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Jeremy Slater April 9, 2021

Precarity, Hope, Resilience: Memories of a Potential Future in Afghanistan

by

Jeremy Slater

Kim Loudermilk
Adviser

Institute for the Liberal Arts

Kim Loudermilk

Adviser

Cynthia Blakeley

Committee Member

Hossein Samei

Committee Member

2021

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Jeremy Slater

Kim Loudermilk

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Abstract

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Afghanistan has endured more than four decades of instability. Many of the foreign policies concerning Afghanistan from countries like the United States and the former Soviet Union were ineffective in producing their expectant results, instead further destabilizing the country. This thesis argues that foreign policy and international development is aided by the inclusion of written forms of autobiographical writing in decision-making processes. I synthesize thematic lessons from memoirs by Fawzia Koofi, a prominent Afghan politician, and Tamim Ansary, a notable Afghan American author. This thesis also translates and evaluates Dari poetry from Afghan writers Parween Pazhwak, Homeira Nakhat, and Azizullah Ima. By Analyzing memoirs and poetry within a postcolonial framework, this paper demonstrates the impact that stories can have on policies introduced and discussed in Afghanistan. Memoir and poetry elucidate the emotive, subjective reality that many Afghans experience in the environment of numerous failed interventions and policies. In short, this thesis aims to illuminate the power of storytelling in cultivating empathetic, humanistic, and people-centric foreign policy and scholarship.

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Dr. Samei gave me access to a tongue I had never thought of speaking. Words cannot express how thankful I am for Dr. Samei's compassionate and patient pedagogy, helping me become a speaker of a language I have fallen in love with. Persian will always have a place in my life, and I know that I will continue to learn Persian because Dr. Samei has instilled an authentic and profound love of all things Persia. I thank him for his translation help, his conversations, his smiles, and his eagerness to teach Persian.

برای همه کارهایتان متشکرم. من هرگز فکر نمی کردم که فارسی بلدم. حالا آن را همه جا با خودم خواهم برد. متشکرم.

To Omid, my friend: Thank you for sharing your stories with me. Without such stories and connection, this thesis would not exist. It is courageous to share such poignant and difficult memories; I hope this thesis makes you proud.

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Introduction

While we sat on a rusty bench in Rudaki Park in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, my friend Omid told me the story of how he left Afghanistan. Omid was serving as my language partner during my summer language program in Tajikistan where I was studying Persian. I remember how we sat looking towards the Presidential Palace and the mosaic arch under which a neoclassical statue of Rudaki stood in the foreground (Rudaki is one of the foremost poets in modern Persian poetry who lived in present-day Tajikistan). Omid revealed his struggle to safely journey to Tajikistan from his hometown Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. He spoke of dead bodies, of becoming desensitized to violence and bloodshed, of the buildings he used to frequent in childhood now merely rubble and dust. He, indeed, confessed both his thankfulness for escaping his country and his anger that he feels nothing will change. Listening to his recollection of migrating and seeking asylum in a foreign country, catalyzed in me a deep introspection that resulted in the following thesis. His experience reminds me of that arch in Dushanbe's central park, how from one story to another, areas can be connected into a beautifully rendered piece of art. In this way, my thesis argues that stories, particularly those like Omid's, have an important and integral role in connecting the outcomes and objectives of foreign policy, contributing to a more stable, positive future for Afghanistan.

As someone who studies Persian and became friends with a few Afghan refugees while living in Tajikistan (a country just north of Afghanistan), the question of how I could help Afghanistan's development in whatever way became an increasingly difficult one to navigate (and indeed, after a year of research, still is). Conversations with my Afghan friend Omid in Tajikistan sparked an interest in learning more about Afghanistan and Dari (Afghan Persian), but more importantly of how to use my privilege responsibly. That is, how may I utilize my Persian

knowledge and area specialty so that I can help, no matter how little, my friend and others like him? His stories of escaping Afghanistan haunt me, because his are not unique or particularly special. When we read memoirs written from Afghanistan, recollections of disturbingly frightening events are commonplace. A nagging question arises, then: how can stories like Omid's help those in power to create change in Afghanistan and draft effective and just policies?

