trainings and discussions on current events in Afghanistan often drew heavily on oversimplified comparisons to cowboys and Indians, as well as imagery in Hollywood Westerns depicting famed battles. Supporting Silliman’s observation, I too noticed (whether conscious or unconscious) the association with cowboys and the U.S. military

²⁵ Zafar, “COIN-Operated Anthropology,” 232.

²⁶ Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*.

²⁷ Pressfield, “Downrange: An Informal Report of a Trip to Afghanistan,” March 2010, <https://stevenpressfield.com/2010/03/downrange-an-informal-report-of-a-trip-to-afghanistan-with-marine-gen-james-n-mattis/>

²⁸ Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden,” <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/kipling.asp>

²⁹ Bush, “President Discusses War in Afghanistan,” 15 February 2007, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/02/20070215-1.html>

³⁰ Kaplan, “Injun Country,” 21 September 2004, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB109572689960923141>; Silliman, “The Old West in the Middle East,” 237.

forces as the 'good guys,' and Indians and insurgent Afghans as the 'bad guys.' In fact, Majid, who I observed briefing U.S. military personnel at training exercises on four different occasions, consistently described Afghanistan as the Wild West. To him Americans were cowboys, and Afghans were the ungovernable Indians. During one of the exercises I observed, an Air Force Major contested Majid's use of "Indian," pointing out that correct term is Native American. While Majid stopped using the referent altogether, he continued to describe communities in the south and southeast of Afghanistan as inherently lawless and degenerate, despite having spent no time at all in Afghanistan's southern provinces. He based his assessment on what he had gathered from speaking to U.S. military personnel and contractors, assigned to the most remote corners of Afghanistan's southern regions, where the conflict was most intense. In some training exercises I observed, contractors (Afghan-American and otherwise) used film clips from old Western movies to illustrate the dynamics the U.S. military might face in Afghanistan upon deployment, by emphasizing the cowboy and Indians trope. When I asked where they had come across the clips, most of the contractors had been provided them as a useful resource by either their military counterparts or the defense contracting companies for whom they worked. In at least three of ten observed exercises, the contractors produced excerpts from popular literature that similarly reconfigured the war in Afghanistan as the Wild West because they believed such representations would resonate with U.S. military audiences.

The facile allusion to America's past and the negligent portrayal of Native Americans and native Afghans has empowered colonial representations awash in assumptions and stereotypes. Entertainment presides over empiricism in the anti-intellectualism that characterizes the U.S. government's approach to understanding Afghanistan. The writer, Robert Kaplan, captures the instinctive recall to America's past among Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan. His discussion uncovers

an eye-opening lexicon marshalled to describe the U.S. experience in Afghanistan, often associating 'Old West' or the 'Wild West' with areas of Afghanistan that were deemed ungovernable. "Injun Country,"³¹ he notes, signified Afghanistan's southern and southeastern provinces.³² The term connotes an area that lacks governance, and thus constitutes the populations in the south and southeast as the 'new Indians' – insurgents that should be conquered and made subjects of the U.S.-backed central government.

Deconstructing the nomenclature of operations further illustrates the casual prejudice with which Afghans were regarded throughout the U.S. occupation. Deeply problematic is the unwavering conviction with which senior U.S. government and military leaders I interviewed treated narratives like Gant's essay, *One Tribe at a Time*. Gant's article effectively reduces the Afghan war to a tribal conflict, arguing that tribal engagement would help Afghans rally to the American side in defeating the Taliban. While Gant was ultimately discharged for going against military orders, his ideas perpetuated the belief that his anecdotal experience could be applied writ large to Afghanistan as a nation, despite the fact that not all of Afghanistan is socially organized into tribes. As a follow up, Ann Tyson's book *American Spartan* further glorifies Gant's noting that U.S. military leaders saw him as Afghanistan's T.E. Lawrence, the famed British military officer who abetted the Arab revolt against Ottoman occupation in 1916.³³ Tyson views the Afghans she met through the same lens as Gant – an honor-bound traditional village preserved in time. Despite the ironic sentimentality of rapport between the villagers and Gant, Tyson's account is typical of the "White Gaze," a racialized power asymmetry reinforced in peacebuilding and development that entrenches the very inequities and conditions humanitarian work endeavors to change.³⁴ The paternalism of the White Gaze divests non-Western communities of agency and capacity. According to Tyson's writing, only she and Gant have the power of knowledge to change the course of the war. The Afghan villagers' agency is circumscribed by their

³¹ *Injun country*, meaning Indian Country, is a trope used to describes areas of limited central governance. In the military, it has been used in places such as Iraq and Colombia.

³² Robert Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts*, 203.

³³ Ann S. Tyson, *American Spartan*, 25.

³⁴ Pailey, "Decentering the White Gaze," 729.

adherence to tradition and Islam. P.T Zeleza's critique of such epistemic constructions explains the effect as one that "seeks to universalize the West and provincialize the rest."³⁵ The "provincialization" Tyson's book accomplished recenters the Afghan village in the Great Plains of America. Gant defies military orders to teach Afghans to mobilize as militias and protect themselves, all the while mastering their culture and gaining their trust by communing with Sitting Bull. With Gant as a mythologized protagonist, it is difficult to move beyond the White Savior complex so characteristic of the power dynamic between Gant, Tyson, and the Afghan villagers, and equally reflective of American colonialism.

Perhaps the most prominent example of the Native American referent in U.S. government discourse is the codename for the operation to kill or capture Osama Bin Laden: Geronimo. The operation was named for the Apache tribal leader who fought against the Americans, evaded capture, and died as a prisoner of war in 1909. Following the killing of Osama Bin Laden by U.S. Navy Seals on May 2, 2011, The National Congress of American Indians released a statement criticizing the use of Geronimo in the context of the Global War on Terror, imploring that "To associate a Native warrior with bin Laden is not an accurate reflection of history and it undermines the military service of Native people."³⁶ Taken together with the prevalence of the 'Indian Country' trope in texts about Afghanistan, the contemporary American system does not seem all too distant from the prejudiced machinations of political power that expanded its global and domestic reach in the 19th century. Silliman offers an apt critique of the damaging effects of exploiting the Native American experience as an edifying comparison to U.S. occupied territories:

even if the rendering of terrorist and infidel zones in the Middle East as "Indian Country" serves more as historical metaphor, and even if soldiers would not consider their Native American neighbors or fellow soldiers

today as terrorists, one still cannot escape the problematic renarration of those historical Indian Wars as conflicts with terrorists, despite the obvious common thread of the United States as the invader.³⁷

The disregard for the centrality of Native Americans history to U.S. history constitutes a thought-provoking consideration for Afghans and Afghanistan, who are even farther removed from the historical realities of American society. Are all conquests the same to the U.S. government? If the experience of the U.S. military and Native American tribes can be so easily applied to adversarial contexts, what does it imply about the relationship between Native Americans and the U.S. government today? And if Native Americans are afforded so little consideration despite their belonging and membership in America, Afghans and Afghan-American will likely not be afforded voice and visibility despite the U.S. government's overtures to equity and equality. Such observations and the research upon which this paper has been predicated are a jarring reminder of the precarity of belonging and membership in America.

Throughout my observations and interviews (and even now merely looking at representation across think tanks and mainstream media), a distinct lack of Afghan voices persists in the executive arenas of U.S. foreign policy and national security sectors, which are disproportionately dominated by white Anglo-Saxon decision-makers or those of European ancestry. With the exception of Zalmay Khalilzad, the former U.S. ambassador to Iraq and special envoy to Afghanistan, most Afghan-Americans, when engaged by the state, were often employed almost exclusively as defense contractors in supporting roles rather than in positions with any policy-planning or programmatic authority. Even in Khalilzad's case, if America was the foot bearing down on Afghanistan, Khalilzad was arguably the shoe, protecting and assisting American interests in the region.³⁸ A good example is the tax-payer

³⁵ Zeleza, "African studies and universities since independence," 133.

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<https://www.ncai.org/news/articles/2011/05/03/>

[ncai-releases-statement-on-use-of-geronimo-as-name-for-osama-bin-laden-operation](#)

³⁷ Silliman, "The Old West in the Middle East," 243.

³⁸ Anderson, "American Viceroy," 19 December 2005,

funded United States Institute of Peace's Afghanistan Study Group included 38 members and advisors from the public and private sectors of which only two were Afghan-Americans.³⁹ It might be little wonder that the Group's final report, published in February 2021, fell atrociously short in its assessment of a Taliban takeover.⁴⁰ In August 2021, as the Taliban advanced its control over Afghanistan's provinces in the wake of America's ill-equipped withdrawal, a telling paradox emerged. The U.S. government appeared to lean on the same reductionist sketches, as exemplified by President Biden's speech, to justify both the U.S. invasion as well as the nature of the withdrawal. And despite their contribution to the U.S. military effort, Afghan SIV holders scrambled to secure safe passage out of Afghanistan through private means in the absence of a coherent evacuation plan by the U.S. government.

This paper has shown that the cultural knowledge produced and employed during COIN within the U.S. military-industrial complex impacted the perceptions and outlook of American decision-makers towards Afghanistan. Under the guise of state-building and security, the overt allusions to the conquests against and subjugation of Native American tribes in relation to the suppression of the Pashtun tribes is paradigmatic of the American government's glib, hegemonic, and extraordinarily discriminatory posture towards Afghanistan and its populations. As the constructed narratives about Afghanistan gained traction politically, they have reinforced the binary categories through which Afghan culture could be differentiated from America and the West. As noted before, this is strongly Orientalist in nature, but the operational effect of such biased ideologies is far more consequential. For Afghan-American contractors endowed with the credibility of 'native expertise,' Afghanistan's contemporary circumstances were more often imagined and idealized, than a reflection of lived experiences. These 'experts' were akin to modern-day Orientalists of the 19th century, drawing on the same problematic literature and viewpoints to

revive exoticized images of Afghanistan as a distant land, curious and elusive only because of its opposition to a Western, progressive ideal. Nonetheless, the U.S. military and government willingly assumed that Afghans in America could reflect, in voice and thought, Afghans in Afghanistan, whose experiences not only negated the idealized tropes of warrior tribes, but were far more complex and shaded by the trauma of two foreign occupations and the dismantling of Afghan society, culture, and political history – legacies of the Soviet-Afghan war and its legitimization of religious fundamentalism and extremist violence.

Condemning Afghanistan as a perpetually lawless territory devoid of 'Western' elements of progress, such as education, equality, and women's rights, has allowed political leaders, like President Biden, to shirk responsibility and point to Afghan culture as the reason the Afghan government's collapse was inevitable. Even beyond that, the cultural framing positioned groups like the Taliban and Haqqani Network, a designated terrorist organization, as indigenous counterparts with whom Afghans must contend in the absence of continued U.S. assistance. At the time of writing, Afghanistan and its long-suffering population remain at an impasse with the Taliban administration amidst colossal violations of human rights and rampant poverty. If any silver lining has emerged in the discourse on Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover and U.S. withdrawal, it may be this: a resolute push, particularly within academe, to decolonize the literature and perspectives on Afghanistan. It is no coincidence that most of the literature referenced in this paper as the most commonly cited texts on Afghan culture within the U.S. system are written by non-Afghan writers. Based on what I have encountered through my research and my lived experiences in the Washington D.C. policy space, most decision-makers on Afghanistan policy are males of Anglo-Saxon/European ancestry who have been privileged with the authority to speak on and for Afghans they may have never met. The conscious effort at inclusive representation has been apparent across panels and programs

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/12/19/american-viceroy>; Shahrani, "War, Factionalism, and the State in Afghanistan," 722.

³⁹ United States Institute of Peace, "Afghanistan Study Group Final Report," February 2021,

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/02/afghanistan-study-group-final-report-pathway-peace-afghanistan>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

that now feature, with earnest interest, Afghan voices, particularly those directly affected by U.S. policies and negotiations. This is important because it not only allows for a more representative collection of voices and thoughts, but it also creates a much-needed space to articulate and preserve Afghanistan's tremendously complex social and political history. The dialogues that may emerge from the inclusion of Afghan scholars and civil society can contest the trivialization of Afghan culture and society by drawing upon a shared social memory of Afghanistan as a nation. While efforts to decolonize knowledge about Afghanistan are ongoing, a more robust repudiation of prejudiced U.S. policies and political leaders must also ensue. While the world will experience no shortage of wars, irrespective of the changing nature of warfare, communities must speak and act against the explicitly biased negotiations of power that render the most affected populations silent and invisible. For Afghanistan, time will likely erode the constructed illusions that have overcome the country and the Afghan people, but what will endure remains to be seen.

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JOURNAL of CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION and SECURITY



ISSN: 2045-1903

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Publication date: Spring issue — April
Autumn issue — October

Failing to Decolonise Knowledge Production in the Periphery: The Compromise of Afghan Research and Higher Education 2001-2021

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ABSTRACT

The article outlines some structural features of the Afghan fields of research and higher education during the period 2001-2021, arguing that problems with the implementation of development programs in these interdependent sectors contributed to the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2021. Two key problem areas are identified: the subordination of Afghan research and researchers to the agendas and methodologies of intervening metropolitan institutions involved in research, and the failure to prevent endemic corruption in delivery of educational aid and development from undermining both local capacities for knowledge production and the perceived legitimacy of the Afghan state. In the research field the outcome was un-reflexive and often inadequate knowledge of Afghanistan and of intervention. In higher education, the outcome of inadequate metropolitan oversight was conversion of development aid into elite patronage, the article concluding that narratives of 'Afghan corruption' omit the key enabling role of metropolitan institutions.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Research, Education, Knowledge, Corruption, Decolonial, Periphery

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Introduction

In this article I will be briefly outlining some features of the Afghan fields of research and higher education, as these pertain to the relative lack of development of an autonomous Afghan capacity for knowledge production within contemporary Afghanistan. I will be focusing on the period of metropolitan intervention 2001-2021, in an attempt to show how failures in intervention practice in the specific fields of research and education contributed to the wider failure of the intervention project, culminating in 2021 in the collapse of the metropolitan-sponsored Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRoA) and the resurgence of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEoA). In particular, I will be indicating how the domination of Afghan research and researchers by metropolitan researchers and research institutions led to the production of unreliable or even invalid knowledge of Afghanistan and of the effects of intervention. In addition to contributing to compromise of the intervention project through the use of questionable analyses in support of given policies – such as support for an increasingly corrupt and unresponsive central government – lack of meaningful Afghan participation in externally-sponsored research led to failures in building local capacities for knowledge production. The extensive corruption that characterised metropolitan intervention in Afghan education led to a corresponding failure to provide an adequate basis for future Afghan research capacity, which it is argued must ultimately derive from local higher education. I conclude that responsibility for problems of corruption lay with metropolitan institutions administering the aid and development project, due to a combination of institutional risk-aversion and short-termism or careerism emphasising reportable outcomes oriented to internal institutional objectives, rather than meaningful development outcomes at Afghan community level.

In framing the analysis that follows, I am drawing on my own personal experience of the Afghan research and education fields, an experience going back to 2011 as a volunteer advisor with the Ministry of Education of the IRoA. Much of what follows draws on the year I spent in Afghanistan in 2018, working

independently as a capacity building consultant and visiting scholar with various research institutions, both public and private, and with both public and private institutions of higher education. The basis of my analysis is hence direct experience of conditions outside the fortified metropolitan enclaves that intervening institutions in Afghanistan, whether INGOs or intervening-state agencies, operated in until 2021. Where I have cited sources in support of points, it is because I found their analysis of local conditions borne out in my own experience: where I make a descriptive or analytical statement without citation, I am basing this on my own experience, and to some extent on the anecdotal evidence of Afghans with whom I was working at that time and subsequently.

The colonisation of the Afghan research field by metropolitan intervention

Distinctions of power in research fields institutionalise the global 'North' and 'South' division in the production of social-scientific or sociological knowledge foregrounded by Connell in *Southern Theory*¹. In peripheralised spaces² such as Afghanistan, power relations are in practice a question of the conditions of employment for contracted local researchers and research institutions. Research is subordinated to maintaining ongoing funding relationships, in the case of institutions, or to gaining access to research-professional employment or metropolitan higher education, in the case of individual researchers. In Afghanistan, access to metropolitan higher education or employment can often operate as a potential migration pathway, a primary objective for many Afghans after decades of conflict and attendant social and economic instability. The Afghan research field can be seen as an "information economy"³, where particular forms of knowledge were produced 'to order', and had a particular 'exchange value' in granting access to opportunities such as contracts, consultancies, scholarships and migration to metropolitan spaces and positions. The Afghan information economy or research field was hence extensively colonised

¹Connell, *Southern Theory*

²Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*

³van der Haar et al., "Construction of knowledge in conflict-affected settings" 523-524

by metropolitan institutions of knowledge production during the period 2001-2021, due to external incentives structuring the local field of knowledge production and determining the particular forms of knowledge produced⁴.

Local research capacity building during the period to 2021 was limited by the extent of domination of Afghan research institutions and researchers by metropolitan INGOs and intervening-state agencies engaged in research, and by metropolitan researchers more generally⁵. The relations of domination in this specific case may be seen as an instance of the production of knowledge proceeding from a particular distribution of power and resources within a field, as theorised by Pierre Bourdieu⁶. Risks of field work were devolved to local researchers but the benefits of grants, publications and advancement of careers accrued to international researchers who oversee and write up studies⁷, a postcolonial relation where “the metropole produces theory and the periphery is either erased entirely ... or, at best, supplies metropolitan theory with data”⁸. The modes of knowledge production aligned with such metropolitan institutional interests arguably represent an instance of a colonial or neocolonial “surveillance modality” of “peripheral groups ... perceived as a threat to social order”⁹.

In parallel, the particular forms of knowledge recognised as useful, and therefore legitimate, by intervening state institutions operated as a dominant methodological position, what may be referred to as a “pentagon epistemology”¹⁰. From an intervening state or security institution perspective, only those forms of knowledge that ultimately facilitate intervention – serving force projection or force protection objectives, or the (re)construction of state and society in line with intervening state objectives – will be recognised as deserving of funding. Methodologically, the dominant

‘pentagon epistemology’ was overwhelming positivistic, emphasising statistical knowledge, and formal case-comparative methods used to address particular problems of intervention policy, as the only legitimate forms of knowledge. Attendant emphasis on technical rigour and on the generalisability of ‘standard’ research methods led to a corresponding de-emphasis of questions of validity, particularly the adequacy of knowledge produced as a representation of Afghan experience or understandings.

During the period 2001-2021, Afghan researchers operated largely as “local enumerators” in the service of “outside researchers”¹¹, reflecting again the metropolitan pre-occupation, outside relatively marginalised fields of ethnographic-anthropological knowledge production, with production of a positivistic and statistical ‘knowledge’ representing the postcolonial continuation of an imperial-colonial “enumerative modality”¹². In practice, local research and local research capacity-building were constrained by a pre-occupation with surveys, a “survey modality” that was also a feature of colonial administrations¹³. Under this ‘survey modality’, Afghan researchers and research institutions as ‘implementing partners’ were largely confined to implementing surveys in the field, and otherwise operating as local ‘fixers’ for metropolitan research projects. The capacity of local researchers to meaningfully contribute to metropolitan research, due to their significant advantages in access to local informants and vastly greater contextual understanding, was generally subordinated to implementation of externally designed projects into which they were often given little meaningful input¹⁴. In many cases, Afghan researchers as ‘enumerators’ were limited to entering numbers or pre-determined analytical codes into spreadsheets, resulting in a local perception that ‘research’ was simply the provision of required numbers or responses to

⁴Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*

⁵Khattak, “Reflections on Pakistan and Afghanistan” 10-11

⁶Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*

⁷Khattak “Reflections” 33

⁸Reed “Theoretical Labours Necessary for a Global Sociology” 162

⁹Shamsul “From Colonial Knowledge to Multiculturalism” 112

¹⁰Gusterson “War on Terror” 292

¹¹Khattak “Reflections” 39, emphases mine

¹²Shamsul “Colonial Knowledge” 112

¹³Shamsul “Colonial Knowledge” 112; see also Nader “Dialogues Between the Middle East and the West”

¹⁴Milton *Higher Education and Post-Conflict Recovery* 152-153

donor institutions. The result was the production of un-reflexive and hence potentially invalid analyses, by metropolitan researchers with no real understanding of local conditions and little interest in actual peripheral experience, beyond what was directly relevant to the categories of their own metropolitan research.