The study of Afghanistan cultivates a discussion on the boundaries between effective foreign policy and productive humanitarianism. Once a center of art, literature, and culture along the Silk Road, present day Afghanistan is a shell of its former glory, shattered after decades of conflict. From the Soviet invasion of 1979 to the ongoing brutalities between the national government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, Afghanistan has experienced more than forty years of political, social, and economic insecurity. According to the most recent CIA factbook, in Afghanistan the infant mortality rate, which is a standard for measuring the well-being of a population, is the worst in the world, where nearly 107 out of 1000 newborns die within one year.[1] The status of many Afghans remains in a state of chronic precarity, creating a breeding ground for religious and political extremism. Despite its challenges, Afghanistan may have a better chance for a future of positive growth by including memoirs and other forms of written word like poetry from Afghans when policymakers, legislators, and academics negotiate emerging agendas for the country. One must ponder the effectiveness of foreign intervention in Afghanistan, especially since the last forty years the country continues to be a turbulent arena for various economic, political, and religious ideologies.

This thesis argues that the lived experiences of Afghans must be included in emerging discussions of the future of Afghanistan. When examining memoirs or poetry from Afghanistan,

[1] "Afghanistan - The World Factbook," accessed March 12, 2021, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/afghanistan/#economy.

we begin to appreciate the intricacies of Afghan culture. Reading memories of a former and present Afghanistan, we are able to visualize a region of the world that offers a counterpoint to the representations of Afghanistan we see on media outlets that only cover the geopolitical struggles being waged in the country. In other words, without reading and learning about the personal experiences of those who have lived in Afghanistan in the past forty years, foreign intervention in Afghanistan will continue to overlook the complexities of issues in Afghanistan, especially those that arise from various foreign projects.

Methodology

For this thesis, I will examine two memoirs from Afghan writers and selections of Dari poetry. The memoirs are *Letters to My Daughters* by Fawzia Koofi and *West of Kabul, East of New York* by Tamim Ansary. The selections of Dari poetry will come from the works of three Afghans: Parwin Pezhwak, Homeira Nakhat, and Azizullah Ima. When reading and evaluating these sources, I will utilize postcolonial ideas, especially Edward Said's *Orientalism*, so that my research is grounded in equitable and also critical examinations of a developing (and non-Western) country. I find it important to frame my analyses of writers from Afghanistan according to postcolonial approaches, because I am from the United States and white. Though I am a student of Persian and have lived in Tajikistan (a border country to Afghanistan) and therefore have some competency with this region of the world, my perspective is critically distinct from the perspectives I study. So, scaffolding my research in postcolonial theory will alleviate any bias as much as possible, because this theory centers perspectives of those formerly oppressed or dominated by Western forces.

My interdisciplinary scholarship derives heavily from courses in anthropology and area and cultural studies. Ethnography, the instrument through which anthropologists and culturalists

study groups of people, is becoming increasingly more experimental and varied as opposed to more traditional, descriptive journaling forms utilized before the 1980s. Ethnography is paramount in evaluating different people and cultures; it must be as unbiased as possible, objective, and descriptive. Though, as Ruth Behar, an anthropologist at the University of Michigan, states in her article "Cherishing Our Second-Fiddle Genre," ethnography has been dominated by power structures since the discipline's creation, arguing "ethnography has a long tradition of being aligned with power; some of our most talented ancestors have been conquerors, explorers, missionaries, and inquisitors."[2] One way more recent ethnographers have overcome power dynamics when studying different cultures is to create ethnography more aligned with the arts, including literature and memoir.[3] In other words, anthropologists view written texts as ethnographic materials, because "the lifeworld of the narrative of the self—its people, its sights, its customs, its tribulations—becomes as important as the reconstructed image of the writer."[4] As memoirs elucidate the lived experience of an individual to an audience, anthropologists and culturalists can employ memoir and written work, like poetry, as ethnographic material. In this way, my thesis will use memoir and poetry as a way to evaluate Afghanistan's relationship to precarity, trauma, and hope for a better future.

Structure

The thesis is divided into three main chapters. The first, "Navigating Womanhood in Afghanistan," will examine the story of Fawzia Koofi, an Afghan parliamentarian who is currently one of the only female representatives negotiating the forthcoming peace agreement

[2] Ruth Behar, "Cherishing Our Second-Fiddle Genre," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28, no. 5 (October1999): 481.
[3] Behar, 481.
[4] Marc Blanchard, "Between Autobiography and Ethnography: The Journalist as Anthropologist," ed. Michel Leiris and Jean Jamin, *Diacritics* 23, no. 4 (1993): 72, https://doi.org/10.2307/465308.

between the national Afghan government and the Taliban. Her story reflects the status of women in Afghanistan and how culture and human rights are inextricably linked. Koofi's memoir illustrates a rather interesting perspective. Despite at least four attempts on her life, Koofi maintains an indefatigable determination to create a better future for Afghanistan. The memoir retells Koofi's lived experience chronologically, with each chapter concluding with a personal letter from Koofi to her two daughters. The letters help the reader conceptualize the dynamics of a mother who seeks a better future for her daughters. We can thus explore how the past and future interact in the story of Koofi.

The second chapter, "Biculturalism and Unintended Consequences," will explore the perspective of Afghan American Tamim Ansary. As a bicultural individual, Ansary offers invaluable opportunities to explore the relationship between the West and the East, a division illustrated by the philosopher Edward Said in his *Orientalism.* Ansary's memoir provides a way for future policymakers and legislators to investigate how foreign aid in Afghanistan has resulted in "unintended consequences." The idea of unintended consequences will remain a crucial aspect to the chapter on Ansary, and to some extent, this thesis grounds itself on how important memory can be in avoiding unintentional effects from various national projects.

The third chapter, "Surveying Afghanistan in Poetry," will discuss works by three Afghan poets: Parwin Pezhwak, Homeira Nakhat, and Azizullah Ima. None of these poets have been published in English prior to this time. Because their work is so important, I have translated key poems from Persian into English under the guidance of Dr. Hossein Samei, Senior Lecturer in Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies at Emory University. Their messages offer another humanistic insight into the thoughts and lives of some Afghans who have lived in the midst of the insecurity and turbulence. Their poems will also help to suggest an alternative perspective of

Afghanistan, because of their rich and at times saddening stories. Nonetheless, their poetry will, like the two memoirs, inform this paper on the potential future for Afghanistan in the eyes of actual Afghans.

When beginning to research and write on this topic, I found it difficult to place my work within the greater conversation on Afghanistan in either academia or governments. At the beginning of this process, the intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha had just begun (September 2020) and Fawzia Koofi had put on her Facebook her intent to advocate for the rights of women in these talks. The goal for the intra-Afghan talks were to find a compromise for an inclusive government for both the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the official name for the Taliban) and the national government of Afghanistan. The talks have stalled, and violence continues to permeate the country. In 2020 alone, civilian deaths numbered 3,035, a fifteen percent increase from 2019—a year before the peace deal between the Taliban and the United States was signed.[5] As Afghanistan remains one of the most dangerous countries to live in as a civilian, this thesis, which highlights individuals' stories from Afghanistan, cannot exist in a more salient environment. Though I offer no policy recommendations, I conclude with a call to include Afghan voices at all times in both academic and political spaces.

I refer to the term "narrative" frequently in this paper. For the purpose of this thesis, "narrative" refers to the process through which "human beings order disordered experience and impart meaning to themselves and their world."[6] In other words, narrative is the function that engenders cohesion among the random events that happen in life. Ronald Krebs in his *Narrative*

[5] "'Disturbing Spike' in Afghan Civilian Casualties after Peace Talks Began: UN Report," UN News, February 23, 2021, https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1085442.
[6] Ronald R. Krebs, ed., "Narrating National Security," in *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316218969.001.