Effects in practice of metropolitan dominance on knowledge production

In attempting to employ metropolitan research instruments such as particular 'standard' surveys under Afghan conditions, the result was in many cases the production of 'findings' that were known to be false. A key example here were surveys indicating that a majority of the Afghan population had confidence in or otherwise supported the central government of the Islamic Republic, where this was known not to be the case¹⁵, and where in parallel the capacity to adequately implement such surveys in Afghanistan was known to be lacking¹⁶. As "survey penetration is usually shallow and concentrated on what is measurable at the time"¹⁷ a "rigidly structured questionnaire will elicit little useful data ... some research techniques are completely useless in a war situation"¹⁸. The result was the use of invalid findings in support of particular policies, such as supporting a central government that surveys de-problematized, using responses categories or methods that were not valid outside the metropolitan contexts where they were originally developed, a basic "misrecognition" in Bourdieu's terminology¹⁹.

Examples in practice of misrecognition would involve posing questions that would never occur to research participants, in terms they would never use, for example asking Afghans in outlying areas if they 'support' the central government, where they may have no referents for what 'support' or even 'central government' might mean. Such methods often result in responses of indifference or politeness, or spontaneous analogising and generalising that

does not necessarily meaningfully relate to the actual experience of the setting or field that the researcher is attempting to investigate²⁰. In general, there was an unacknowledged problem of respondents telling researchers identified with donors what they thought they wanted to hear, particularly relative to (usually again misrecognised) possibilities for gaining access to metropolitan aid, funding, or opportunities such as scholarships. Further methodological problems resulted from attempting to implement surveys as quickly and cheaply as possible, and lack of transparency about the probability of producing invalid data or analysis as a result. For example, Asia Foundation surveys, usually considered among the more reliable, could involve as many as 6500 separate survey interviews across 34 provinces in a single month, with little time allowed to analyse the data produced, and little discussion of the methodology of the study and how it might affect the analysis in the presentation of the survey findings²¹.

The methodological and analytical problems arising from disconnection from the setting were exacerbated by perceptions of extreme danger to metropolitan personnel of operating in Afghanistan during the period of international military operations, reinforcing a culture of individual and institutional risk aversion, and preoccupation with risk management, which I have discussed elsewhere²². Preoccupied with possible risks, metropolitan staff of donor institutions would "shy away from working with staff in the field, or getting directly involved in or observing the operation of projects"²³. The result was limited-to-non-existent quality assurance of development and research projects, and very limited opportunities for local researchers to work directly with metropolitan researchers

¹⁵Guistozzi *The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* 35-37

¹⁶Khattak "Reflections" 25

¹⁷Barakat et al., "Research Design" 995

¹⁸Barakat and Ellis "Collecting Data and Information in War Circumstances" 154

¹⁹Bourdieu "Reflexive Sociology" 128

²⁰Bourdieu "Reflexive Sociology" 128

²¹Bazia *Education in Afghanistan* 191

²²Simpson "The Enclavisation of Intervention in Afghanistan" "Risk Management Responses to Armed Non-State Actor Risk in Afghanistan" and *Catastrophe and precaution outside the risk society*; see also Duffield "Risk-Management and the Fortified Aid Compound" and "Danger, resilience and the aid industry"

²³Hayward *Transforming Higher Education In Afghanistan* 125

and hence build capacity above the survey-implementation and data-entry-enumerator level. Under these conditions, local research institutions tended to be almost entirely dependent on metropolitan researchers not simply for funding but for the production of almost any higher-level research outcome²⁴, and were largely unable to move beyond this condition of dependency and incapacity.

The result was a largely irreconcilable tension, observable in the cases of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU) for example, between the need to localise and end their dependence on metropolitan consultants, and the need to keep their institutions in being through the maintenance of ongoing funding relationships. Where local capacity for the production of higher-level research outcomes was mostly lacking, local research institutions were forced to choose between delivering lower quality outcomes or continued dependency on non-local consultants. The result was a vicious circle where local researchers were only employed in low-level implementation roles, if at all, as they generally lacked research capacities above this level²⁵, but where as a result they were denied the opportunity to develop capacity for higher-level research, particularly the key capacity of autonomous publication of research.

To date it is almost entirely through assimilation of Afghan researchers to metropolitan institutions and fields that Afghan capacity for knowledge production has developed. However, the lack of adequate preparation for higher-level knowledge production resulting from the limitations of the local education system, and Afghan higher education in particular, in addition to the difficulties attendant on migration, has potential to limit the capacity of Afghan diaspora scholars to produce a genuinely *decolonised* Afghan knowledge of Afghanistan. In particular, the dependency involved in patron-client relationships between peripheral-migrant or diaspora scholars and metropolitan sponsors controlling access to opportunity-granting networks and especially publication militates against possibilities for

autonomy from metropolitan structures of knowledge production. Insofar as autonomous knowledge production requires autonomous institutions, peripheral-nation higher education institutions would seem to be an obvious choice for capacity-building support, both as producers of knowledge, and of capacities for knowledge production on which non-higher education institutions such as research organisations depend. Autonomous peripheral capacity in higher education would on this basis seem central to postcolonial projects of decolonisation of knowledge of peripheralised spaces.

The Afghan higher education field 2001-2021

A fundamental demographic feature of contemporary Afghanistan is the disproportionate youthfulness of the population, 63 percent of the population in 2018 being under the age of 25²⁶, creating a proportionate demand for education, a demand increased by recognition by Afghans post-2001 of education, and particularly higher education, as a key pathway to social and global mobility²⁷. In Afghanistan, very high rates of youth unemployment strongly incentivise seeking a higher education place, both to increase employability, and to defer having to seek employment for as long as possible. The result is demand for higher education places dramatically outstripping supply, especially the supply of subsidised places at the more prestigious public universities²⁸, notably the University of Kabul. Rapid expansion of higher education after 2001 resulted in significant quality issues in a sector already severely affected by previous periods of conflict, particularly the urban destruction of the civil war period in the early 1990s, issues made even more problematic by the high expense of maintaining a student even within the public system. The only other option, private higher education, which hence experienced dramatic expansion during the period, is even more expensive, despite being plagued by even more serious issues of quality, including instances of

²⁴Milton *Higher Education* 153

²⁵Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 105-106

²⁶National Statistics and Information Authority/CSO "Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook" 4

²⁷Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 192

²⁸Milton *Higher Education* 58-60

deliberate fraud²⁹.

The only higher-quality private sector institution, the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) has annual fees making it inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of Afghans, despite its crucial position as the key local higher education institution for gaining access to metropolitan higher education. However even AUAF had significant problems with the quality of teaching and research³⁰, owing in part to generally low levels of faculty qualification by international standards. AUAF can be considered primarily to represent an example of a higher-educational institution where, as theorised by Igarishi and Saito in their work on cosmopolitanism as cultural capital³¹, non-Northwestern-metropolitan or peripheral subjects can be acculturated to a dominant cosmopolitan-globalist culture, hence increasing their chances of gaining access to a range of metropolitan fields, usually by migration. The assimilationist or global-multiculturalist approach to building peripheral knowledge-production capacity has attracted strong criticism from postcolonial theorists, as representing no more than elite “‘minority particularisms’ in search of inclusion in the dominant system”³². From the postcolonial perspective, elite ‘inclusions’ are not conducive to genuine decolonisation of knowledge production, but only to token assimilation of a small minority of elite peripheral subjects to metropolitan culture or knowledge³³.

What development did take place in Afghan higher education in the period of peak intervention 2002-2014 tended to focus on physical infrastructure, in line with the general preoccupation of the major metropolitan donor institutions with programs of infrastructure development³⁴, and with administration of the attendant private and state contracts and contracting relationships. Notable also was the emphasis on prestige facilities, with quality of

education identified largely with the physical quality of facilities that could be visually presented in reports³⁵, for example the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU), or the prestige reception and event spaces within the large and extensively fortified AUAF complex. As such prestige facilities were largely inaccessible to general student populations, they had only a limited effect in building local capacities. A parallel development was donor contracting for construction of locally-prestigious ICT facilities at both public and private institutions, presented as a technical solution to Afghanistan’s academic isolation and almost total lack of access to even minimal scholarly resources³⁶. Again, access to these facilities was often restricted, or technical issues limited their usefulness, and basic issues of lack of access to subscription-only academic libraries or databases required for higher-level knowledge production remained un-addressed.

Part of the problem for building the capacity of higher education followed from the way, historically, higher education in Afghanistan has been for the “authorisation” or recognition of existing, usually familial, social statuses, through titles, credentials and occupancy of positions, rather than for the development of specific skills, or any more general capacity for knowledge production³⁷. The historical capacity of a higher education place, and especially graduation with a title such as ‘Doctor’ or ‘Engineer’, to confer status on a family or associated network³⁸, led to places being sought as honours, as a position conferred through patronage, or in recognition of the status of the head of the family. New expectations of higher education after 2001 resulted in a culture of credentialism, whereby certificates were used to secure access to further opportunities, such as scholarships, or other internally or externally funded positions or opportunities that require given formal qualifications. Credentialism tended to lead to a social and political pre-occupation with *access* to the education system, but a corresponding

²⁹Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 120

³⁰Khattak “Reflections” 13

³¹Igarishi and Saito “Exploring the Intersection of Globalization, Education and Stratification”

³²Boatca and Costa “Postcolonial sociology: a research agenda” 15

³³Bhambra “Towards a Postcolonial Global Sociology”

³⁴Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 119

³⁵Tarheyar *Higher Education in Afghanistan* 44 and 53

³⁶Milton *Higher Education* 42

³⁷Daxner and Schrade “Higher Education in Afghanistan” 11

³⁸Ali “Afghan students’ difficult way into higher education” 3

disinterest in (or even active antipathy to) merit and the actual *quality* of education³⁹, especially where candidates were admitted to successively higher levels of education on grounds other than merit. From the relatively little that is known in specific cases, spurious credentialism seems to have been the rule rather than the exception: for example, at one technical institute of higher education, a teacher-training college, only ten percent of students attended but graduation certificates were issued to all enrolled students, and the absent students were included in official enrolment and graduation statistics⁴⁰.

Continuous with the problem of credentialism is that even the most prestigious and relatively well-supported higher education institutions in Afghanistan have very low academic and professional standards for graduation. For instance, at the University of Kabul, the leading public university, undergraduates do not in general write papers or learn basic academic and professional skills: only a single piece of written work may be required during the course of a degree for graduation, and low academic capacity and standards mean that even this piece of work is often plagiarised⁴¹. As elsewhere within the Afghan education system, there were serious issues with the consistent and equitable implementation of standards and the principle of merit, with frequent concessions for members of the families of those who are “important” or “have suffered”⁴², or who can otherwise claim ‘extenuating circumstances’ where academic performance is concerned. In parallel, the oversubscription of prestigious disciplines such as political science has created an over-supply of graduates with low-quality qualifications in these areas, increasing unemployment where the state, traditionally the expected employer of the more-educated, is unable to absorb more graduates⁴³.

If graduates of higher education are unable to find employment, or if general education

graduates are unable to secure a place in higher education, they may be more vulnerable to radicalisation⁴⁴. Such graduates would obviously be particularly prone to radicalisation if they felt dissatisfied with the quality of the education system, and hence by extension with the central government, or if they felt that access to public higher education was compromised by government misadministration or corruption.

Disenchantment due to the effects of corruption on prospects for employment or access to higher education may have a more radicalising effect than exposure to militant ideologies, or may significantly increase the effect of such exposure⁴⁵. Expansion of the education system but not of employment opportunities, and attendant radicalisation of unemployed graduates, has historically resulted in conflict and violent regime change in Afghanistan, being one of the key pre-conditions of the 1978 communist coup and subsequent civil wars. Graduates in the 1960s and 1970s, some of whom would go on to become key figures in later communist and fundamentalist factions, found themselves unable to secure adequate employment, largely due to lack of government connections, leading to increasing alienation from the central government⁴⁶. Disenchantment of un- or underemployed graduates of both general and higher education with the central government was on historical evidence alone likely to have been a contributing factor to events in 2021.

Student and graduate concerns regarding the quality of higher education and the need for reform emerged early after 2001, but concerns expressed in 2002-2003 remained unaddressed ten years later⁴⁷, with later attempts at reform often effectively blocked by the Ministry of Higher Education⁴⁸. An emphasis on seniority or social connections rather than capacity or merit resulted in serious problems with largely unqualified or incompetent so-

³⁹Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 129

⁴⁰Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 231

⁴¹Khattak “Reflections” 28

⁴²Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 7

⁴³Milton *Higher Education* 60 and Ali and Roehrs “University entry exams as bottleneck for higher education” 5

⁴⁴Daxner and Schrade “Higher Education in Afghanistan” 13-14

⁴⁵Khousary “Madrasahs and general education in Afghanistan” 122

⁴⁶Guistoizzi “Politics of Education in Afghanistan” 10

⁴⁷Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 32

⁴⁸Milton *Higher Education* 76

called ‘professors’⁴⁹, and whole ‘universities’ without PhD-holding staff: in many cases so-called ‘faculties’ across the higher education sector were composed largely of junior teaching assistants⁵⁰. Students were often graduated, and graduates appointed to faculty positions as ‘professors’, as an honour or status-conferring title as noted above, on bases of nepotism or favoritism, or through patron-client networks, or in response to political pressure on institutions and individual academic and administrative staff that at times included armed intimidation⁵¹.

Rather than focusing on actual reform, programs of capacity-building were characterised more by a pre-occupation with donor conditionality for funding. Funding conditionality tended to focus on the production of strategic plans and reports, largely limited to Ministry or at best university administrative-executive level, as centralisation at high levels made implementing programs easier for donor institutions. Conflicts resulted over control of the process, on the side of the Ministries of Education and Higher Education mainly concerning control of funds and donor control of contracting and sub-contracting, and on the side of donor institutions concerning failures to meet conditions for release of funds. The result was funding delays, delaying implementation, followed by shortfalls in capacity to implement, further delays, and projects hence remaining uncompleted across successive project cycles⁵². Despite – or possibly because of – lack of outcomes relative to the extent of funding, the consultancies, infrastructure contracts and funding for capacity-building projects came to represent what has been described as a “huge reservoir of patronage”⁵³. Opportunities for patronage accrued not only to local positions and institutions, but also to the metropolitan positions and institutions delivering the aid, vis-à-vis both local and international contractors and implementing partners. Given patron-client relations, lack of transparency, no independent oversight and multi-million-dollar programs, it was naïve to suppose that endemic

corruption would not inevitably result⁵⁴.

The corruption of Afghan capacity-building by metropolitan intervention

Corruption, specifically perceptions of monopolisation of metropolitan resources by a minority composed of central government factional elites, was a significant popular issue and source of unrest and disaffection in Afghanistan almost from the outset of intervention. For example, a collapse of popular enthusiasm for state-sponsored education was noticeable from as early as 2002 due to the low quality of government services⁵⁵, and due to a perceived general failure of intervention from that point onwards to produce significant concrete outcomes at community level. The extent of the problem was under-reported throughout the 2001-2021 period, despite repeated assertions by many Afghans that corruption was as significant an issue as physical security and the ongoing insurgent conflict between the IRoA and Coalition and the IEoA⁵⁶. In the failure to foreground corruption as a key problem, the operation of a key structural condition of knowledge production about Afghanistan can be seen, one determined by an alignment between local governance elites *and* intervening metropolitan institutions, both with vested interests in de-emphasising the extent of corruption.

Arguments were made in regard to tolerating corruption as an element of a traditional culture of patronage, or relative to Afghanistan as a unique setting in which ‘western’ models of transparency in contracting or recruitment, quality assurance or other standards were inappropriate or even culturally insensitive⁵⁷. Leaving aside the extent to which this is an obviously stereotypical and orientalisng representation of a peripheral society and culture⁵⁸, a distinction can readily be made between more traditional-cultural or central-state institutional social-network models of patronage in Afghanistan before 2001, and conditions during the period of metropolitan intervention. Wholesale colonisation of virtually every Afghan institutional field and

⁴⁹Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 218

⁵⁰Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 137

⁵¹Khattak “Reflections”

⁵²Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 238-241

⁵³Guistozzi “Politics of Education” 2

⁵⁴Cordesman “How America Corrupted Afghanistan”

⁵⁵Guistozzi “Politics of Education” 19

⁵⁶Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 26

⁵⁷Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 138

⁵⁸Said *Orientalism*

governance sector after 2001 by metropolitan fields and institutions offered opportunities for appropriation through contracting, project implementation, consultancies and access to global mobility and migration pathways on a scale vastly greater than at any other period in modern Afghan history⁵⁹. Contributing to the problem was a strong sense of entitlement to what might be termed the 'spoils of war' on the part of an older mujahideen generation who had survived the conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s⁶⁰.

A pervasive culture of metropolitan-funded institutional corruption at all levels resulted in a general popular perception that merit was largely irrelevant to access to opportunities. The effect was wholesale erosion of credibility for any educational qualification, and particularly higher education graduate qualifications, leading to endemic problems of faking of certificates and of records⁶¹: for example, over 1000 forged documents were discovered at the Ministry of Education in a single case in 2006, following the establishment of a central register⁶². Forging of documentation extended to any documentation that might grant access to metropolitan-funded opportunities, leading to wholesale copying of any documents to which individuals or organisations might have access, for example planning documents or reports, creating a 'copy-paste' culture of plagiarism among networks of "briefcase NGOs"⁶³, later 'laptop NGOs', that sprang up in response to the demand for local implementing partners. A culture of opportunistic plagiarism militated against development of genuine capacities for research and knowledge production, especially where 'capacity-building' came to mean granting individuals and institutions access to opportunities regardless of capacity, rather than increasing capacity to demonstrate merit relative to opportunity, or capacity to deliver outcomes above a minimal funding-conditionality level. Officials were paid to accept forged, plagiarised or otherwise

spurious documentation, conferring positions or contracts on individuals or organisations with limited capacity to deliver outcomes⁶⁴, degrading the project of aid and development assistance, and the project of producing valid data and analysis as knowledge of the setting.

Across the Afghan governance field, resources made available by metropolitan donors during the period 2002-2021 became the object of patronage networks converting control of the distribution of these resources into social and political power and influence⁶⁵. An endemic problem of 'ghost' employees – salaries drawn on non-existent positions – was continuous with that of absenteeism, particularly on the part of those occupying longer-established positions⁶⁶. Again, this was a consequence of a historical culture of positions being seen as sinecures, assigned through networks of patronage⁶⁷, but was dramatically exacerbated after 2001 by endemic nepotism and favouritism⁶⁸. Estimates of the extent of the problem in the general education field alone refer to 16 000 to 20 000 ghost positions, at a cost of up to US\$12 million a month: potentially over a *billion* US dollars in misappropriated funds across the decade of peak intervention, in just one area of a single Afghan governance sector. It cannot be over-emphasised that the implication of what is known in specific instances such as this is that, far from being a marginal issue or special case, wastage and misappropriation of funds may have been the *general* case, with the *majority* of funding potentially lost to corruption.