and the Making of US National Security explores how narratives become dominant in international relations and from these dominant narratives power is asserted towards communities and individuals. He notes that "narratives are the product of events whose meaning is clear to all, or that a narrative's dominance simply reflects the interests of powerful groups and leaders," indicating that narratives serve as a ubiquitous, standard microscope through which current events are viewed.[7] So, while analyzing writings by these specific Afghans, I ponder the following questions: what is Afghanistan's narrative? From whose perspective? Can it change? In short, this thesis surveys the various outlooks on Afghanistan and its future from three Afghan women and two Afghan men. The perspectives of diasporic Afghans (Ansary, Peshwak, Nakhat, Ima) include unique and important stories to be told in their journeys beyond Afghanistan, and I seek to illustrate how all of these sources can begin to recalibrate the discourse on Afghanistan as a people-centric, humanist endeavor. Finally, the last chapter will conclude and synthesize the many different perspectives on Afghanistan evaluated in the thesis, so that a comprehensive understanding of how lived experiences and a humanistic approach to foreign policy and scholarship can foster a more inclusive and productive discussion of Afghanistan.

[7] Krebs, 2.

Chapter 1: Navigating Womanhood in Afghanistan

On August 14, 2020, an unidentified gunman attacked a vehicle carrying Fawzia Koofi as she headed towards Kabul from Kalakan, a district city just north of the capital. According to an Al-Jazeera article, two black cars began following Koofi's escort and fired a barrage of bullets, leaving Koofi wounded in her right arm and unable to move her hand.[8] Likely assuming that Koofi had died, the attackers fled the scene, while Koofi managed to survive the hour drive to the hospital in Kabul. Lamenting to the Thomas Reuters Foundation after the attack, Fawzia commented that "'it was a narrow escape…All the way to hospital (my daughter) held my bleeding arm tight and kept telling me not to close my eyes.'"[9] Koofi's assassination attempt was in response to the peace talks between the Taliban, the national government of Afghanistan, and Western allies in which Koofi participated as one of the few women to represent Afghanistan in the intra-Afghan negotiations taking place in Doha, Qatar.[10] This most recent attack on Fawzia Koofi's life underscores the complexity of the situation of women in Afghanistan as well as the ongoing struggle to create a more stable nation. Just as the United States and the Taliban officially signed a peace treaty in February 2020,[11] the path to stability continues to be muddied by violence, such as the unsuccessful assassination of Fawzia Koofi. Nonetheless, hope lies within Koofi's story, as they do with the stories of many other Afghans.

The following chapter will examine the life of Fawzia Koofi through her memoir, *Letters to My Daughters*, which helps to inform scholars on the extent to which Afghans negotiate

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[8] Shereena Qazi, "'Why Was I Targetted?': Asks Afghan Activist after Gun Attack," accessed September 29, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/28/why-was-i-targetted-asks-afghan-activist-after-gun-attack.
[9] Shadi Khan Saif, "Shooting Fails to Deter Afghan Woman on Taliban Talks Team," *Reuters*, August 27, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-women-interview-t-idUSKBN25N2KQ.
[10] "'Cowardly' Attack on Woman Negotiating with Taliban," *BBC News*, August 16, 2020, sec. Asia, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53795870.
[11] Mujib Mashal, "Taliban and U.S. Strike Deal to Withdraw American Troops From Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, February 29, 2020, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/29/world/asia/us-taliban-deal.html.

precarity, hope, and resilience. From Koofi's memories, we can discern a sense of unadulterated patriotism, augmented by her testament to courage and strength. Koofi's memories allow for a more authentic, humanistic approach to the study of Afghanistan, perhaps even extending to other developing countries. Her memoir serves as a conduit into the consciousness of an Afghan who has experienced unprecedented loss and torment. Despite continued threats to her life, Koofi continues to play an active role in the progress of her country. Today she serves as one of the only female representatives in intra-Afghan peace negotiations,[12] ascending into an Afghan political sphere that few women have entered.