A further key form of patronage was control of scholarships, especially those conferring a place at a metropolitan institution, and hence allowing residence outside of Afghanistan for extended periods. Opportunities for global mobility were obviously highly desirable given conditions in Afghanistan, and especially for the children of the governing elite, given the potential of scholarships to operate as a

⁵⁹Cordesman "How America Corrupted Afghanistan"

⁶⁰Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 140

⁶¹Welch and Wahidyar "The Interrupted Development of Higher Education in Afghanistan" 174 and Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 20

⁶²Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 20

⁶³Khattak "Reflections"

⁶⁴Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 20

⁶⁵Pherali and Sahar "A political economy analysis of education in Afghanistan" 248 and Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 23

⁶⁶Tarheyar *Higher Education in Afghanistan* 70

⁶⁷Daxner and Schrade "Higher Education in Afghanistan"

⁶⁸Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 231

migration pathway, not just for the recipient but for their immediate family also. As a means of building local capacity, the external scholarships model attracted considerable criticism at the time, as almost inevitably in practice it tended only to facilitate the key capacity-building problem in Afghanistan of 'brain drain', where the best qualified in every Afghan field leave as soon as they are able⁶⁹. Development of 'capacity' was hence used to gain entry to metropolitan fields with the aim of permanent migration, resulting in "masses of academic exchange activists"⁷⁰ with a strong vested interest in the external scholarships model, keen to leverage any metropolitan connections to that end. Scholarships were largely awarded to the same members of elite families or patronage networks who were also given preferential access to higher education and certification of graduation, as "selection [was] unmeritocratic, based on political allegiance and sectarian identity"⁷¹.

The social power conferred by capacity to distribute overseas scholarships led to aggressive competition between Ministries, in particular between the Ministries of Higher Education and of Foreign Affairs⁷². The perverse outcome was that rather than being only conferred on those with merit, who would make best use of an opportunity they would otherwise be unable to afford, scholarships were often awarded to those with little or no merit, who would for that reason be unable to make use of the opportunity, one they were in any event readily able to afford, due to their privileged position. Despite occasional exceptions, in general external scholarships can be considered to be a "worst practice"⁷³ model, one that has "long been criticised as a regressive form of aid that fails to sustainably build capacity in recipient countries"⁷⁴. Perhaps 50% of higher education aid in Afghanistan took the form of external scholarships, resulting in a small number of

graduates at the "enormous cost" of higher degrees at metropolitan universities⁷⁵. Scholarships were hence a key example of delivery of aid and development funding by metropolitan institutions that consisted in practice of awarding resources back to metropolitan institutions, while ostensibly engaged in local capacity building.

However, sinecures and scholarships are only two areas of corruption: the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, in the first comprehensive report on implementation at a specific Ministry by an independent Afghan body, and now post 2021 likely to stand as a key study of metropolitan-sponsored governance 2001-2021, identified 36 distinct areas of corruption that developed as a result of insufficient monitoring of externally-funded programs⁷⁶. Problems previously identified by the office of the Special Inspector-General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR)⁷⁷ with lack of transparency or independent monitoring and oversight were largely ignored in practice, despite the obvious potential for the vast influx of funds – US\$855 million for education from USAID alone 2002-2016⁷⁸ – to be misappropriated. In particular, the relatively few independent inspections that were carried out indicated problems with generally reported data on the education system and implementation of policy⁷⁹. The MEC report indicates that even basic programs such as adult literacy were seriously mis-represented, in practice often non-existent, with "collusion to hide the absence of any implementation, inappropriate and fraudulent participants, and numerous 'ghost' program sites"⁸⁰.

Due to the reliance of the whole apparatus of governance in Afghanistan on external funding, a system developed in which "ministers, parliamentarians and senior bureaucrats ... primary focus is to obtain funds for further

⁶⁹Milton *Higher Education* 36

⁷⁰Draxner and Schrade "Higher Education in Afghanistan" 23

⁷¹Milton *Higher Education* 70

⁷²Welch and Wahidyar "Interrupted Development" 169

⁷³Milton *Higher Education* 15

⁷⁴Barakat and Bengtsson 2017 in Milton *Higher Education* 21

⁷⁵Milton *Higher Education* 66 and 69

⁷⁶Bjelica "An assessment of Afghanistan's Ministry of Education" 1 and MEC "Corruption Assessment of the Ministry of Education"

⁷⁷SIGAR "Corruption In Conflict"

⁷⁸Adili "Afghanistan's inconsistent education statistics" 9

⁷⁹For example, Adili "Education statistics" 8 and Ali "Plundered education in Ghor" 1

⁸⁰MEC in Bjelica "An assessment" 5-6

disbursement”⁸¹, which led by extension to a focus on meeting conditions for external funding, notably in the production of plans and reports, and on capacity-building to this end at Ministry level⁸². Production of policy as required to meet donor conditions, emphasising detailed action plans for implementation, become the focus of Ministerial operations and capacity-building. However, as Ministry capacity for planning had always been limited, Ministries remained largely dependent on the technical support of external consultants for policy development⁸³ and to meet donor requirements, with the actual role of the Afghan government described as “negligible”⁸⁴: again, resources for Afghan capacity-building were effectively awarded back to metropolitan positions and institutions.

Lack of local ownership of policy development combined with the remoteness of external consultants and agencies from conditions on the ground resulted in disconnection of implementation from policy development: “despite the fact that many planning documents (‘strategic plans’) seem to be perfectly rational, they don’t show much attachment to reality”⁸⁵. The need to satisfy donor requirements led to wholesale copying of policies and systems from elsewhere, but these were often simply not possible to implement in the Afghan context, either due to differences in local conditions, lack of capacity, or simple political inexpediency⁸⁶, especially where wholesale changes to the existing system would have disrupted political structures of alliance and patronage. In the context of the disconnection between donor-developed policy, and systems as they existed and operated in practice, a wider system developed where, to quote an Afghan educator, “they say everything is OK on paper, but I have found through interviews that they do not implement. They say they do, but they do not”⁸⁷. Where there was any response to

problems of implementation, this tended to be “short-term fixes that satisfy donors”⁸⁸ but which had little or no concrete effect at community level, further exacerbating popular Afghan perceptions of the incapacity and illegitimacy of the IRoA and its metropolitan sponsors, contributing to the collapse of 2021.

Conclusions: consequences of governance failures

Improvements in education, usually in access to primary and general education but also in higher education, continue to be cited post-2021 as one of the key achievements of the primary period of international intervention in Afghanistan 2002-2015⁸⁹. In particular, dramatic increases in enrolment statistics have been repeatedly cited as evidence for the effectiveness of programs of aid and development, and of the Ministries of Education and Higher Education as recipients of metropolitan aid. By extension, improved access to education legitimated the central government, international donors supporting education, and metropolitan intervention itself: a narrative of ‘achievement’ that continues to be presented by metropolitan institutions post-2021⁹⁰. However, representation of metropolitan intervention in terms of ‘achievements’ requires serious qualification, especially where what was ultimately ‘achieved’ was return to power of the IEoA, arguably due to failure to build IRoA capacity for effective governance.

In practice, the intervention project was fatally compromised in the eyes of the Afghan populace by practices such as highly questionable tendering for major infrastructure projects, awarding of sinecure positions such as consultancies through un-transparent recruitment or contracting processes, and nepotism and favouritism in the awarding of scholarships and other key opportunities. Donor agencies established a patron-client relationship with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan⁹¹ which emphasised delivery of outcomes at the level of government

⁸¹Khattak “Reflections” 16

⁸²Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 228 and 238

⁸³Baiza *Education in Afghanistan* 237

⁸⁴Khattak “Reflections” 32 and 30

⁸⁵Daxner and Schrade “Higher Education in Afghanistan” 24

⁸⁶Milton *Higher Education* 74

⁸⁷Afghan woman academic in Roof “Day By Day: Higher Education in Afghanistan” 72

⁸⁸Milton *Higher Education* 74

⁸⁹Adili “Education statistics” 1

⁹⁰ASPI “Beyond the Sandpit: Counterterrorism and resilience in an age of strategic competition”

⁹¹MEC “Corruption Assessment” 20-21 and Khattak “Reflections”

and donor policies, plans or reports, rather than delivery of concrete in-practice educational or research capacity outcomes on the ground, at Afghan community level. Lack of transparency and quality assurance enabled the development and institutionalisation of a new system of patronage networks, due largely to a failure on the part of donor institutions to engage in adequate monitoring and quality-assurance of the implementation of their own programs⁹². The quality-assurance needed was precluded by a lack of institutional capacity to tolerate the risks of effective monitoring under the security conditions of Afghanistan, and an attendant culture of avoidance of risk and liability⁹³. A key enabling condition for these problems of mis-reporting of educational and other program outcomes was the emphasis placed by donors and hence by the Afghan government on 'reports' as outcomes, particularly the use of statistics as performance indicators relative to the amount of funding delivered, where local capacities for reliable production of statistical knowledge were generally very limited in practice⁹⁴. As a result of the donor emphasis on reportable statistics, Afghan institutions tended to focus on outcomes most easily quantified, such as student enrolments and numbers of teachers and schools⁹⁵, with the high unreliability of the statistics⁹⁶ either de-emphasised or not referred to.

In parallel, metropolitan disinterest in the production of knowledge not directly relevant to immediate metropolitan interests led to a failure to build the capacity of local researchers for autonomous, that is, potentially *critical* knowledge production. The result was production of reports and surveys as 'knowledge' effectively de-problematising intervention, and obscuring the key problem for the legitimacy of the IRoA and metropolitan intervention represented by corruption. The corruption resulting from ineffective

governance of programs was attributed to Afghan institutions and the IRoA, rather than to the metropolitan intuitions ultimately responsible for the implementation of programs of intervention. The wider analytical conclusion is that failures to deliver adequate outcomes at community level may over time fatally compromise the legitimacy of governance institutions and their implementing agencies in the eyes of external, that is, citizen and community, stakeholders, a conclusion with applications beyond extreme cases such as Afghanistan, including in metropolitan societies.

The concrete policy challenge for building capacities for autonomous knowledge production in Afghanistan is to make a break with the previous period of institutional maladministration, misappropriation of resources and loss of opportunities for building capacity, a break at once facilitated and made more challenging by the change of regime in 2021. More specifically, building genuinely autonomous capacity would appear to require making a break with previous practices of sponsored inclusion of a limited number of Afghans in metropolitan institutions where they remain largely subordinate to metropolitan knowledge production, and cannot be realistically expected to return to Afghanistan under current or future conditions. Building local capacity for the production of knowledge genuinely critical of prior metropolitan knowledges would hence appear to require building Afghan higher education institutions that do not operate primarily as migration pathways: a complex problem. A key specific challenge in attempting to make changes in intervention practice will be in addressing the 'spoils of war' expectations of factions within the successor regime, and to avoid perpetuating past practice in continued attempts at misappropriation of resources, with attendant bad-faith proffering of spurious evidence of meeting criteria for ongoing funding of programs of aid and development. The problem can arguably only be addressed by significantly more effective and rigorous oversight and quality assurance than in the past, which would require addressing the problems of the risk-aversion and institutional self-interest of metropolitan institutions overseeing programs.

⁹²MEC "Corruption Assessment" 21-22

⁹³Simpson "Enclavisation" "Risk-management" and *Catastrophe and precaution*

⁹⁴Khattak "Reflections" 28

⁹⁵Guistozzi "Politics of Education" 22

⁹⁶Karlsson and Mansory "Islamic Education in Afghanistan" 696, Hayward *Transforming Higher Education* 39-40, Adili "Education statistics" 2-3 and Bjelica "An assessment" 5

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Taliban Performativity through the Distortive Orientalist Looking Glass

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: This article uses theory of performativity to analyse the violence of subaltern groups such as the Taliban in order to reveal nuances missed by mainstream analytical approaches. Taking a postcolonial approach, it exposes us-versus-them binaries in the mobilization of knowledge and creation of narratives for the purpose of delegitimization and Othering. From their emergence, the Taliban, faced with a growing international backlash, contested the role to which they had been relegated to as a result of an Orientalist reading. Their characterization followed hegemonic narratives that historically limited the Taliban to unruly Afghan Islamists, the ultimate retrogressive Other, the Muslim fanatics of the colonial, imperial past. An examination of the Taliban's performative violence in creating their 'imagined geography', the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, should lead to questions about the identity of 'knowledge communities', the subalterns they choose to exclude, and the need to decolonize the production of knowledge.

Keywords: Taliban, performativity, violence, Orientalism, Subaltern, space, postcolonialism, imagined geography

Biographical Note: Sepi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam is a social scientist and researcher with 30 years' experience consulting in conflict/post-conflict settings. Oxford graduate and PhD candidate at the University of St Andrews, writing on Taliban identity and performativity. In the 1990s, she worked with communities across Afghanistan, regularly negotiating access with Mujahideen and Taliban commanders. Post-Taliban, she worked on capacity building emerging civil society groups. She has worked at senior level on gender issues with donors and multinationals. She advised the British military command in Southern Afghanistan (counterinsurgency) and more recently, NATO (WPS). Recently, she has worked with national clients (Ministry of Interior, Martyrs and Disabled, etc.). Her publications include some landmark reports on a range of topics.

Introduction

The Taliban movement, which first emerged in the 1990s, and returned to power in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021, has frequently been stereotyped and associated with specific narrow visual and narrative representations in media, commentary and literature, as simultaneously primitive, hyper-masculine, aggressive, childlike, and effeminate.¹ This persistent Othering of the Taliban through an Orientalist lens in mainstream narratives, together with perceptions that they are not Afghan but rather creations/servants of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), has often prevented deeper examination of a complex movement. In this article, I argue that the Taliban's often performative and violent transformation of public spaces as part of a contestation of a subaltern identity, which signals a postcolonial stance, has been one of the least understood or studied. This article focuses on the Taliban's everyday and more spectacular performative violence in a number of key events and spaces between 1996 and 2001. Ghazi Sports Stadium in Kabul, for example, is still more often associated with Taliban executions² rather than a sports venue. Similarly, Bibi Mahro Swimming Pool in Kabul has become part of urban myth as the site of Taliban executions. The narratives associated with Taliban violence in these locations added to the Taliban's enduring notoriety years after their regime was toppled.

Combining theoretical frameworks of performativity and postcolonialism, I aim to present a picture that contrasts with an exogenously assumed and projected Taliban identity, outlining a movement capable of performative subversion and contestation to construct a complex identity that responds to diverse forms of 'colonization' and subalternity, particularly in controlling a 'power-knowledge' nexus. Drawing on a partly auto-ethnographic account based on extensive experience in Afghanistan since 1995, I offer a different perspective on the Taliban, showing

how the entrenched, hegemonic narratives presented in Western scholarship and media at the time created critical blind spots in the study of certain groups in Afghan society.

Theoretical Framework

The Taliban performatively contested Orientalism's imagined imperialist and colonial geographies and their subaltern status within them partly by reclaiming and repurposing Afghanistan's physical terrain. From their emergence in 1994, they have done this by performing 'Talibanized' spaces in progressively grandiose and reactionary ways, mostly in urban areas, notably Kabul. As a result, certain sites, contested by being repurposed for Taliban use, became indelibly associated with them through the emotions evoked in the audiences they gathered.

In postcolonial theory, subaltern describes social groups and lower social classes that constitute the Other - marginalized and existing in a space of difference.³ The term subaltern identifies and designates those segments of colonial populations who are geographically, politically, and socially excluded from the power hierarchy of an imperial colony and the empire's metropolitan homeland. Metropolitan cultures, including the cultures of colonized elites, protect their powers and privileges⁴ in a number of ways including the insistence that "the subaltern cannot speak", referring to Spivak's seminal postcolonial text. Using a postcolonial lens, specifically Orientalism, allows questions to be raised about the basis for generating knowledge about the Taliban movement, demonstrating how specific types of representation, downplaying agency and performative force by utilizing stereotypes, have been normalized.

Part of the process of Othering is to deny voice, especially to groups that challenge hegemonic narratives. Cultural imperialism has the power to disqualify or erase the knowledge of certain populations, or segments thereof, considered low on the social hierarchy.⁵ In this way, troublesome groups can be denigrated, dismissed or erased. Adopting the prism of

¹ Hein Kiessling, *Unity, Faith and Discipline*

² Miglani, "Taliban executions still haunt Afghan soccer field", 13 September 2008

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghan-stadium-idUSSP12564220080913> (Accessed 15 July 2022)

³ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

⁴ D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present*

⁵ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Othering reveals how, before the arrival of mobile phones and internet connectivity⁶ in Afghanistan, the Taliban were bereft of a means of communicating with and transmitting their narratives and meanings to a global audience.

Deploying the Orientalist Lens

Orientalism is a form of representation: a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and... 'the Occident' and is considered a foundational document of postcolonialism explaining a powerful political instrument of domination".⁷ Orientalism provides an essential analytical framework for understanding cultural representations of groups like the Taliban as portrayed in Western literature and mass media. The underpinning concept is that the generation of representations based on the binary are mutually constitutive social constructs, as each exists because of the Other. In service of the colonial variant of imperialism, the Orientalist paradigm allowed for cultural representations that depicted these societies as primitive, irrational, violent, despotic, fanatical and essentially inferior to westerners and their indigenous informants or the metropolitan elites and proxies they supported. Societies, or segments of them, could then be essentialized as static and undeveloped, reactionary, and traditional, awaiting enlightenment through contemporary and progressive ideas provided by Westerners. In contrast to this Oriental Other, Western Europe was superior, civil, progressive, and rational.⁸

In Orientalism, Said utilizes both Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and Foucault's discourse on power-knowledge relations (the power to fabricate meanings, to represent others as Other) to establish an intellectual binary relationship that allows Occidentals and their proxies to claim definitive knowledge of the Orient and to colonize the people and geographies therein.⁹ The power-knowledge binary is essential to understanding colonialism and the power to imagine

geographies and to assign identities to the people in those spaces. The power-knowledge nexus is the locus of the Taliban's struggle to escape their subaltern status and to explain their situation through performative violence in the 1990s, in order to create new 'space'.

An Orientalist vantage point on Afghanistan has historically allowed for a shift in the balance and practice of power, entitling Western countries to intervene, usually through a compliant elite, militarily or through the provision of development aid, 'saving' or 'empowering' people while furthering multiple agendas. Attitudes towards the Frontier regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, for example, are still dominated by British ethnographic accounts to the present day and local elites have adopted this prism for viewing those labelled 'traditional' and 'rural', often interpreted as 'backward'¹⁰. As a result, the production of knowledge has remained colonized and biased to some extent, "usually muted, tamed, and incorporated within hegemonic frames"¹¹, while subaltern voices have been silenced.

Narratives of Othering have been an insidious constant of alienation in Afghanistan, justifying the seizing of power based on control of armies, state funds, ethnicity, tribal background, land ownership, religious background, since the 1950s - rural-urban location, literacy and ability to speak English, since the 1990s - the ability to mobilize specific types of vocabulary favoured by the international development community, and, since 2001 - direct access to the international media, military, donor and diplomatic communities and the skilful mobilization of victim narratives. A myriad of Afghan identities often grind against each other in contestation for legitimacy and authority, seeking to gain the upper hand over opposing groups, to exclude and disenfranchise them. Compliant Afghan elites have mobilized the hierarchy to consistently Other opponents, leading at best to exclusion and denial of voice and at worst to incarceration and death. Othering has become an innate feature of political and public life resulting in an increasingly brittle polity

⁶ Mobile phones arrived in 2002 and internet connectivity slightly later.

⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 10

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Kolsky, "The Colonial Rule of Law and the Legal Regime of Exception"

¹¹ Juris, "Violence Performed and Imagined"

projected through a highly fractured lens, a bewildering 'multiverse' of subaltern actors, ideologies, identities, narratives and histories.

The mobilization of the concept of the Other requires "imagined geographies", a term coined by Edward Said as a component of Orientalism, referring to the perception of a space created through certain imagery, texts, and/or discourses, specifically for the Western gaze. A recent example is the insistence of Westerners and their proteges on presenting distinct suburbs of Kabul as somehow representative of the whole of Afghanistan, in all its diversity and complexity. The analysis of imagined geographies is important in dispelling "us-versus-them" binaries in the study of history, as well as for challenging "public cultures of assumption, disposition and action"¹², by exposing asymmetrical systems of power, knowledge, and geography. Within the Orientalist purview, Afghanistan's imagined geographies are overlaid fragments in strata of colonial, neocolonial, postcolonial and imperialist histories¹³, a highly complex mosaic of spatial and temporal imaginaries, reflecting the foreign ideologies and often constructed identities of elites, given meaning by or for the benefit largely of the Western gaze, at times for the process of evoking and maintaining subsidies and largesse.

Taliban as the Subaltern Other

A study of the Taliban as subaltern and Other is required in any discussion of the construction of their identity through performativity. The Taliban emerged from combinations of groupings – generally rural, refugee, madrasa-educated, devout Muslims. Generally they did not come from elite tribes or families, the intelligentsia, famous Mujahideen commanders, and the urbanised. A history of Othering had created many subaltern groups in Afghan society long before the Soviet invasion. The removal of the monarchy in the 1973 coup and of the traditional ruling classes in the 1978 revolution, together with the disorder and war which followed, allowed many subaltern groups to assert themselves, often using weapons and violence. These included new religious groupings and some aspiring to

religiosity that had historically had to defer to the aristocracy and tribal leaders. Some were mobilized with Saudi and US funding and became a new elite and prominent figures within Mujahideen factions.

Even famous Mujahideen leaders were at times the subalterns of those who funded, trained, and guided them. Internationally, the Mujahideen provided the mute faces, rugged warriors carrying weapons against a backdrop of mountains, on posters usually entitled 'freedom fighters'. They even provided an epic backdrop to the Cold War heroics of Rambo and James Bond. For the media, as long as they were fighting the 'godless Communists', they were the 'good guys' facing the Soviet Goliath, but very few in the audience generally understood or cared about their aims beyond that. This attitude meant that after the Soviet withdrawal, the fall of the Communist government and a rapidly cobbled together Mujahideen government, Western powers disengaged. The result was a bloody civil war.

From their first appearance in 1994, the Taliban grappled with the violent and lawless aftermath of the war with the Soviets - fiefdoms run by hierarchies of squabbling Mujahideen commanders and straggling militias formed by the Communists.¹⁴ Violence had become an increasingly grim background soundtrack to Afghan lives since the late seventies, but its full extent was not always captured by the all-important and dominant Western gaze. The Taliban rejected the Mujahideen's subaltern identity, as 'noble savages' while assisting the West in its adventure against the Soviets, and affirmed the movement's genesis in the plight of ordinary Afghans struggling to survive and longing for security.¹⁵

During the *jihad*, Mujahideen leaders used *madrasa* student fronts or *taliban* as cannon fodder on the frontlines.¹⁶ The latter had no say in military or political affairs and in the end, they watched as the theocracy they had been promised failed to materialise. Even by assuming the name 'Taliban', the movement acknowledged its initial status as subaltern to

¹² D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present*

¹³ M. Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination*

¹⁴ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: militant Islam, oil, and fundamentalism in Central Asia*

¹⁵ Kathy Gannon, *I is for Infidel*

¹⁶ David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age*

the subalterns in search of *their own* 'imagined geography'. By rising up and taking power to continue on the path to the promised Emirate - the initial rationale for taking up arms against the Soviet-backed Communist government - the Taliban were finishing what the Mujahideen failed to complete. The international community and many Afghans expected the Taliban to fit Mujahideen stereotypes. Once the Taliban seized Kabul, however, their violent performativity increased but the usual frameworks for analysis and the distorting foreign media lens, which had already shifted focus in search of 'Islamic terror', were inadequate to the task of explaining their actions and they were generally dismissed as anachronistic savages.

The media and development agencies, part of the few representatives of the West remaining in Afghanistan at the time, had near exclusive control of the narrative, as the extant 'knowledge community'. They also controlled the "means of symbolic distribution".¹⁷ From their emergence in 1994, rather than in-depth studies, the Taliban were introduced to Western audiences through the media, in the form of sensationalized 'tabloid realism'¹⁸ related to their treatment of women, closure of girls schools and destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Persistent reductionist interpretations of the Taliban's actions as 'Pushtun', 'rural' and 'madrasa educated', the latter characterized as 'backward', 'savage' and 'medieval', Othered the Taliban as irrelevant relics and led to their gradual isolation.

Taliban actions were frequently decontextualized and placed within hegemonic narratives in order to marginalize them as what could only be described as the spontaneous and violent acts of a backward, draconian regime. Ultimately, the Taliban failed to wrest the power-knowledge nexus from the grip of the international media. Calculated performative violence, for maximum effect to stabilize a country ravaged by decades of conflict, was reduced by the distortive media lens to the incomprehensible brutality of savage fundamentalists. A series of

assumptions and urban myths about the Taliban were at times touted as facts. When the Taliban stepped outside the boundaries of exogenous, predefined identities and activities, it was simply attributed to their being backward or irrational.

Spatial Configuration and Visual Propaganda

The Taliban, in a hurry to communicate to a shell shocked and unstable population, were using visual propaganda to spread their messages. Images are a more emotive and effective means of influencing the public, because humans "process images more quickly than text, making images more emotionally visceral and responses to images frequently more immediate and powerful than responses to text".¹⁹ Repetition is also important in visual propaganda to convey messages to the masses²⁰ and to "accumulate a degree of performative force if it is repeatedly invoked, reasserted and rearticulated".²¹ The Taliban used spatial configuration to remind people of their power relations, constantly impressing the imminence of punishment. The Taliban had an uncanny ability to use space for performative force: "Space, how it is constructed, what is used to decorate it, and how it is used, are all important in establishing authority and projecting power and in moulding people's outlooks and values".²²

Spatial configuration appeared in the form of smashed televisions and streamers of video and audio cassette tapes festooning many metal frameworks, constructed to hold banners on roads where the Taliban had checkpoints. The disembowelled objects were a constant visual reminder of the Taliban's puritanical ban on many forms of entertainment. It reinforced their performative power alongside the visual of their armed foot soldiers manning checkpoints, signalling their coercive power. Shock effects were created around public executions, when people were shown dead bodies, mutilated body parts or enacted

¹⁷ Jeffrey Alexander, *Performance and Power*

¹⁸ M. Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination*
Mainstream publishers produced approximately three books on the Taliban before 2001

¹⁹ Carol Winkler et al., *Visual Propaganda and Extremism in the Online Environment*, 9

²⁰ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*

²¹ Michael Glass et al., *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space*, 13

²² Graeme J. Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*, 12

violence. Visual information also elicits higher rates of information recall than auditory or textual channels.²³ This performative violence in public spaces frightened people, attached new and intense emotions to the spaces where events occurred and contributed to an enduring Taliban myth.

Performativity

Discourses establish an actor's place in the world as he constructs it, and provide frameworks of meaning within which the actor can think and act.²⁴ Performativity, based on the work of philosopher, Judith Butler, is an important theoretical framework for exploring the early years of Taliban rule. For Butler, the political "subject" only comes into being or is gradually constructed-whether individually or collectively-in the performative act of political reiteration. By reiterating the "performative enactment of particular social norms"²⁵ which came to be specifically associated with them, the Taliban gradually developed attributes as sovereign subjects. Prior to specific political actions, the Taliban did not exist as 'the Taliban' and could have become just another Mujahideen group. Thus the Taliban were constituted in and through these actions (e.g. blowing up the Bamiyan Buddhas) and the subsequent reactions of their various 'audiences', which set them apart from previous Mujahideen factions. They clearly demonstrate Butler's "conception of performativity [as opening] up the radical possibility for political agency by illustrating how social norms can be challenged through performative acts of material-discursive rearticulation".²⁶

Using theory of performativity to examine the Taliban's use of violence in 'becoming' reveals how they were, at times, reconstructing meaning around what it meant for the movement to be, for example, extremist Muslims, the most common frame of reference used by Western and Westernised commentators to describe them. Such

commentators assumed social norms, drawn from Orientalist, hegemonic and at times superficial interpretations of what it meant to be an extremist Muslim, 'doing' *jihad* (being a *mujahid*), being *madrassa*-educated, and so on, interchangeable with words such as backward, conservative, uneducated or medieval in a pejorative sense. Texts often juxtaposed these words with the Taliban's assumed constitutive frames of reference. The next section touches on how the Taliban's actions can be interpreted as creating new meanings associated with these aspects of their identity.

Power and Performance - Cultural Pragmatics

Jeffrey Alexander, a cultural sociologist, uses the theory of cultural pragmatics, within the frame of performativity, to examine how actors create cultural or social performances, that demonstrate "the social process[es] by which [they], individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation"²⁷. Alexander's theory is critical in revealing the Taliban's attempts at creating new meanings and 'explaining their situation' through their violent performances of power and space as well as the challenges they faced in doing so. Meaning is conveyed through 'authentic' performance. This, in turn, is achieved through what Alexander calls cultural pragmatics, combining elements of social and cultural performance, such as collective representations of background symbols, strategic audience selection and demonstrated power to construct social performance.

Furthermore, when analysing Taliban actions, it is necessary to differentiate between coercive power and performative power. Alexander explains that performing power must be successful for social actors to be credible to their intended audience. For example, Mujahideen factions demonstrated coercive power through the excessive use of heavy weaponry in civilian areas. By 2001, the Taliban had mastered performative violence to such an extent that they had totally eclipsed all Mujahideen groups despite relying on less violence. To date, even the memory of Taliban actions in certain locations continues to fill people with dread. Power cannot be made or

²³ Carol Winkler et al., *Visual Propaganda and Extremism in the Online Environment*

²⁴ A. Klotz et al., *Strategies for Research in Constructivist International Relations*

²⁵ Michael Glass et al., *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space*

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Jeffrey Alexander, *Performance and Power*, 28

sustained through action alone, but is “subject to the rigors of performance”. By this Alexander means “the need for power to constantly “iterate” background narratives and codes”²⁸, including sustaining “a productive relation to all the other elements of performance”.²⁹ Examining some of the well-known events which took place under Taliban rule reveals their ability to control these elements of performing power, while iterating narratives and codes linked to Islam and episodes in Afghan history.

Traditional/Modern Binary

The Taliban emerged as a modern movement anchoring their actions in the cultural and religious structures from which they emerged, while developing a postcolonial script that contested their subaltern status as warriors who had fought a *jihad* against the Soviets only to be denied the promised emirate. Alexander differentiates between the traditional and the modern in order to explain ‘authenticity’ in delivering a performance. Following Foucault’s argument that people are not subjects but actors, Alexander argues that “people anchor their actions in culture structures, but they continuously script their lines of actions in pragmatic and meaningfully distinctive ways”³⁰. Alexander’s theory is useful not only because it discusses differences in meaning-making in traditional and modern contexts, but also because it shows how, for analysts using an Orientalist interpretive lens, Taliban performativity was glaringly at odds with the latter’s perceptions and understanding of Islamic and Pushtun cultural norms. Meanwhile, the Taliban were performing new meanings as they faced challenges to their evolving identity in a complex modern context.

In performing power and space, the Taliban selected elements from a variety of repertoires which they fused together – Pushtun, madrasa-educated, Muslim, Mujahideen, rural, etc. Wishing to confine the Taliban to a traditional frame and not understanding that a modern reworking was being witnessed, many commentators have consistently claimed that they had corrupted the ‘correct’ forms of Islam or Pushtun culture, because they were illiterate

Pushtun peasants in some explanations, and/or madrasa brainwashed boys who had been ripped from ordinary family life, in others. In such critiques, there was no possibility that Taliban performativity did not follow anticipated scripts because the audience was witnessing a re-fusion of ‘traditional’ elements and a reworking of standard scripts.

Contestation and Performativity

The Taliban, as subalterns, redeployed dominant hegemonic codes, predominantly from Islam, as part of their performance of subversion, contestation, and revision of the power-knowledge binary, in and through public spaces. They contested Western neo-liberal notions of governance and statehood. They contested previous accommodations between Islam and state and being left with no emirate, having made tremendous sacrifices in their *jihad* against the Soviets. Alexander’s praxis approach points to “sites of contestation where performance of resistance and subversion are understood to flourish in the ceremonial and interactional practices of the marginalized, the enslaved, and the subaltern”.³¹ This approach rejects culture as text and argues that subaltern groups such as the Taliban ““create a culture of resistance,” a “subjugated knowledge” that must be conceptualized not as a discourse but as “a repertoire of performance practices””.³² Culture as a “repertoire of practices”, reformulated in an embodied and experiential form, is often “wholly unrecognizable to members of the dominant culture”, hence the accusation that the Taliban, for example, do not have complete knowledge of Islam. The point of the reformulation, frequently missed by the hostile Orientalist lens, is to “reclaim, short-circuit, and resignify” the hegemonic code’s “signed imperatives”.³³

Performative Violence

By constructing their identity through performative violence, and perceiving themselves as just and moral avengers,³⁴ the

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid, 89

³⁰ Ibid, 5

³¹ Ibid, 21

³² Ibid, 21

³³ Ibid, 21

³⁴ Carol Winkler et al., *Visual Propaganda and Extremism in the Online Environment*. The authors

Taliban crossed the line from Mujahideen faction in 1994 to terrorists by 2001. Some of their notable spectacles involved commentary on grievances or injustices related to the situation of the Afghan people since the arrival of the Communist government and the Soviet army, and the inability of the international community and Mujahideen factions to create stability and a promised theocracy. Lack of in-depth analysis of their performative violence fits within the discourses of postcolonialism, where “historically, all the indigenous peoples and other national groups who have resisted state conquest and oppression have been denounced and vilified by those states as ‘savages’ and ‘terrorists’”.³⁵ In the case of the Taliban, their resistance and contestation have been described by “dominant media frames”³⁶ as evidence of savagery rather than violent performances expressive of identities, styles and practices rooted in opposition.³⁷

After the Soviet withdrawal, the international community left Afghans to ‘bare life’. The war against the Soviets disrupted the social order through, among other things, the proliferation of small arms, the abandonment of heavy weaponry, land grabbing and criminality, creating a chaotic, violent situation which would eventually necessitate the rise of the Taliban movement who attempted to stabilize it.³⁸ The Taliban’s origin story sees them emerging as vigilantes rising to fight Mujahideen depravity at local behest in Kandahar,³⁹ acting to end the plight of Afghans become Agamben’s *homo sacer*, a position “conferred by archaic Roman law upon those who could not be sacrificed according to ritual (because...their deaths were of no value to the gods) but who could be killed with impunity (because they were outside juridical law)”.⁴⁰ *Homo sacer* lives:

“at the point where sovereign power suspends the law, whose absence thus falls over a zone not merely of exclusion but of abandonment. ...

This space is produced through a speech-act, or more accurately a decision in the sense of ‘a cut in life’, that is at once performative and paradoxical. It is performative because it draws a boundary between politically qualified life and merely existent life exposed and abandoned to violence: ‘bare life’”.⁴¹

Once Afghanistan descended into civil war, Afghans were abandoned to become *homo sacer* by departed neo-imperialist patrons who had no further use for them. Fanon argued that such people should not be bound by principles that apply to humanity in their attitude towards those seen to represent the (dis)interest of the masters.⁴² In some respects, reflecting Fanon’s defence of the use of violence by the subaltern to gain independence, the Taliban emerged as a movement that felt compelled to embrace ‘counter-violence’ to bring stability to Kandahar and beyond. Simultaneously, to shock people into obedience after years of acclimatization to alarming levels of carnage, the Taliban had to transcend the norms of violence to which people had become desensitized.

Within the framework of performativity, acts of Taliban violence can be perceived as instances of seeking “to produce social transformation by staging symbolic rituals of confrontation”.⁴³ The performative quality of the Taliban’s violent acts, with their attendant narratives, must be emphasized within systems of “cultural and material structure”.⁴⁴ Performative, “non-verbal, spectacular forms of iconic display”⁴⁵ go beyond kinetic acts to create an ‘opportunity space’, that provides a wealth of messaging that eclipse passive symbolism.⁴⁶ The shock or hiatus of the moment of violent impact is the ‘opportunity space’ where actors using performative violence insert their own values and create a critical arena for the performance of an evolving identity.

analyse revenge as a common and popular theme in Jihadi propaganda.

³⁵ Sluka, “Terrorism and Taboo”, 168

³⁶ Juris, “Violence Performed and Imagined”

³⁷ Peteet, ‘Male Gender and Rituals of Resistance in the Palestinian Intifada’

³⁸ David B. Edwards *Heroes of the Age*

³⁹ Kathy Gannon, *I is for Infidel*

⁴⁰ Gregory, “The black flag”, 406

⁴¹ Ibid, 406

⁴² Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth*

⁴³ Juris, “Violence Performed and Imagined”

⁴⁴ B. Schmidt et al., *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*

⁴⁵ Juris, “Violence Performed and Imagined”

⁴⁶ Neville Bolt, *The Violent Image*

One spectacle which stands out as an example of Taliban performative violence is the display of former President Najibullah's corpse. An examination of this grim spectacle demonstrates the power of the Taliban's performative violence in their early years. In a photograph⁴⁷ published the day after the Taliban took Kabul in late September 1996, two young Taliban foot soldiers hug each other with joyful faces under the grotesquely deformed and bloodied figures of Najibullah and his brother, hanging from a traffic light pole in Aryana Square. The bodies, castrated as a further expression of their powerlessness in the Taliban's masculinised public sphere, were left hanging for three days. The Taliban used the corpses, prominent public figures displayed like a common criminals, as a "means of symbolic production"⁴⁸, mobilizing them as macabre "objects, iconic representations dramatizing and rendering vivid the invisible motives and morals they were trying to represent".⁴⁹

Announcements had been made on the radio so that thousands of people, the 'strategic audience', could gather to watch the scene with shock and dismay. Unlike the majority of Mujahideen commanders, who disposed of victims away from the public gaze, the Taliban treated the president's body with shocking performative violence. The spectacle of Najibullah's corpse was the first of many, designed to cow the population of Kabul into submission and to set up the Taliban as Islamic arbiters of justice and morality for what they saw as a profligate urban setting – performatively creating an 'opportunity space' to display the outcome of their violent act and to construct narratives as social actors who consciously or unconsciously have meanings which they want others to believe.⁵⁰

Utilizing temporal sequencing, i.e. the morning after the Taliban arrived in Kabul, and the choice of space, completed the *mis en scene*.

Indeed, the killing and display of the corpse of the last Communist president was the Taliban's brutal and very public message to the people of Kabul on the first morning of their rule in the city - that the Taliban were not even going to make exceptions for a fellow Pushtun or a president, punished as revenge for those killed by the Communists. Performing the space, displaying Najibullah's grisly end can be interpreted as the Taliban symbolically killing the last protégé and vestige of Communist rule and Soviet influence, finally ending the war the Mujahideen had started, in the way they believed it should have ended. Instead the Mujahideen had allowed Najibullah, their enemy until the collapse of the Communist government in 1992, to be kept safe in a United Nations compound. Hence, it can also be surmised that with this bloody, symbolic act, the domination of non-Muslims (including the United Nations) and a colonization of sorts was at an end and Islamic rule, the long awaited theocracy, had finally been installed.

The Taliban chose the location of King Amanullah's monuments to Afghan Independence from colonizers, Aryana Square, at a crossroads at the heart of Kabul's historic centre, to display the body of President Najibullah, the last Communist ruler of Afghanistan. Aryana square is very close to the Arg, a fortress-palace built by another king, Abdur Rahman, the "Iron Amir" (between 1840 and 1844 – 1 October 1901). He was not afraid of brutality and built the foundations of the modern Afghan state. The Arg was constructed after the Bala Hissar fortress was destroyed by British Indian troops during the second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880.⁵¹ The location of the Taliban's spectacle was possibly another nod to Afghan kings, one who hammered the Afghan state in place and one who threw off the colonial yoke.