Fawzia Koofi's *Letters to My Daughters* is a recollection of her life and the trials she experienced from her birth in 1975 until the memoir's publication in 2011, offering an important entrance into the mind and lived experience of an Afghan woman who has experienced periods of intense religious, political, and social upheaval. In particular, this memoir elucidates the impact of the Taliban on women in Afghanistan and can be read as an ethnographic source, because of its examination of both ethnic and gender experiences during a specific time period, namely 1975 to 2011. *Letters to My Daughters,* furthermore, offers insights into the plight of a prominent, politically involved Afghan family and their unassumingly brilliant daughter, Fawzia Koofi. In her book, Koofi illuminates how proximity to death has changed her outlook on her life and her country. Close encounters with death comprise a seminal aspect of Koofi's story, and many of her near-death experiences are connected to the plight of women in Afghanistan. Though Koofi has overcome horrifying situations, she embodies the power and resilience of the Afghan community, especially in the presence of unwavering conviction and hope.

Imminent death

[12] Swaminathan Natarajan, "The Woman Who Negotiated with the Taliban," *BBC News*, February 27, 2020, sec. Asia, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51572485.

In the earliest pages of her memoir, Koofi writes "they often try to kill me…As I tore myself away from my children I knew I might well be murdered."[13] Setting the stage for the chapters to follow, Koofi elucidates the book's most prominent message in the prologue: death from political dissent is not hypothetical, but eventual. Of course, death from political opposition is not intrinsic to Afghanistan, nor is death from civil unrest unique to any one country, nation, or region. Alas, Koofi's experiences with near death form part of a larger political and social narrative that is crucial for the improvement of society at large, in particular societies in developing countries.

To begin, Koofi recounts the story of her birth on the basis of various retellings by family members. The opening of her first chapter foreshadows Koofi's lifelong endangerment and ever-imminent death, writing "even the day I was born I was supposed to die."[14] According to Koofi, Afghan society deems female children "worthless," because males are expected to uphold family honor and status.[15] After an intense thirty hours of labor, Bibi jan, Koofi's mother, gave birth to a daughter, who, in a moment of her parents' pure disappointment, was taken outside the family home under the blazing sun, alone and without care. Purposefully neglecting female children is apparently commonplace in Afghanistan,[16] because males are the heirs to the family's estate and social status, leaving little room in families to admire and cherish their female progeny. Though Koofi anguishes with the realization that many Afghan families do not respect the value of female offspring, she offers an interesting conclusion to this traumatic experience: "When I finally stopped crying she [Bibi jan] began to weep silently, promising herself that no harm

[13] Fawzia Koofi, *Letters to My Daughters: A Memoir* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2011), ix-x.
[14] Koofi, 5.
[15] Koofi, 15.
[16] "WHO | Infant and Under-Five Mortality in Afghanistan: Current Estimates and Limitations," WHO (World Health Organization), accessed April 9, 2021, https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/88/8/09-068957/en/.

would ever come to me again. She knew that some reason God had wanted me to live and that she should love me."[17]

While this story may be undergirded by the inevitable deception of a regurgitated, third-person perspective, it is evident that even Koofi's birth was imbued with the possibility of impending death. This is not to suggest that Koofi, despite her parents' initial disappointment over her sex, was not eventually admired for the woman she has become. Rather, her first few hours of life were endangered by gendered societal expectations of family heirs, elucidating what Koofi has had to overcome—both familial pressures and societal influences on the role of women in Afghanistan. And through her turbulent, chaotic birth story, we can evaluate the scope to which imminent death has played a role in the shaping of Koofi as an individual.

It was 1978, three years after Koofi's birth. The Russians and Mujahideen had begun to flex their strength across Afghanistan, inflicting pain on many families, including Koofi's. The Mujahideen were a band of anti-government rebel organizations aimed at restructuring Afghan society.[18] Koofi's father, Wakil Abdul Rahman, was an important politician in pre-Soviet Afghanistan. He served as a parliamentarian and was revered in the Koofi family's district, Badakhshan. Abdul Rahman, however, resented the rise of the Mujahideen and frequently held political rallies at the Koofi estate to advocate for cooperation and political collaboration amongst the country's diverse communities. As the Russians and Mujahideen began to wage war against each other in the northern regions of Afghanistan, including Badakhshan, Rahman became a target. Seeking to extend peaceful negotiations with the Mujahideen, Rahman and his fellow elders arranged a meeting with the rebels in hopes of ceasing the escalating warfare within the district. As Rahman's entourage approached the rebels in an encampment in the Hindu

[17] Koofi, 16.
[18] Koofi, 32.