Since their return to power in 2021, the Taliban is tapping into other codes and symbols. These are linked to the Taliban's, and in particular Haqqani's, 'killing machines'⁵²,

⁴⁷ Irish Times, "Ex president hanged by Taliban after fall of Kabul", 28 September 1996
<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ex-president-hanged-by-taliban-after-fall-of-kabul-1.90501>
 (accessed 31 August, 2021)

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Alexander, *Performance and Power*

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Woodburn et al., "From the Bala Hissar to the Arg"

⁵² Carter et al., "Haqqani leader turned network into 'killing machine,' intelligence officials say", 7 September 2012
<https://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/07/world/asia/>

such as elite fighter units and suicide bombers for complex attacks, both employing performative violence to turn public spaces into terror zones. Their performances on arrival in Kabul in August 2021 involved their special forces, the elite Badri 313 unit,⁵³ a well-equipped force, not clad in traditional attire, but superficially mirroring special forces units from other parts of the world. Images of the Badri soldiers challenged descriptions of the Taliban as 'medieval' since the uniform, weaponry and posture (e.g. resting finger trigger position) belied a selective process of engaging with modernity.

Additionally, in late 2021, Sirajuddin Haqqani – leader of the powerful and feared Haqqani faction in the Taliban, and now interior minister – met with the families of suicide bombers in a formal gathering,⁵⁴ where he praised their sacrifices and gifted them land and money. Suicide bombing, supremely performative violence, which once again had had the impact of altering many public spaces into scenes of terror and carnage, was a key part of the Taliban's campaign against previous government. In stark contrast to Haqqani's act, the previous regime rarely publicly acknowledged the deaths and sacrifices of their ordinary soldiers and police, let alone their families – they were literally cannon fodder. The government had even hidden casualty figures for a while to avoid demoralising the nation. Haqqani's meeting performatively legitimized and valorised the violent martyrdom of the suicide bombers.

Space and Performativity

The Taliban employed 'spatial practices', performing the space of the newly created Islamic Emirate as they perceived it, with

violence adding 'performative force'.⁵⁵ Following Butler's theory, space is created through performances and as a performative articulation of power.⁵⁶ Gregory discussing spatial practices, echoes the link between performativity and space as "an effect of practices of representation, valorization, and articulation...fabricated through and in these practices and...thus not only a domain but also a "doing"". ⁵⁷ The importance of reworking the public sphere in this manner is "the truly revolutionary process in social change",⁵⁸ restructuring the bases of social and public life. It is the mise-en-scene of cultural pragmatics, 'spatial choreography' creating new meaning and expressing power⁵⁹. The giant, gaping niches where the Buddha statues once stood are perhaps the most monumental and startling testament to Taliban determination to alter the historic landscape of Afghanistan. The effect was to create Taliban territory through performative power.

Since "the production of social space is the material-discursive effect of performative practices",⁶⁰ the Taliban understood that to have impact they would have to surpass the issuance of edicts, something the Mujahideen had pursued with little effect. Each edict was violently enforced by the Taliban adding performative force by shocking the audience. For example, the Taliban issued edicts banning many types of entertainment. It was, however, the smashed TVs dangling at Taliban checkpoints,⁶¹ resembling blinded eyes, cassette and video ribbons flying in the wind, like the entrails of eviscerated creatures, executed and displayed as trophies, that acted as symbolic geographic markers of Taliban rule. These were cultural performativity's objects serving as "iconic representations to help them dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they [were] trying

pakistan-haqqani-profile/index.html (Accessed 25 August 2021)

⁵³ France 24, "Taliban shows off 'special forces' in propaganda blitz", 25 August 2021 <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210825-taliban-shows-off-special-forces-in-propaganda-bltz> (Accessed 30 August 2021)

⁵⁴ Reuters, "Taliban praise suicide bombers", 21 October 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-praise-suicide-bombers-offer-families-cash-land-2021-10-20/> (Accessed 30 October 2021)

⁵⁵ Michael Glass et al., *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space*

⁵⁶ N. Gregson et al., "Taking Butler elsewhere"

⁵⁷ D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 19

⁵⁸ Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*

⁵⁹ Alexander, *Performance and Power*

⁶⁰ Michael Glass et al., *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space*

⁶¹ From 1996 to 2001 working in Taliban controlled areas I saw these everywhere.

to represent".⁶² The use of space for violent punishment for perceived infractions had the effect of creating a metanarrative of rough but effective justice and a Taliban 'territory of moral authority'.⁶³

An extraordinary spectacle which was not violent but captures the Taliban's spatial choreography, and use of objects to create meaning and performative power, occurred in Kandahar in 1996. Mullah Omar removed a holy relic from a shrine in Kandahar, a historic former capital of Afghanistan. This relic was a cloak which Muslims believe belonged to Mohammed, the holy prophet of Islam, who wore it on the famous, miraculous journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, completed in one night, around 621AD. The object was brought to Kandahar in the 18th century from Bukhara by Ahmad Shah Durrani, founder of the Durrani empire, precursor to the modern state of Afghanistan. It is a relic to which miracles are attributed and it is rarely seen, let alone removed from the shrine and displayed. Only kings and rulers of Afghanistan could demand to see the object.

This was spatial choreography with a strategic audience to create new meaning around the identity of the Taliban. By touching this venerated object before a gathered crowd of thousands, the leader of the Taliban was positioning himself in the symbolic line of descent from the Prophet of Islam. Through this act the Taliban broke with the notion of externally conferred legitimacy (through foreign subsidies), as an offshoot of the Mujahideen, and aimed for a different form of legitimacy, bypassing recent history, and linking themselves directly to the Durrani Pushtun kings and their championing of Islam in Afghanistan. Legend has it that Ahmad Shah Durrani held a large tribal gathering which elected him leader. In a similar manner, the Taliban organized a large religious gathering before the spectacle. Mullah Omar was

declared *Amir ul-Mo'menin* (Commander of the Faithful), giving him the Islamic and political authority to lead the Taliban to Kabul and to establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This action stated dramatically that he had not arrived there solely by the power of the gun and that he was not an ordinary leader of a Mujahideen faction. He was claiming moral and religious authority to put his arms in the sleeves of this venerated object. This action henceforth anchored Mullah Omar and the Taliban to the shrine where the cloak is kept.

Interestingly, in August 2021, after entering Kabul, Taliban fighters and leaders referred back to this event when they posed for photos in the Presidential Palace, the Arg, congregating at one point under a painting depicting the crowning of Ahmad Shah Durrani.⁶⁴ A very few journalists commented that this action was incongruous with the identity of the Taliban as it had been projected by the international media. It appeared, however, that the Taliban may have been performatively reminding the strategic audience of the symbolic lineage, reaching back to Ahmad Shah Durrani through Mullah Omar's appearance with the cloak of the prophet.

Performative Contestation of Space

In the production of identity and difference through contestation "particular stylized performances can...communicate directed messages, such as rejection of the dominant order, or radical confrontation with the symbols of global capitalism and the state".⁶⁵ Ordinary objects can be used to delineate that this place is "other". One of the most dramatic spectacles of the Taliban in this genre was the 2001 destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues,⁶⁶ located in the central highlands of Afghanistan. This event made the Taliban globally notorious. One of the most celebrated

⁶² Alexander, *Performance and Power*

⁶³ Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*, 3. Gill defines metanarrative as: "a body of discourse which presents a simplified form of the ideology and which is the vehicle of communication between the regime and those who live under it; it is the principal form of cultural mediation between regime and people."

⁶⁴ Wecker, "The painting behind Taliban fighters in Kabul presidential palace is worth a thousand words" 9 September, 2021 <https://religionnews.com/2021/09/09/the-painting-behind-taliban-fighters-in-kabul-presidential-palace-is-worth-a-thousand-words/> (Accessed 10 October 2021)

⁶⁵ Juris, "Violence Performed and Imagined", 421

⁶⁶ The final moments of the Buddhas can be seen here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBk5-zRUuNQ&feature=youtu.be>

tourist sites in Afghanistan before the war, the Buddhas were described as priceless artefacts – the largest standing Buddha carvings in the world. In 2000, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on the Taliban to pressure them into breaking their ties with Osama Bin Laden and close terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. In response, the Taliban, in keeping with their violent power performances, went for a systematic and spectacular display expressing their subalternity and contestation. Creating a build up to the spectacle, Mullah Omar issued a decree ordering the elimination of all non-Islamic statues and sanctuaries from Afghanistan. The Taliban began smashing Buddhist statues in Kabul Museum from February 2001 onwards and eventually communicated their intention to blow up the Bamiyan Buddhas. Inevitably, there was international outcry in the form of pleas from Muslim religious leaders, letters, delegations, official protests and widespread condemnation, and offers to buy the statues.

The substantial task of destroying the statues in the Bamiyan valley started on March 2, 2001 and took place in stages, over 20 days, using heavy weaponry and eventually dynamite. To ensure an international audience, the ‘strategic audience’ of cultural performativity, twenty journalists were flown to Bamiyan to witness the destruction and confirm that the two Buddhas had been destroyed. Footage of clouds of dust billowing out of the niches, where two giant Buddha statues had stood watch over the Silk Route winding through the Bamiyan valley for millennia, was transmitted all over the world, as the international community watched in horror and dismay.

The Taliban had sought – unsuccessfully – to obtain acceptance of their regime by the international community, which continued to dictate terms to them, based on decisions the latter had made about the Taliban’s actions and identity, viewing them and all groups in Afghanistan as subalterns through the Orientalist lens. This action was the use of symbolic objects and spatial choreography on a grand scale, to create new meaning around a number of issues pertinent to the Taliban’s relations with the international community. The ‘sacrifice’ of the Buddhas can be interpreted as a symbolic act, a grand gesture

of contestation, permanently altering a historical location, symbolising a break with the international system which had rejected them. Also of interest in the story of the Buddhas, in a nod to *homo sacer*, was the comment from a dismayed Taliban official, reported as contrasting the international community’s haste to pay millions of dollars to save the Buddha statues to their refusal to provide funding to save starving Afghans afflicted by drought in the same period.⁶⁷ This destruction was an assertion of power by spectacle. The gaping Buddha niches are also now associated with the Taliban.

Concluding Remarks

Examining groups such as the Taliban as facets in a kaleidoscopic and at times problematic Afghan national identity and exploring their reactions to being Othered, reveals some of the entrenched and intrinsic structures of discrimination and Othering in the study of Afghan politics and society. Until recently, Western and Westernised commentators, embedded in Orientalist frameworks have largely been ill equipped to analyse the Taliban beyond rigid and narrow frameworks of ‘Muslim’, ‘Pushtun’, ‘backwards’ and ‘medieval’. The Taliban’s actions were rooted in processes of contestation and subversion, within the power/knowledge nexus that had relegated Afghans to permanent subaltern status. Groups such as the Taliban were further demoted within a political hierarchy externally imposed on Afghanistan by the very elites who pay and receive foreign subsidies, perpetuating an implicit architecture and hierarchy of Othering. This has obscured much about subaltern groups throughout Afghan history, the Taliban being one of the most recent to be delegitimated. This leads to an unnuanced and hollow analysis of their situation at a given moment, their response and the meanings of their speech-acts. Analysing Taliban violence through theoretical frameworks such as performativity provides deeper insights into the identity of the movement and similar movements. Using a distorting Orientalist lens reduces all their actions to the incomprehensible rage and brutality of savage fundamentalists – particularly in the 1990s,

⁶⁷ Centlivres, “The Controversy over the Buddhas of Bamiyan”

when such an approach contributed to a narrative of Afghanistan based on a narrow focus on battlefield statistics and, later, human rights abuses.

The application of postcolonialism and by extension the imagined geographies of Orientalism, together with theories related to performative violence in the creation of space, in particularly 'opportunity space', provides another layer of insight into the Taliban's actions in and through public spaces. Challenging their own subaltern status through an anti-imperialist stance, and in some ways a postcolonial stance, the Taliban use performative violence to create a 'Talibanized space' that reflected their emerging identity and values. With consistent messaging through reiterated actions, events and texts, the Taliban gradually created a metanarrative of harsh justice, anti-corruption and morality based on their interpretation of Islam, laying the foundations for tense but effective security. The ultimate aim of this exercise was the creation of an Islamic emirate, the very reason why Afghans had been urged to take up arms against the British in the 19th century, the Soviets in the 20th century and the Americans in the 21st century. This Taliban metanarrative was primarily performed and spatially choreographed, often violently, in and through public spaces. The use of these new frames of reference reveals a movement that has performatively challenged the imagined geographies of Afghanistan, and by extension, the Western power-knowledge nexus of Said's theory of Orientalism.

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Beyond *Watan*: Valency of Place among a Fragmented Afghanistan Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the factors that have contributed to lack of a cohesive national identity in Afghanistan, and how the diasporic experience as a rupture has led to reformulation of identity. Drawing on findings from qualitative interviews among Afghanistan heritage communities in Australia, I argue that 'Afghan' identity is better understood through the notion of 'place' rather than the more contested construct of 'nationality'. My research found that emotional and nostalgic attachment to Afghanistan 'the place' was shared by and informed identity for a diverse sample of participants, representing what is now considered a fragmented diaspora, from different regions and ethnic groups, and with different dates of departure from Afghanistan.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Afghan identity, Place Identity, Ethnicity, Diaspora, Transnationalism, Migration¹*

Biographical Note: Zarlasht Sarwari is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Sciences at Western Sydney University (WSU). She is research assistant for the Challenging Racism Project and a member of The Australian Sociology Association of Australia. Her work examines the history and experience of the Afghanistan diaspora in Australia, including construction and reformulation of Afghan identity. Her work also considers Australian multiculturalism, belonging, racism, immigration, nationalism and transnationalism.

¹ I would like to acknowledge the Dharug people as the traditional custodians on whose unceded lands I live, work and raise my family. I would like to thank the two co-editors of this special issue; (soon to be Dr) Mujib Abid, whose enthusiasm convinced me to become part of this project, and Dr Susanne Schmeidl, whose attentive guidance and thoughtful feedback encouraged me in my thinking and writing in ways that I could not have achieved on my own. I would also like to thank Dr Mejgan Massoumi, Dr Zohra Saed, Dr Alanna Kamp and Prof Kevin Dunn for their feedback on earlier versions of this paper, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their comments.

Introduction

Diasporic identity and belonging, despite distance and exile, are still largely understood by the relationship to the original national homeland². The concepts of nationalism and long- distance nationalism are often used to explain how members of diaspora communities engage with their homeland and construct their sense of self. This paper argues that the example of Afghanistan and its diaspora, demonstrates that not all members maintain politically constructed notions of a cohesive 'national identity' or engage in 'nation building'. Rather, research participants expressed their strong emotional and nostalgic attachment to Afghanistan 'the place' as a source that informs their identity. The concept of place identity allows individuals to memorialise and connect with their place of birth or heritage beyond the divergent and conflicting political and nationalist narratives that have resulted in a fragmented diaspora.

Conceptions of Afghan identity have been largely unexplored in the diasporic context, where multiple and competing narratives of nationhood have emerged in the absence of a cohesive homeland nationalist discourse. In this paper, I will examine identity in the diaspora from Afghanistan, specifically, how national identity has been constructed in Afghanistan, and how the diasporic experience as a rupture has led to reformulations. This paper outlines the factors that contributed to an incoherent nationalist discourse, conceptual frameworks for understanding diasporic identity, and the findings from my research which demonstrate the significance of place identity as an alternative construct to national identity among Afghanistan diaspora communities in Australia.

The dataset informing this paper is drawn from qualitative in-depth interviews conducted with 20 participants between September 2018 and October 2019. The interviews formed a subset of data from a larger mixed methods project (n=251) with Australian residents (aged 18 years or older) who self-identify as having heritage from Afghanistan³. Participants were recruited in a variety of ways through

community groups and mosques, self-reported interest, and snowball sampling. Interview participants were half male and half female and included the main ethnic (Tajik, Hazara, Pashtun) and religious (Sunni and Shia Muslim) groups in Afghanistan. They also represent a range of perspectives, including age, migration history, place of birth⁴, rural-urban experiences, and different levels of education.

I use the term 'Afghan' in the context of labels operationalised within the national world order, and/or where study participants self-identify as such. 'Afghanistan diaspora' or 'Afghanistan heritage communities' are terms used in this paper to reflect the diversity of those who share territorial connections and/or cultural heritage with the nation of Afghanistan. The research has been conducted reflexively, from my position as a female, Australian born scholar with heritage from Afghanistan, who grapples with the notion of 'Afghan-ness' in a personal and sociological capacity.

Identity in Afghanistan and the Afghanistan Diaspora

Identity represents a deeply held personal attachment to how we see ourselves, how we feel and how we locate ourselves in relation to others and the wider world⁵. Identification is operationalised through the grouping of categories in a context of power relations and constantly evolving discourses - the most hegemonic of which are nationalist discourses. A nation is conceived not only in terms of sovereignty and borders but also as a site of national and cultural production that propagates a collective sense of identity linked to an 'imagined community'⁶. In contexts of diverse ethnic composition within a state, the question of national inclusion becomes particularly salient, as structural tensions

² Knott, Nationalism and belonging.

³ The in-depth interviews were conducted in English or Dari in Perth, Melbourne and Sydney.

⁴ Participants come from six different provinces within Afghanistan: Kabul, Ghazni, Nangahar, Baghlan, Balkh and Panjshir. Those born outside of Afghanistan cited Australia and Canada as place of birth, with family heritage from Kabul and areas outside of Kabul.

⁵ Jackson & Penrose, *Constructions of Race, Place and Nation*.

⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

between 'ethnic' and 'national' identity persist⁷. States have been described as "irrevocably ethnically diverse spaces" that must always "contain within them the frictions between sameness and difference, unity and diversity"⁸. National identity can be reconstructed through multiple acts and can vary over time and space, making it highly elusive, contested and exclusionary.

People who form diaspora communities, are often emotionally, economically and physically bound to more than one country and culture⁹. This creates a range of networks and sites marking patterns of communication, exchange of resources and information, and participation in socio-cultural and political activities¹⁰. Simultaneous connections contribute to transnational networks and activities that formulate identities beyond a single location and shape ways of being and ways of belonging among people within diaspora communities¹¹.

Even before the recent collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021, which saw the return of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, the fragmented nature of the Afghanistan diaspora demonstrates the contentious and complex politics surrounding constructions of Afghan national identity¹². Past research identifies several 'intellectual fault lines'¹³ which have (mis)informed ideations of the country and its people and contributed to the high levels of fragmentation that can be observed within Afghanistan and its global diaspora. These fault lines can be largely attributed to (1) British colonial entanglements, (2) the internalisation of racial or ethnic hierarchies by Afghan political elites, (3) conflict and ethnicization of politics, and (4) the lack of coherent population data.

First, the formation of the geographical and political entity known today as Afghanistan, was shaped by the interests of imperial Russia and Britain in the late 1800s¹⁴. This, in addition to British colonial relations and writings, influenced how the country, identities and social groups in Afghanistan were conceived¹⁵. In particular, it influenced political and social hierarchies, in which the hegemonic position of the Pashtun royalty meant the subordination of other ethnic identities and classes.

Second, Afghan political elites reproduced and internalised the colonial 'master narrative' of Pashtun royal hegemony, laying the foundation for recurring ethnic tensions¹⁶. Successive Pashtun kings sought to establish their central authority and consolidate nation-building. These goals were achieved through the violent conquest of rival ethnic groups and tribes in the nineteenth century¹⁷, and later through constitutional reform and state building measures in the twentieth century¹⁸. The term 'Afghan' was first codified in the 1964 Constitution¹⁹ as a collective term for all citizens of Afghanistan with the intention of promoting nationhood and national identity, ignoring the fact that 'Afghan' had commonly been used to refer to ethnic Pashtuns. This shift signalled the modernising national aspirations of the state. Such a collective sense of national identity was felt most strongly by urbanised and educated constituents of different ethnicities in the larger cities, especially as the new constitution eased restrictions on freedom

⁷ Ang, Chinese Australians between assimilation, multiculturalism and diaspora

⁸ Ibid: 1185

⁹ Cerwonka, Native to the Nation.

¹⁰ Vertovec Transnationalism and identity; Erdal & Oeppen, Migrant Balancing Acts

¹¹ Levitt and Glick Schiller, Conceptualizing Simultaneity.

¹² Fischer, Social Identities and Social Organisation among Afghan Diaspora; Khan, Hazara History Writing; Abrahams & Busbridge, Afghan-Australians: Diasporic Tensions.

¹³ Hanifi, Quandaries of a Nation: 83.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Manchanda, Imagining Afghanistan; Hopkins, The Making of Modern Afghanistan; Hanifi, Quandaries of a Nation; Schetter, Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction of Afghanistan; Sungur, Early Modern State Formation in Afghanistan.

¹⁶ Manchanda, Imagining Afghanistan; Hanifi, Quandaries of a Nation; Saikal, Status of the Shi'ite Hazara Minority; Schetter, Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction of Afghanistan.

¹⁷ Hopkins, The Making of Modern Afghanistan; Hanifi, Quandaries of a Nation; Schetter, Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction of Afghanistan; Ibrahimi, The Hazaras and the Afghan State.

¹⁸ Ahmed, Afghanistan Rising: Islamic Law and Statecraft.

¹⁹ Govt. of Afghanistan, Constitution of Afghanistan, 1964, accessed 20 August 2022, available from <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=afghanenglish>.

of speech and expanded mass media communication (print and broadcast), education and the arts²⁰. It was far less relevant to conservatives and minorities in rural areas, who had little to do with the state and benefitted less from its modernisation and nation-building efforts. Despite the dominance of Dari as the administrative language underpinning state institutions (schools, courts, and the bureaucracy), political and military power rested with the elite Pashtun classes of the royal family and the intelligentsia supporting their rule²¹.

Third, notions of a collective Afghan identity were further complicated by the prolonged war since 1979, as different Mujahideen factions recruited fighters along ethnic and tribal lines. Manipulation by external powers meant that financial support was channelled to different groups to further their own geopolitical interests²². This intensified when the Soviet-backed government was defeated, power-sharing between the various Mujahideen factions failed and civil war broke out along ethnic lines²³. A continued ethnic focus on Afghan identity was reinforced after 2001, when ministries were distributed among different Mujahideen factions and power-sharing became very much a matter of ethnic balance²⁴. These dynamics led to increasing tensions over the term 'Afghan'. The issue of national and ethnic identification on Afghan national identity cards is one example of how tensions over ethnic and national identities have generated emotional and political debates in more recent social and political discourse²⁵. The rise in digital nationalism²⁶ in the post 2021 period has also seen conflicting narratives of the nation and its historiography disseminated by individuals and groups in online spaces.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in the absence of a complete national census since 1979, the lack of accurate cultural, historical

and demographic data prevents a holistic understanding of the Afghan people. This opens the door to the creation of different ideas and political constructs of contemporary Afghanistan, including political manipulation²⁷.

Taken together, these four factors have not only led to significant gaps in our knowledge of Afghanistan and its people, but also explain why there has long been an incoherent national discourse and why national identity is understood and experienced differently by different groups. This inconsistency of what constitutes national identity for the citizens of Afghanistan has been further complicated by the rupture of displacement.

Since 1979, millions of Afghan refugees have had to come to terms with their 'otherness' and sense of self in new environments, sometimes with and often without family networks. Cultural reproduction through music, food, language and everyday practices became important lynchpins in maintaining identity and *Afghanity* (Afghan-ness) in exile²⁸. As Afghan diaspora communities grew, family ties, ethnicity, region or village, class and politics influenced social identities and community²⁹. While Afghan refugees initially formed social clusters based on a shared experience of exile and opposition to the Soviet invasion, they were not immune to the growing divisions in their homeland. The traumas associated with different phases of the conflict in Afghanistan were carried over to new places of settlement and influenced how different Afghan communities interacted with each other. As noted above, these differences have increased rather than diminished over the past two decades of a Western-led state building project in Afghanistan (2002-2021) and have been further exacerbated by social media.

Considering the above, the Afghanistan diaspora, like other diaspora communities³⁰, is

²⁰ Massoumi, Soundwaves of Dissent.

²¹ Saikal, Status of the Shi'ite Hazara Minority.

²² Saikal, Afghanistan's ethnic conflict; Emadi, The Radicalisation of the Shiite Movement.

²³ Simonsen, Ethnicising Afghanistan, 710

²⁴ Sharan & Heathershaw, Identity Politics and Statebuilding.

²⁵ Mobasher, Identity Cards and Identity Conflicts.

²⁶ Skey, Nationalism and Media.

²⁷ Hanifi, Quandaries of a Nation; Ibrahimi, The Hazaras and the Afghan State.

²⁸ Haboucha, Transmission of food as heritage in the Afghan diaspora; Baily, War, Exile and the Music of Afghanistan; Sadat, Hyphenating Afghanity in the Afghan Diaspora.

²⁹ Fischer, Social Identities and Social Organisation among Afghan Diaspora.

³⁰ McAuliffe, Transnationalism Within; Khosravi, A Fragmented Diaspora; Baldassar, et al., The

fragmented along lines of ideology, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, local identification, cause of migration, period of displacement and migration trajectory, all of which undermine a coherent collective national identity. The terms 'Afghanistani' or 'Afghani' or 'Hazara-Afghan' or 'Hazara-Australian' over 'Afghan' or 'Afghan-Australian,' have been documented in recent academic literature, demonstrating irregularities in how national constructs are experienced and expressed among diverse groups³¹. This latter, more nuanced identity marker has become more prevalent with the rise of diasporic Hazara consciousness over the last twenty years³² in response to historical and contemporary marginalisation and violence against Hazara communities³³. The following sections present research findings that shed further light on these issues.

Conceptualising Afghan identity: Findings from the Australian diasporic context

This section of the paper presents qualitative interview findings that highlight aspects of fragmentation and divergent views of what it means to be 'Afghan' in the Australian Afghanistan diaspora. Interview findings show how national constructions are overridden by conceptualising the significance of Afghanistan as 'place' over other forms of identity markers. Place identity articulates connection to a place, be it a city, region or country, without being encumbered by complex nationalist political discourses and power dynamics. Furthermore, place identity becomes more pronounced when sense of place is threatened³⁴ thus, it is an ideal construct to apply in the context of diasporic identity. The concept of place identity is best defined by Proshanky as:

"those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by

means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills and behavioural tendencies relevant to a specific environment"³⁵.

Disagreements of what it means to be an "Afghan"

As discussed earlier, underlying the different perspectives and constructions of what it means to be 'Afghan', are the internal tensions and misconceptions between different ideological and ethnic groups. Among the interview participants, it appeared that those who had been marginalised because of their ethnicity were more likely to see ethnic background as an important aspect of their identity, for example by identifying as Hazara-Australian or Hazara-Afghan. A Hazara male participant tries to explain how identifying as 'Afghan' can mean losing a sense of self:

"Because people have such a historically traumatic memory, they are not interested in accepting this term of Afghan for themselves, they want to assert their identity and their histories. Because they say when you accept this term of Afghan, then they will force you to accept other things as well. It means that, if you are Afghan then this country is ours, the power is ours, the economy is ours, everything should be ours. You're a stranger, this isn't yours. Other ethnicities say no, we are not strangers, we are part of this land. This is the trouble. It isn't just about a word; it has a history. Because of the terrible history, people are not drawn to it"³⁶.

The participant spoke of these debates as a product of a heightened awareness emerging from increased education and access to information which was otherwise denied to large sections of the population due to underdevelopment and war. The emergence of a Hazara consciousness has led to a concerted effort to reshape Hazara narratives and history in the diaspora, in ways that redress the subaltern position that Hazara communities

Vietnamese in Australia; Fischer, Social Identities and Social Organisation among Afghan Diaspora.

³¹ Bezhan, A Contemporary Writer from Afghanistan, 21; Abraham & Busbridge, Afghan-Australians: Diasporic Tensions; Radford & Heitzl, Hazara refugees and migrants.

³² Ibrahim, Shift and Drift in Hazara Ethnic Consciousness; Latif Khan, Hazara History Writing.

³³ Phillips, Wounded Memory of Hazara Refugees.

³⁴ Proshanky et al., Place identity.

³⁵ Proshanky, The city and self identity.

³⁶ Interview participant, 24 March 2019 (male, Hazara, aged early 50s, born in Kabul).

historically held in Afghanistan³⁷. It critiques the political and cultural hierarchies and power dynamics that have subordinated the positions of Hazara communities in Afghanistan. These debates suggest that the nation needs to be reimagined to acknowledge the diverse origins of its people³⁸. For younger Afghans in the diaspora, identifying as a 'Hazara Afghan' acknowledges Hazara history and celebrates the diversity that makes up the Afghan identity:

"We should appreciate everyone, a Tajik Afghan, a Hazara Afghan, an Uzbek Afghan, a Pashtun Afghan. We've got to appreciate them. As much as I appreciate myself as a Hazara Afghan, and we should accept their difference and their identity... it's a beautiful thing to accept diversity, so we've got to accept that"³⁹.

In contrast, participants with other experiences of marginalisation (e.g., gender, class, political opinion) still subscribed to a national Afghan identity. For example, one female participant who worked as a judge, described her upbringing within a poor, conservative family from Baghlan⁴⁰. She had to overcome numerous obstacles including opposition within her own family to access and complete her education. She displayed a strong and impassioned attachment to Afghan national identity. She voiced the fear that ethnic identity politics would ultimately lead to separatism in Afghanistan. She felt this to be true among the Australian diaspora as among those living in Afghanistan.

Another participant downplayed both ethnicity and nationality as a circumstance of birth, focusing more on religious identity, noting: "I am a Muslim. ... I don't emphasise much on my being Afghan..."⁴¹. He commented on ethnic politics in Afghanistan, which he felt has rendered the label of 'Afghan' as meaningless:

"In Afghanistan, being Afghan has no meaning. They say I am not Afghan, I am Tajik. No I am Pashtun. No I'm Hazara. Well then what does this mean, who is Afghan then? Then it's just the map that is referred to as Afghanistan. In that regard, the sense of being Afghan doesn't really mean much..."⁴².

These examples illustrate that different groups struggle with a common 'Afghan' national identity based on their experiences. This was especially so, when ethnic persecution led to forced displacement. A young Hazara woman who was forced to leave Afghanistan as a child during the Taliban era in the 1990s described her perspective where ethnicity is a primary aspect of her identity:

"Being Afghan... has evolved... growing up you were forced out of your country, your home because they keep saying you're Hazara. That's why you get killed and things like that. So you develop this really ethnic identity because you only grow up with your own kind..."⁴³.

Following a return visit to her place of birth in Afghanistan in 2017, she experienced a shift in her perspective:

"I saw every type of people, like I saw everyone in one country, one city living the same wonderful lives... you do develop a deeper, maybe more meaningful definition of an Afghan identity. [As a result] I identify myself as both Afghan and Hazara. Hazara is the reality of my existence. I would not hide from it"⁴⁴.

This experience suggests two things. First the importance of return visits for second generation youth to experience positively valued versions of their origins⁴⁵. And second, the significance of 'place' for identity, which I argue in this paper.

This reimagining of what it means to be 'Afghan' and what it means to be from

³⁷ Ibrahim, Shift and Drift in Hazara Ethnic Consciousness; Latif Khan, Hazara History Writing.

³⁸ Hanifi, *Quandaries of a Nation*, 87.

³⁹ Interview participant, 4 October 2019 (male, Hazara, aged mid 20s, born in Ghazni).

⁴⁰ Interview participant, 21 April 2019 (female, Afghan, aged mid 60s, born in Baghlan).

⁴¹ Interview participant, 22 September 2019 (male, Afghan, aged early 60s, born in Kabul).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Interview participant, 14 September 2019 (female, Hazara, aged late 20s, born in Ghazni).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Wessendorf, *Second generation transnationalism*.

Afghanistan was most strongly conveyed by younger participants. Born both in and outside of Afghanistan, and raised in multicultural Australia, younger participants demonstrated a generational shift, as the following quote illustrates:

"We [younger generation] feel ready to move on. Because it feels like a burden sometimes. There are all these prejudices and like, not just from you know, our side of the community, but throughout Afghanistan. It's not doing the country any good, it's not doing the people any good. And we've come here [Australia] and we have an opportunity to create dialogue and change... we have to acknowledge the mistakes that have been done"⁴⁶.

Characterised by upward educational mobility, strong community ties and exposure to range of media, the experiences and words of the young participants demonstrate the importance of recognising and respecting cultural and ethnic multiplicity in both the Afghan and Australian contexts. Other participants cautiously laid claim to the term 'Afghan', acknowledging that it can be used positively for the sake of unity. They demonstrated the importance of recognising ethnic origin within the national context of Afghanistan and also their new connection to Australia,

"Afghan as a term has become, like an inclusive term, you know, internationally. Now everyone, all ethnicities in Afghanistan like Hazaras, Tajiks they're all known as Afghans. But then I think more personally, I would identify myself as a Hazara Afghan, or Hazara Afghan Australian"⁴⁷.

Afghan identity as 'Place' rather than nationality or ethnicity

Participants who were born in Afghanistan conveyed a physical and/ or psychological attachment to the homeland, regardless of when they left, where in the country they came from, and to what ethnic or political group they belonged to. Several participants who

experienced different political conditions and regimes in Afghanistan, all spoke about the importance of Afghanistan, the country and their homeland, to their sense of self, as the following quote by a Tajik woman illustrates: "I feel like my *watan*, Afghanistan, it's in me, [it] is just me. It's like my honour ... when someone says Afghanistan, I think they're talking about me"⁴⁸. Attachment, then, is to 'place' and the memories it evokes, as this quote from an older Afghan woman from Kabul emphasises:

"I was raised on that *khaak* (soil), I was raised in that *watan*... My blood, skin and body are from that country. This is why I am proud. Not in terms of Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara - not these things. I am Afghan. I am from Afghanistan and I am very proud of it"⁴⁹.

This intense connection to place (soil and blood) was echoed by another older male participant from Nangarhar province, who describes it as important for physical and mental well-being, like a mother's embrace:

"It is in the blood, you can't help it... Previously when I went to Afghanistan, in the seven months I spent there, I didn't need to take all the serious medications prescribed to me... I have a strong physical connection (*reshta*) with Afghanistan. Just like when a baby cries a lot, it goes into its mother's arms, it becomes quiet and calm. It's like that kind of feeling"⁵⁰.

A younger female participant born in Kabul explains Afghanistan as "paradise", a place in her heart (*dil*), which made her feel reborn during a return visit⁵¹. Others describe it as filling a void for them and wanting to be buried in the soil on which they were born⁵². These sentiments demonstrate the importance of place as expressed through the concept of

⁴⁸ Interview participant, 12 September 2019 (female, Tajik, aged early 40s, from Mazar-e-Sharif).

⁴⁹ Interview participant, 5 May 2019 (female, Afghan, aged mid 70s, born in Kabul).

⁵⁰ Interview participant, 19 April 2019 (male, Pashtun, aged late 60s, born in Nangarhar).

⁵¹ Interview participant, 22 March 2019 (female, Afghan, aged late 30s, born in Kabul).

⁵² Interview participant, 24 March 2019 (male, Hazara, aged late 40s, born in Kabul).

⁴⁶ Interview participant, 4 October 2019 (female, Hazara, aged mid 20s, born Jaghori).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

watan (homeland) for the interview participants. For some participants, the sense of connection with their *watan* or place of birth is a lasting one. This affected not only their sense of identity, but also the nature of their interactions, such as sending remittances to their family and village, and following news and events affecting their area.

Anthropological research in Afghanistan has already identified the importance of place (or spatial belonging) for identity and how *watan* represents an emotional quality of belonging, security and social connection⁵³. The literature also emphasises a dual meaning of *watan*, depending on distance or proximity, and this was also reflected in the interviews. For example, when a person is in Afghanistan, *watan* refers to their local area, but when a person is outside of Afghanistan, *watan* represents the country⁵⁴. Thus, a person's place of residence (*manteqa*) can be synonymous with notions of homeland (*watan*) and, along with *qawm* (extended family or ethnic/tribal social network) and religion (*mazhab*) figured prominently as important aspects of identity in Afghanistan⁵⁵. These multiple and interchangeable meanings of *watan* are also reflected in the words of a male respondent born in Panjshir province:

"*Watan* means everything to me. I was born and raised there. I have family there. *Watan* has obligation on every single Afghan to help... If I am in Afghanistan, I am connected to Panjshir. But if I'm in Australia, I'm connected to Afghanistan"⁵⁶.

This importance of 'place' to identity could also be seen in how the majority of research participants think about belonging in Australia. Attachment to *manteqa* (local area) or *watan* (homeland) in Afghanistan thus translates into attachment to the local community in which they live, work and raise their children as expressed by a man born in Kabul:

"I am proud of my Afghan identity, because I was born and raised in that country and the community work I pursue, is part of that country. I am proud of my Australian identity too because it is a country that has offered us a safe place on this land... people are embraced and welcomed by Australia so they can pursue a good life to the extent they don't feel that sense of distance from their own country"⁵⁷.

Thus, Australia, the new country of residence and/ or citizenship, also forms the locus for identity and thus becomes a second *watan* or place of security, social connection and belonging. Despite the memories created by an original homeland, the host culture and society shapes identity more significantly than the term 'diaspora' suggests⁵⁸. This points to the formation of an integrated identity that acknowledges attachment to the original home as well as the new home.

Imagined Watan among second generation diaspora youth from Afghanistan

While research participants who were born in Afghanistan spoke of their identity to a physical place, those born outside of Afghanistan had to develop an 'imagined' place identity, translated through family practice and storytelling, social networks, transnational contact, and engagement in online spaces. For example, family stories and practices shaped young people's perceptions of what it meant to be 'Afghan', and even benign domestic practices were imbued with cultural meaning as a young female second generation Afghan woman explains: "As a kid I thought waking up on Saturday and cleaning the house while listening to Afghan music, is like an Afghan tradition. Like a cultural thing that we all do"⁵⁹. Afghanistan is thus reproduced in a range of domestic, transnational and online spaces as highlighted by a young Qizilbash woman, whose immediate family arrived in Australia in the 1980s and who remains connected to a transnational family network:

⁵³ Glatzer, War and boundaries, 381, Schetter & Mielke, Where is the Village?

⁵⁴ Glatzer, War and boundaries.

⁵⁵ Monsutti, War and Migration; Sungur, Early Modern State Formation in Afghanistan; Tapper, Ethnicity, Order and Meaning.

⁵⁶ Interview participant, 27 September 2019 (male, aged mid 40s, born in Panjshir).

⁵⁷ Interview participant, 22 March 2019 (male, Afghan, aged late 30s, born in Kabul).

⁵⁸ Khosravi, A Fragmented Diaspora.

⁵⁹ Interview participant, 17 September 2019 (female, Afghan, late 20s, born in Canada).

"That sense of being Afghan and relating to another Afghan, you see those Afghan memes and you send it to each other. It's just this sense of connection and belonging to Afghan identity... the values, the food, the traditions..."⁶⁰.

Imagined *watan*, then becomes the familiar, the shared diasporic experience, narratives and identities born of multiple traumatic displacements from Afghanistan. The same female participant explains:

"When I visit my family in Holland, US, or the UK, there are things that are the same no matter which part of the world you're in. As long as you're Afghan it's kind of there... it might not be significant, just all those little and big things unique to being Afghan that make you feel connected"⁶¹.

Conclusion

My research has provided a nuanced insight into how 'identity' is constructed around place (either physical or imagined) among the Afghan diaspora in Australia. I found that nationalist causes, had limited uptake and appeal among most research participants. The issue of ethnicity was most salient for those who belonged to oppressed minorities (particularly Hazara). By and large, however, *watan* (home or homeland), or the soil (or dirt - *khaak*) on which participants were born and raised, became the most important identity marker among first-generation Afghanistan diaspora respondents. Given Afghanistan's chequered history of ethnicised conflict and a politicisation of ethnicity and identity, an emphasis on place separates identity from the politics, which has undermined the idea of a cohesive nation. A connection to place, or a sense of place identity, thus depoliticises place, focusing on the natural characteristics of and emotional attachment to the land, valuing it as the container of all the social relationships, positive memories and place of cultural value that a person may idealise about Afghanistan. This suggests that 'place identity' as *watan* can

play a symbolic, unifying role for diasporas in the face of political fragmentation at home.

Although the second-generation diaspora born outside of Afghanistan, are more detached from politics at home, they still emphasise place over other forms of identity, the only difference being that the place is imagined and constructed through a set of symbols that encompass a range of social categories and meanings, allowing identity to be maintained at different levels and dimensions⁶². The construct of place identity allows people from Afghanistan of diverse ethnic groups and all levels of the social and political hierarchy, regardless of their history in relation to the state, to maintain a connection to the place (*watan*), *khaak* or soil of Afghanistan, rather than to the contested political construct of the nation of Afghanistan. In this way, despite fragmentation, 'place identity' allows for a common collective bond among a diverse diaspora from a war-torn country.

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⁶⁰ Interview participant, 29 September 2019 (female, Qizilbash, late 20s, born in Australia).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Hauge, Identity and place.

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INTERVIEW

Interview with Omer Sabore and Hamid Parafshan

By Mujib Abid

The past four decades of protracted armed conflict in Afghanistan have resulted in numerous waves of population displacement, the most recent of which began in August 2021, when the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed, and the Taliban returned to power. Today, there is a large Afghan diaspora that represents a vibrant, politically diverse and intellectually activist culture, supported by a growing body of indigenous scholarship that is not necessarily part of the 'mainstream' of host countries. Rather, the Afghan diaspora tends to follow the path of a longer, traditional Afghan epistemology – or more appropriately, given the esoteric influences of their scholarship, an Afghan gnoseology.

To explore the depth, internal dynamics, and esoteric dimensions of these scholarly traditions, I interviewed two Afghan writers in Australia: Hamid Parafshan and Omer Sabore. In our conversations, a number of overlapping and complex dynamics emerge. In their work, both writers draw on Sufist Islam as a guiding compass for their politics and worldview. At the same time, despite this investment in a spiritualist sensibility, both writers respond through poetic writing, to the political imperatives of their adopted countries. To give a taste of their original writing and to demonstrate the immense decolonial potential of this emerging, marginal, fragmentary writing culture, each interview is followed by a poem selected by the writers themselves and translated by the author in collaboration with them.

Hamid Parafshan is Melbourne-based Afghan-Australian poet and writer. He is a celebrated figure in the Afghan community of Melbourne, widely recognised for his contributions to the cultural and literary scene of that city. With traditional schooling and a background in civil engineering and aviation, Hamid enjoyed a long and fruitful career as a civilian pilot in Afghanistan. Since migrating to Australia in the mid-1990s, he has self-published four books of poetry, all in Dari – his native language. His work follows the Hindustani Classical style, reflective of both these esoteric influences and Afghanistan's political upheavals.

*Omer Sabore is a Brisbane-based Afghan-Australian short story writer, poet and community organiser. Omar is a founding member of the Afghan Australian Arts, Literature & Publishing Association of Victoria Inc and from 2010 to 2017, he served as the editor of the monthly Nawaie Farhang [Voice of Culture]. He is a board member of the Afghan Queensland Community Association. Omar has self-published *Ishq o Ihsas*, a collection of poetry and short stories. He is working on completing his second manuscript of shorts and poetry.*

Interview with Omer Sabore

Mujib: Can you please introduce yourself and tell us about your literary journey?

Omer: I am from the Koti Sangi area of Kabul. I did my schooling there, with a background in pedagogy in science education. At that time, the pressures of war and of conscription forced me to flee Afghanistan. My father taught me literature, focusing on classical Persian poets Bedil, Rumi and Sa'adi. He always encouraged me to read Bedil's *Char Ansur*. I read the first two parts of *Char Ansur* with my father before I emigrated from Afghanistan. By the time I settled in Australia, my father had moved to Pakistan, from where he sent me more books to read. For the first few years after my migration to Australia, there were interruptions in my reading and literary interests. But then I was confined to my home for a while, which was extended to about six months. During this time, I returned to my literary books. I worked on the last two parts of Bedil. I read them at a distance with my father, over the phone.

Mujib: your father seems to have had a profound influence on you. This seemingly master-disciple (*pir-murid*) relationship, was it common for fathers and sons to have this sort of a relationship as you were growing up?

Omer: It could happen but also, it's not necessarily a universal feature of father-son relationships in Afghan culture. Growing up, there were seven of us in the household. My father tried to deal with most of us, but he seems to have found me more sympathetic to these scholarly traditions, the ones that he himself was trained in. My father had been trained in esoteric traditions by an Egyptian scholar who taught devotees from of a mosque in central Kabul. So my father wanted me to turn to Irfan (Islamic mysticism). I did, although I must say even before I emigrated, when I was about 22, I was interested in both esoteric works and in modern writings. For example, I liked reading texts on Wais Qaran, but I also liked reading Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*.

Mujib: the transition from being a reader to writing poetry must have been a gradual one. How did you come to write poetry?

Omer: As an avid reader of Bedil, I came across this verse, where he challenges his readers to speak for themselves. The verse reads: 'Why is it that one is always preoccupied with others - speak for yourself, Bedil, for you too are not so insignificant.' This awakened something in me. I found the courage to write, and my first piece of prose was a short *munajat* [poetic prayer]. The piece would eventually be published in my book *ishq o ihsas* [Love and Sensations]. From there I wrote some poetry, mostly satire, here and there. But it was scattered. From the mid-1990s, I ran a motel business in Melbourne. I had a lot more time to myself to write, read and study. Around the same time, my father's health had begun to decline, and he spent a lot of time at home. Telephones had improved. So I started working closely with him again. A lot of my writing is influenced by him. Then I had an epiphany in around 2005, when an incident at the Dandenong Mosque compelled me to use poetry to comment on the state of religion in the Muslim community. The poem is a critique of Islamic orthodoxy, because what I took away from that encounter was that I had no place in the mosque.

Mujib: can you talk a little bit about the purpose of your writing? Why do you think you write?

Omer: There is an impulse for why people write, a kind of creative energy that seeks a creative expression as a cathartic release. When you have access to the arts, you turn to them as a healthy outlet. I happen to have the ability to use language in a creative and playful way, and that is my art. I would not say that I believe exclusively in *ilham* [spiritual inspiration] as the reason for writing. Rather, I believe that the writer is affected by his/her environment. The things that happen to you, injustices around us, are reasons to write.

Mujib: I wonder if there are any tensions there between the various forces that you respond to in your work. For example, do you ever sense that your father might have wanted you to be more inclined towards Irfan [Islamic mysticism]?

Omer: To an extent, yes, there was some tension there. I remember, sometimes my father would notice certain books with me. He would pay attention to what I was reading, scrolling through my books and my reading list. He would talk to the family about the virtues of esoteric thought and practice but never outright discourage me from extending my reading list. I would try to write these down as a keepsake. I remember asking him about the position of Sufism in the pantheon of Islamic mysticism. As a young person, his teachings were influential. I would show up to school classroom with questions and discussion points from what he had talked about, because at school as well we were reading various Irfani texts. I enjoyed the attention that teachers gave me, because it looked like I knew more than my years perhaps indicated. It carried over to university and to life post-migration. I could articulate in spoken form and in writing, I thought, better than others.

Mujib: how do you approach the sources of esotericism across faiths in your work?

Omer: I think here in the West, they use the 'Orient' to refer to the East. I think this East/West dichotomy is an elitist construction, reflecting the view of the *khawas* [privileged classes]. The *awam* [masses] are not interested in such divisions. Ravi Shankar [an Indian sitarist] and any Western musician, say a violinist, can work together to blend both instruments into a more beautiful form. The political class and the elites reproduce such dichotomous language. Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Islamic esotericism are one and the same when, for example one looks at the *muqams* [valleys] that awaits the ascetic seeker of truth: the ultimate goal is always the same *fana* [annihilation of the self]. The orthodoxy within each faith, however, compels the faithful to dismiss one another. A Hindu is not allowed to enter a mosque. In *Manaqib Al-'Arifin*, there is a telling anecdote about Rumi. Two drunken Christian men enter the monastery. Either on purpose or coincidentally, they rather violently push Rumi. His disciples come to remove the Christians and when Rumi asks why, he is told 'They are Christians, drunk and badly intoxicated.' Rumi replies, 'They have been drinking wine, but you are the ones who are behaving like drunkards.' He encourages them to stay and enjoy the event. I think it is telling.

Mujib: the work that you do from exile, how much do you think this carries the traditions that you were trained in pre-exile?

Omer: I believe that the traditions in which I was educated as a young person, neither the environment nor my years were suitable to give me a more holistic view of life. Now, of course, I can have access to more resources and I can study. So, I think, migration, has had its positive effects, because it has given me a more complete account of life. I feel a certain tension, but I have always maintained a respect for the work and depth of knowledge of those who stayed behind, and with that respect I think I manage to maintain a good working relationship with many scholars back home. Some years ago, during my visits to Kabul, I sat in on Haidari Ujudi's classes. from which I benefited greatly.

Mujib: Thank you for your time. Do you have any final remarks?

Omer: I have one final comment. When I encounter youth who dismiss our writings and works, I use my poetry and my writing to tell them that the skills and traditions that they learn in universities here are already reflected in the kind of work that I do. I hope for more understanding across cultural boundaries.

گوشه از تعبیر مقام عشق / On interpreting the valley of Love / By Omar Sabore

In Love, there is no valley but one of self-immolation

There is nothing but intoxication from wine, cordial and cup

One soars in the skies with wings

Alas, as it is for the bird, the open skies are all littered with traps

For it to be reflective of the gathering of desire

There is no name in everyone's skin

From the chest the sigh reaches for the skies

If the sigh comes easy, one's destiny won't be the heavens

Losing oneself to the land of eternity

For it is not a destination unreachable

The fly can turn to the legendary Simurgh in perception

The tongue that suffers from the affliction of no restrain

If abuse turns to well wishes in the universe

For you the sun of dawn is not the same as that of dusk

Sabore [a double entendre, Sabore translates to patience] quarrel with yourself, not others

Whose eyes are yet to experience letters

در عشق غیر سوختن مقام نیست
مستی ز شراب و درد و جام نیست
آسمان می پرد به بال پرواز
در بند و هوا چو مرغ دام نیست
آیینہ شود به بزم بینش
در پوست همه چو هر نام نیست
از سینه به آه منزل در آفاق
آسان بکشد و مرد بام نیست
رفتن ز خود در دیار باقی
منزلگه است که ناتمام نیست
سیمرغ صفت است مگس به پندار
آنجا که دهانی را لگام نیست
زشتی گر شود خوبی در عالم
خورشید سحر ترا به شام نیست
صبور گله کن ز خود نه از کس
در دیده که ادب نیام نیست

Interview with Hamid Parafshan

Mujib: Can you please tell us how you came to writing and your literary journey?

Hamid: I am originally from Kabul. I grew up, studied and worked in Afghanistan until the civil war of the 1990s, when I was forced to seek asylum in another country. Growing up and even after joining the civil aviation industry working as pilot for Afghanistan's national airline (Ariana), I had a profound interest in literature and poetry. While I have always appreciated Persian literature, I turned to writing poetry during the difficult years of the civil war and especially since my migration to Australia 26 years ago.

Mujib: It seems like school was an influential period. It is quite telling that in Afghanistan young children learn reading and writing by

reading classic Persian texts at the mosque and school. Have you always had an interest in literature?

Hamid: Yes, I have always had a keen interest in *adabiat* [literature]. From a young age, as was customary in Afghanistan, at the mosque and in our family settings we were introduced to classic Persian poets like Hafiz and Sa'adi. This interest would grow in me as I encountered other poets and works. This was quite influential in that by the time I was working as a pilot, I had the skills and command of language necessary to pen numerous epic poems. Later on, I would [self] publish these under the title *armaghan hashti saur* [*The Gifts of the Eighth of the Month of Saur*]. This was my first *dewan*. Later I published *Fazai Ghazal* [*The Air of Poetry*], which was followed by *Gul Distai Adab* [*The Garland of Literature*]. My latest collection of works, under the title *Gulbarg Ghazal* [*A Petal of Poetry*], was only recently published. I share my books with my readers and friends, and continue in my work.

Mujib: As an educated and skilled person in the 1980s and 1990s, were you involved in the politics of the time?

Hamid: Not really. As a professional, I was not allowed to be political or really take sides in the civil war. I felt that the state had invested a great deal in us, and so my only purpose was to serve the nation. In fact, I wrote the manuscript of *The Gifts of the Eighth of the Month of Saur* during the civil war of the 1990s. It was completed during the months of transition, between the fall of Rabani's government and the Taliban takeover [September 1996]. I only managed to publish it after my return to the Afghanistan in early 2000s.

Mujib: Can you speak to the content of your initial work? How did you balance the politics of the day with your interest in literature?

Hamid: The injustices and wrongs of the time fared prominently in my work early on. In fact, my home was ransacked, and all my property was looted. I went to the authorities of the Islamic government [or Ustad Rabani] and asked for redress. They didn't really listen to my pleas. That is why I wrote *The Gifts of the Eighth of the Month of Saur*. Most of what is

written has to do with my personal experience during that tumultuous period. I witnessed what the Rabani government was doing. I witnessed the destruction of Kabul by all the Islamist factions. I witnessed who fired at whom, where the fighting took place, and which factions destroyed which parts of Kabul. The collection captures these experiences in the form of rhythmic prose, in the traditions in which I was brought up in.

Mujib: I must say, to me that is exactly why your work is so impactful. It captures the horrors of war. I'm curious to know how you managed to escape those horrors. Tell us a little about your migration journey?

Hamid: I was active in the aviation service when during a short stay in Dubai, a colleague mentioned his willingness to assist me with my family's papers. I ended up in India first with my family and then later migrated to Australia as a refugee. As I had my pilot's licence, both from the U.S. and Germany, I wanted to find a suitable job in the industry. I went to the authorities here, but they asked me for an Australian licence. I managed to get my licence here, but then 9/11 happened. That event changed everything. It was made clear to me that Muslims were not allowed to work in the aviation industry, not even in the towers let alone on a plane. By then, I had about 16,000 hours of flying time under my belt, well above what is considered average in Australia, but there was nothing I could do.

Mujib: How was life, seeing how you couldn't find an appropriate job fitting your skillset due to reasons beyond your control?

Hamid: The Australian government helped, for which I am grateful. I also had some savings which I managed to bring with me to Australia. That helped in the beginning when we restarted our lives here. There were financial problems, no doubt, but I had to make do. All I wanted was for my children to study, which they have all done, and I am very proud of them. Over the years, the pain of the nation got to me. I was depressed and still take prescription anti-depressants. But I am doing better now.

Mujib: In terms of the content of your work, what traditions or schools of thought are most prominently reflected in your work?

Hamid: From early on, going back to school, I was always interested in the tradition/sabk of Bedil Dehlavi [Indo-Persian poet; 1642-1720], what is referred to as the *Sabki Hindi [Classical Hindustani School of Poetry]*. Later, on further examination, I realised that most of his work was Irfan [Muslim mysticism]. I realised that I should turn to Irfan as my path. Bedil wrote in Farsi, even though he was from India and lived and worked there. Because this is the language spoken in Afghanistan, Afghans are most infatuated by him. And because Sufism and Irfan have a unique place in Afghanistan, Bedil speaks to Afghans. In India – even in Iran – Bedil is losing people's attention. That is rather unfortunate. Luckily, while this may be the case in Bedil's birthplace, the wider world continues to share an appreciation for Irfan and spiritual art form. I am glad to be following in their paths.

گلبرگ غزل / A petal of Ghazal / By Hamid Parafshan

In this wicked world, we have forsaken notions of good and evil

Once life's joys were gone could we enjoy the fruits of love

Before the eyes could appreciate hyacinth and lily

From this garden, our harvest was only the wet eye

The way of division and hate, from enmity, was riddled with stones

I gave up on trying to cross this path altogether

We planted the seedling of love and passion in our hearts

From this reed, our harvest was sweet sugar

My heart was preyed upon from the pretty trap of love

I became learned on this art from the book of Love

Those who went astray from this path were struck but I

Found glory and conquest in this, my bowed head

For a while, from lust this heart went after accumulation of wealth

This naivety of mine, in seeking gold, only led me to wickedness

I cleansed this chest from envy so that it found calm

From the crevasse of contentedness, I discovered a treasure of gold

Wine freed me from the confines of religious dogma, to soar infinitely

In the space of fellowships, I could open my wings and unwind

Hamid's good place, where he rests, cannot be this oppressive homestead

I'm but a recluse, having packed up and ready to leave this world

در جهان فتنه دل از خیر و شر برداشتیم
راحت اندر کف رسید الفت ثمر برداشتیم

دیده تا بر حسن روی سنبل و سوسن رسید
زین چمن حاصل به دامن اشک تر برداشتیم

جاده تفریق و نفرت از عداوت سنگ داشت
زین خیابان پای خود را از گذر برداشتیم

نخل عشق و الفت اندر سینه خودکاشتیم
برگ حاصل این نیستان را شکر برداشتیم

صید دلها شد بما از دام زیبای وفاق
از کتاب مهر و الفت این هنر برداشتیم

سرکشان شد طعمه تیغ بلا و لیک ما
در سر تسلیم خود فتح و ظفر برداشتیم

مدتی دل در هوس رفت از پیء تحصیل مال
همچو طفلان در خیال زر شرر برداشتیم

حسرت از سینه زدودیم زندگی راحت گرفت
از کمینگاه قناعت گنج زر برداشتیم

مشرب از قید مذاهب داد پرواز عاقبت
در فضای دوستی ها بال و پر برداشتیم

جای آسایش (این خانه ظلمت نبود
دل گرفتیم زین جهان بار سفر برداشتیم



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BOOK REVIEW

Omar Sadr

Negotiating Cultural Diversity in Afghanistan

Oxon: Routledge, 2020, ISBN: 978-1138371057, 242 pp.

The past decade has been an intellectually robust time for Afghanistan Studies, as the burgeoning field has been enriched with new theoretical and methodological insights that challenge teleological narratives of state formation and governance.¹ Omar Sadr's book, *Negotiating Cultural Diversity in Afghanistan*, is among these new works. It centers on a dedicated study of cultural diversity while revealing the disjunctures and fissures inherent within the project of nation building from 1992 to 2014. While scholars working on state formation or diplomatic histories of Afghanistan have tended to rely on reading state documents at face value, Sadr's unique approach combining discourse analysis with political theory questions the validity of such records as appropriate representations for a multicultural society that has been politically motivated to assimilate rather than integrate. One of the largest pitfalls in 'official' accounts of national integration in modern Afghanistan has been the inability of the state to fully recognize itself as ethnically and culturally heterogeneous. Moreover, Anglophone scholarship has often repeated colonial and neocolonial myths about Afghanistan's social organization as a solely tribal structure with ethnic hierarchies, leading to misinformed yet unfortunately authoritative knowledge about who the people of Afghanistan are and what

Afghanistan is.² As a historian of and from Afghanistan, I read Sadr's insider analysis as a refreshing alternative discourse stemming from the fields of International Relations and Political Science that often reify colonial and neocolonial accounts of a singular, homogenous Afghan identity. Given the nature of events in Afghanistan's recent past, Sadr's book is a timely contribution that informs current debates regarding national identity and the demand for ethnic and cultural rights amid ongoing violence, terror, and instability.

Sadr begins the introduction of the book by providing a definition for cultural diversity, describing it as "a plurality of identities, customs, practices, values, modes of political discourse, and ideals in a state" (p. 4). He argues that the idea of Afghanistan as a multicultural state has not been translated into practical terms in a way that resonates with the aspirations of its multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, and religiously diverse constituents within its borders. Since the nineteenth century, the effort to establish a national culture gave rise to state-led policies of assimilation rather than integration of its diverse population. A related issue is the historiographic problem of determining what the term *Afghan* means. Across space and time there have been considerable ambiguities attached to the word *Afghan* particularly in its association with Pashtuns and Pathans.³ The

¹ For instance, see Robert Crews, *Afghan Modern*; Nile Green, ed., *Afghan History through Afghan Eyes*; Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan*; Benjamin Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*; Elisabeth Leake, *Afghan Crucible*; Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*;

² Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*. See also, Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, ed., *Mountstuart Elphinstone in South Asia*.

³ Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, "Quandaries of the Afghan Nation", 83–101.

word *Afghanistan* has also been invoked by different authors at different historical moments spanning across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the nation-state was forming its borders. Debates over the terms *Afghan* and *Afghanistan* continue today as the people of Afghanistan grow more critical of the labels used to indicate their national identity and the stories used to narrate their histories. Taking this as his starting point allows Sadr to then trace patterns of national integration in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries while also considering the shifts in the state's policies and responses to address cultural diversity. He argues that both in the periods of the 1990s and the 2000s, the push for state centralization limited efforts to create a stable, heterogeneous, and peaceful nation. In the 1990s, in wake of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the collapse of the Soviet-led communist bloc, Sadr posits that the fighting among Mujahideen factions was fueled by ethnic and sectarian tensions that limited their ability to share power and form a centralized, multicultural government (pg. 208). Ethnically mobilized rivalries and the quest for a unified nation did not end with the rise or fall of the Taliban. Instead, they made their way in the 2000s when state building efforts resumed with the involvement of various international actors. Sadr describes the manipulation of internal and external actors that played a significant role in repressing multiculturalism, ostensibly in the name of peace and stability (Chapter 7).

Beyond the introduction, the book is organized into eight chapters spanning a chronology of twenty-two years in the history of modern Afghanistan. The starting point is 1992 when the centralized state collapsed in the wake of Mujahideen groups capturing power and concluding in 2014 marking the end of President Hamid Karzai's second term. Sadr's justification for focusing on these years is his assertion that the genesis of claims for ethnic rights can be traced back to the 1992-2014 period. However, as early as the nineteenth century, rebellions led by minority groups challenged internal subjugation enforced by the state and points to a much longer historical trajectory of rights claims in the region. For example, in Chapter 3, Sadr discusses rebellions led by "common people" against the

colonial strongarm of the British: "The interaction with [the] British and transformation of military technology in the 19th century in South-Central Asia brought the marginalized people into politics...in both first and second British invasions to Kabul and Qandahar, it was the common people – non-state actors – having no role in politics in the past, who defeated [the] British" (p. 62).

While Chapter 1 focuses on state-led policies that led to assimilation rather than accommodation, Chapter 2 provides a critique of literature on state formation within the field of International Relations, highlighting the need to include the role of culture and cultural diversity in forging a nation-state. Chapter 3 provides a detailed historiography of nationalism in Afghanistan, one that, as discussed above, has privileged Pashtun identity and language. Chapter 4 carries this theme forward by highlighting several measures of cultural assimilation pursued by the state including institutional discrimination, formation of a singular national identity, monolingual domination, and lack of investment in the local languages of minorities coupled with religious discrimination. The remaining chapters (5-7) of the book are empirical studies examining a host of topics including modes of cultural integration, multiculturalism, the politics of intercultural dialogue, and minority rights, among other notable themes. In summary, Sadr seeks to demonstrate how the present proclivity for ethno-nationalism has antecedents in a historiography of the nation that has been Pashtun-centric. He advocates for the rights of marginalized communities who have been excluded from participating in the making of their country.

Sadr's analysis of colonial knowledge production in Afghanistan is particularly noteworthy. His discussion in Chapter 3 is reminiscent of what historians have long argued/critiqued, that Afghanistan as a nation is both a material and ideational construct built upon a Pashtun ethnocentric ideology.⁴ While

⁴ Among works by historians include Nile Green, ed., *Afghan History through Afghan Eyes*; Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan*; Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, "Quandaries of the Afghan Nation", 83-101.

Sadr does mention works produced by Afghans he did not reference the work of Shah Mahmoud Hanifi who has criticized the colonial founding myth about Afghanistan at length.⁵ Sadr highlights that the early Afghan nationalists ignored the basic point that Afghanistan has been materially and ideationally a colonial construct. This has severely impeded it from successfully articulating a coherent and durable national identity. For example, Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859) the British colonial officer whose book, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* (1815), has served as authoritative knowledge about Afghanistan, claims that Pashto speakers are the 'original' Afghans. He portrayed the Afghan rulers, or the Durrani elite – as urbanized, culturally Persianized, and tame in comparison to the majority of rural inhabitants who were also Pashto speakers and practitioners of a normative tribal code of conduct known as *Pashtunwali*. The intellectual legacy of Elphinstone is a stifling understanding of Afghanistan that is not only ethnocentric but pits an Afghan-Pashtun ruling elite against a rural Pashtun-Afghan nation. What comes into full view, then, is a myopic understanding of a vastly diverse geography composed of multi-ethnic and multi-lingual inhabitants. Colonial accounts have served as the standard reference on Afghanistan and reduce the country to a monoethnic, tribal nation that ignores its cultural diversity. As such, Sadr's analysis provides a necessary corrective in the fields of International Relations and Political Science by problematizing such essentialist approaches to the study of Afghanistan and illuminating the difficulty of coalescing a multicultural nation under the banner of an ethnocentric Pashtun identity.

Sadr also addresses the politics of language in establishing an ethno-nationalist state (pps. 74-77). Citing examples from the newspaper, *Seraj ul Akhbar*, he notes how the early visionaries of the Afghan state in the 1920s and

1930s, including the intellectual Mahmud Tarzi, advocated for Pashto as the singular national language. Tarzi is often cited as the father of Afghan modernism and the founder of journalism in the country.⁶ Literary associations were also established that promoted Pashto and attempted to establish a consciousness for Afghan nationalism (pps. 77-83). While the arguments and examples presented buttress the idea that the state was invested in promoting and officiating Pashto as a national language - which it undeniably was - what it does not include is a discussion of how, despite these attempts, the Persian (Dari) language persisted in both its formal and colloquial usages, even among those advocating for Pashto. For example, in 1944 a cadre of Afghan scholars founded the Encyclopedia Association in Kabul and created the first encyclopedia in Persian.⁷ Efforts like these counterposed the ethnocentric impulses of the state that aimed to valorize Pashto as a national language at the expense of Persian. Many of the policies enacted to promote Pashto faced serious roadblocks. For example, given the historical primacy of Persian as the language of education and bureaucracy, the state struggled to implement its Pashto-only language policy and had to recognize Persian (Dari) as an official language in the 1964 Constitution as well as the 2004 Constitution. The radio – a state sponsored and supported communication technology – broadcasted programs in the two official languages of Dari and Pashto and by the 1970s and 1980s, also included other regional languages including Uzbek, Turkmen, Balochi, Pashayi, and Nuristani.⁸ Nonetheless, Persian remained the cohesive cultural force throughout the country as the traditional language of bureaucracy and education. Even Elphinstone's 1815 account describes how the Pashtun rulers of Kabul were Persian speakers who did not use Pashto. In fact, his book was also published in the Persian language while Elphinstone himself

Benjamin Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

⁵ Among works authored by Shah Mahmoud Hanifi on the founding myth of Afghanistan, see *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan*; "Quandaries of the Afghan Nation", 83-101; *Mountstuart Elphinstone in South Asia*.

⁶ Mujib Rahimi, *State Formation in Afghanistan*.

⁷ See Aria Fani. "Disciplining Persian Literature in Twentieth Century Afghanistan", 675-695.

⁸ Mejgan Massoumi. "Soundwaves of Dissent", 697-718.

demonstrated no knowledge of Pashto or a need to use it.⁹

Chapter 5 and 6 were also of particular interest for their discussions of multiculturalism as a movement from below and introducing lesser-known historical figures. For example, Muhammad Tahir Badakhshi, an ethnic Tajik and leftist intellectual, was a pioneer in advocating for cultural pluralism in Afghanistan. In the 1960s, he argued that Afghanistan was a multinational state comprising of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Pashtuns, Hazaras, and others, and that each nation (ethnic group) had the right to preserve its own language, culture, and history. Badakhshi proposed a thesis that became known as the “National Oppression Struggle” in which he argued that oppression in Afghanistan was not limited to class struggles, but rather heightened by ethnic struggles (pg. 138). He was a strong advocate for minority rights and representation. Despite his literary activism, Badakhshi’s thesis did not reach a broad audience and had little impact. He was imprisoned and hanged after the communist coup in 1978 (pg. 140).

Another example Sadr discusses to showcase multiculturalism as a movement from below is through the amendment of the Shia Personal Law of 2009 which regulated personal affairs such as family issues, marriage, inheritance, divorce, guardianship, among other domestic issues. (Chapter 6, pg. 197). What is interesting about this law is that while civil society activists worked to ensure the right of the Shia community to have a separate law regulating their personal affairs, they also had to ensure that the law did not violate or contradict human rights and the rights of women. The Shia Personal Law of 2009 contained some controversial clauses that violated the individual rights of women including restrictions on her movements outside the home, as well as having to defer to her husband’s “inclinations for sexual enjoyment” as well as his demands for her to “apply makeup.” It also allowed for a man to have intercourse with his wife without her consent. (pg. 197). While these provisions resulted in different reactions within the Shia community,

many of the clauses that violated human rights were withdrawn or changed (pg. 198).

While Sadr’s book employs an erudite understanding of both political theory and international relations theories as it applies to cultural diversity, it also assumes its reader may be well-versed in this literature, making it, at times, difficult to access for non-specialists. Nonetheless, *Negotiating Cultural Diversity in Afghanistan* gives readers a good understanding of cultural diversity in Afghanistan and addresses the key challenges and opportunities which lie ahead. The book succeeds in tracing patterns of national integration and state construction in twentieth-century Afghanistan. Sadr aptly employs literature produced by scholars of Afghanistan including the seminal writings of Bashir Ahmad Ansari, Mohammad Seddiq Farhang, Mohammad Ghulam Ghoobar, Saif Heravi, Rawan Farhadi, Mahiudeen Mahdi, Sayed Askar Mousavi, Mujib Rahimi, Amin Saikal, among others. Given that most scholarship on Afghanistan produced in the fields of International Relations and Political Science do not rely on sources in original languages, this is a particularly important and essential contribution.

Sadr’s discussion of state-led attempts to homogenize the people of Afghanistan through ethnocentric policies could have been further nuanced with the inclusion of examples of people’s resistance to these policies. One way in which resistance is seen is through visual and performing arts, and literature, which are avenues that the author could have pursued. This could have been done to showcase the ways in which everyday people resisted against state-led attempts to subjugate them, particularly from the 1990s to the mid 2010s, the period covered in this study. In my own work on radio in Afghanistan, I discuss how despite being the son of a prime minister, the country’s most famous musical icon, Ahmad Zahir, sang songs of revolution and of society’s social ills in the 1970s, and remain relevant today.¹⁰ Recent examples from the past two decades include performing artists on the popular TV show, *Afghan Star*, including the Hazara rapper, Sayed Jamal Mobarez, who sang

⁹ Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, “Quandaries of the Afghan Nation”, 88.

¹⁰ Mejgan Massoumi. “Soundwaves of Dissent” 697-718.

of dire economic and political conditions of the Afghan state.¹¹

This book will be of interest to students, scholars, researchers, and practitioners who are interested in politics, international relations, and especially those interested in multiculturalism, state-building, nationalism, and liberalism in the case of Afghanistan. Students in cultural history, Afghanistan Studies, South Asian studies, and other related fields will also benefit from the findings of Sadr's work.

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¹¹ Munazza Ebtikar, "How a Rapper Won Over Afghanistan's Hearts" 20 November 2017. <https://ajammc.com/2017/11/20/rapper-afghanistan-sayed-jamal-mubarez/> (Accessed 1 September 2022)



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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 Pashtun 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 Pashtun 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 Pashtun 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 Chioyenda 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 or 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 Pashtun 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 Pashtunwali, 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 Pashtunwali 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 Pashtun people and culture. They 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 becomes 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 identities 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 loses 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.

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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.

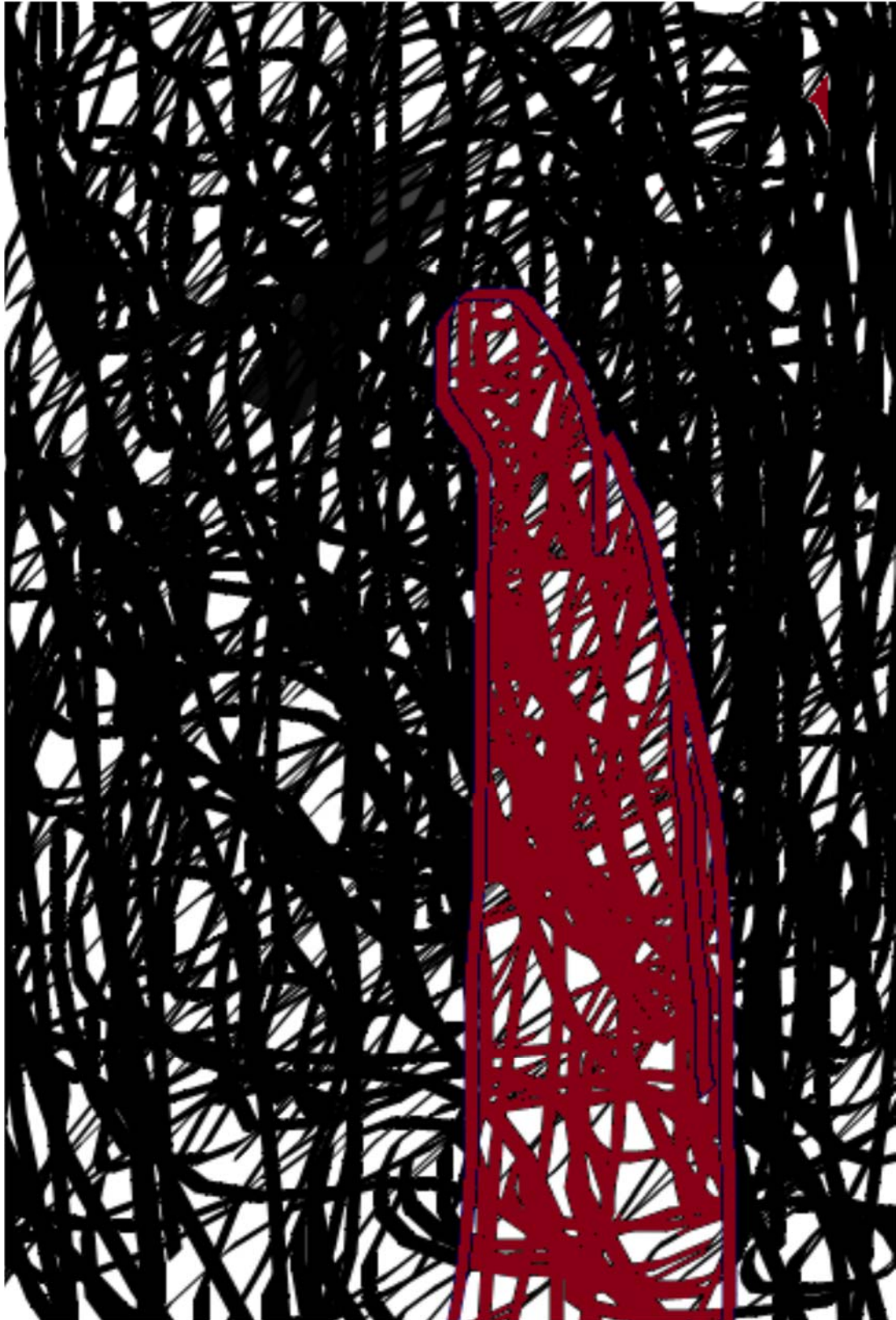
The more I learned, and the more difficult life became, I realised that women are the worst affected by all this. My mother is a good example. She lost her father, mother, four brothers and a sister during the civil war; she spent her entire youth in displacement (Pakistan and Iran) and poverty, and 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 at 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.

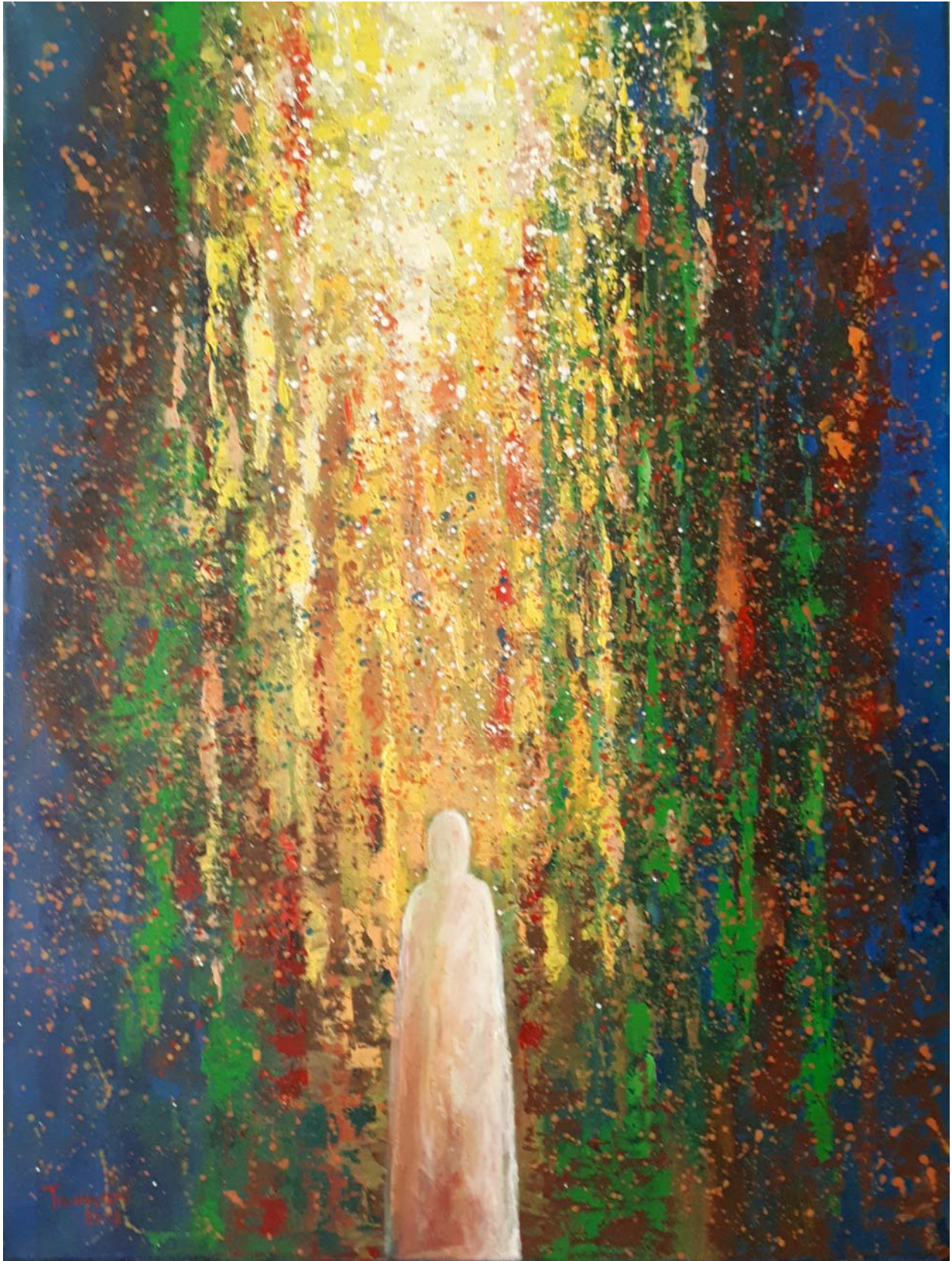


**Picture 4/
Rise:**

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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