Kush mountains in the northernmost region of Afghanistan, the Mujahideen sprang. Koofi recounts, "my father's horse was hit…they captured him and held him hostage for two days…all I know is that two days later they executed him with a bullet straight through the head."[19] During this historical period in Afghanistan, prominent politicians frequently died as a result of assassinations and political power maneuvering, and Koofi's family was no different; as with many other Afghan households, the Koofi family experienced a traumatic, bloody altercation with the rise of the Mujahideen rebels.

Following Koofi's father's execution, the Mujahideen were determined to assassinate the rest of the Koofi family. The rebels raided the Koofi estate in 1978, and Koofi, her mother, and her siblings fled the house and into the nearby river ravine. Before attempting their escape to the countryside, the family hid in one of their barns, covering themselves with cow dung and hay. Their extended relatives sat on them in the cow dung and insisted to the Mujahideen assassins that the Koofis had already fled. In their only chance to escape the estate before the Mujahideen realized the Koofis were still in the barn hiding, the family began to run. Retelling an intense memory, when her family members debated throwing Fawzia, still a toddler, into the river so the family could run more quickly, Koofi writes, "'if you don't throw her [Koofi] they'll catch us'…she [Bibi jan, Koofi's mother] almost did…from somewhere deep inside, she gathered reserves of strength…she put me on her back."[20] Thus, in her short life, Koofi had already experienced two episodes not only of near death, but of a familial debate over the worth of her life. This memory underscores her mother's promise from her very first day of being alive, whereby no harm will come to Koofi, while also illustrating the very real proximity to death that Koofi experienced as a small, innocent child in the foothills of the Hindu Kush mountains, a

[19] Koofi, 36.
[20] Koofi, 44.

constant reckoning with mortality and worth that continues to prevail as she negotiates peace with the Taliban.

Despite her siblings' panicked push to abandon Koofi, Bibi jan made a decision that illuminates the undulating social circumstances of Afghanistan. The assassination attempts against the Koofi family and their escape from their ancestral estate suggest a deeper complexity to the negotiation of precarity. For example, Koofi writes about her peculiar relationship with the Mujahideen. On one hand, they had murdered her father "playing their deadly power struggles," but on the other hand, the Mujahideen were responsible for the withdrawal of Soviet troops inside Afghanistan and the development of a sovereign Afghan state.[21] This paradox, however, is augmented by the rise of the Taliban within Afghanistan, spurred by religious zealots from the Middle East and Pakistan who came to fight off the Russians. After the Taliban's successful capture of Kabul in 1996, Koofi foreshadows the brutality and suffering to be endured during their rule, stating that her country's tragedy "was just beginning…they [the years of Taliban rule] were our bleakest years of need."[22] Though the Mujahideen had caused both the Koofi family and their country immense insecurity and turmoil, Koofi indicates that the Mujahideen were but a prologue to the eventual devastation of the Taliban regime.

Women's Rights

Koofi's memoir negotiates the complex boundaries between culture and human rights, especially women's rights. According to Sima Samar in *The Journal of International Affairs*, the West has been decidedly noncommittal in addressing human rights in Afghanistan in recent decades due to suggestions that female oppression was "'part of the culture.'"[23] Yet in Koofi's

[21] Koofi, 74.
[22] Koofi, 115.
[23] Sima Samar, "FEMINISM, PEACE, AND AFGHANISTAN," *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2 (2019): 151.

memoir, the boundaries between women's rights and culture could not be more prominent. For example, Koofi writes poignantly about wearing the *burqa* during the period that the Taliban controlled the country (1996–2001). In one vividly rendered episode, Koofi explains her first time being forced to veil entirely:

> Peering through the tiny blue mesh eye slot, I felt as though everything was closing in on me. The mountains seemed to be perched on my shoulders, as if the world had somehow grown both much larger and much smaller at the same time. My breathing was loud and hot inside the hood, and I felt claustrophobic, like I was being buried alive—smothered beneath the heavy nylon cloth. In that moment, I felt something less than human. My confidence evaporated. I became tiny and insignificant and helpless, as if the simple act of donning the burka had shut all the doors in my life I had worked hard to open. School, pretty clothes, makeup, parties—all of these things meant nothing to me now.[24]

Koofi describes wearing the burqa as being "smothered" beneath the weight of the fabric, making her feel "tiny" and "helpless" to navigate a world now effectively ruled by male Taliban. By including such a visceral response to wearing the burqa, her experience becomes palpable, something that can connect the reader to an Afghan high schooler unfortunately forced to adapt to the boundaries of hegemonic culture and freedom.

Veiling, nonetheless, has long had positive perceptions in Muslim cultures. According to Koofi, "wearing a burka was a sign of nobility" and was traditionally employed to help women to avoid harsh natural elements, though during the Taliban's reign veiling became compulsory. She positions the burqa as the garb of previous generations, noting that her generation was the

[24] Koofi, 55.

first to have the opportunity to choose *not* to veil.[25] The distinction between Koofi's ability to choose to veil (that is, until the Taliban's regime) and her predecessors' inability to choose is representative of a changing social fabric in late 20th century northern Afghanistan. Though Koofi recognizes the importance veiling has for members of her community, she believes that she is one of many who resent the Taliban's brutal female modesty laws. Samar, mentioned earlier, an Afghan woman who writes on women's rights in Afghanistan, reinforces the shared notion that forced veiling is not only oppressive, but also preclusive to a just democracy. She writes that the role of women in the future of Afghan democratic society "will have a significant impact on attaining a truly sustainable and long-lasting peace," adding that women have become a political tool in the rise and invasions of various power groups, with foreign politicians in recent decades justifying ill-informed interventions in Afghanistan based on a misguided understanding of veiling, Afghan-Islamic culture, and women's rights in a developing democratic society.[26] In other words, veiling has been used as an incentive for diplomatic and military missions because of projections regarding the nature of oppression. Like Koofi, Samar argues that veiling is not, actually, inherently oppressive, but an individual choice to be made by every female. Veiling, in other words, is one of many choices women should have the freedom to make within a democracy. Like the right to be educated or to make independent decisions regarding marriage, a woman's right to veil, according to both Koofi and Samar, is connected to the growth and development of a free and stable Afghanistan.

It is evident that the last forty years have resulted in a complex, rapidly evolving sociopolitical landscape that systemically neglects the lived experiences of Afghans who face the

[25] Koofi, 54.
[26] Sima Samar, "FEMINISM, PEACE, AND AFGHANISTAN," *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2 (2019): 146.

outcomes of flawed understandings of Afghan culture. As a result, foreign policy initiatives in Afghanistan have failed to a large extent and are indicative of a lackadaisical approach to foreign relations and counterterrorism. Reading memoirs and other writings by Afghan individuals is one way—and a particularly effective one, I argue—to assess the degree to which international missions to Afghanistan critically misinterpret Afghan culture and, consequently, do not adequately address the increasingly complex Afghan sociopolitical system. Veiling and the role of the burqa, particularly in Koofi's memoir, exemplify how the West (especially the United States) has characteristically misconstrued the status of women in Afghan culture. Laura Bush, upon seeing the coverage of Taliban rule where women were forced to wear blue burqas, famously launched a campaign to raise awareness for the plight of Afghan women.[27] While an extremely important issue, many scholars and human rights advocates have argued since then that this approach to supporting women's rights in Afghanistan has resulted in the tokenization of women as political tools to garner support for military intervention. Samar argues further that Afghan women must be in the forefront of future peace negotiations, rather than unfortunate recipient of Taliban oppression and generational conflict, because political expediency in the name of women's rights has not worked since George and Laura Bush's campaign to promote gender parity in Afghanistan.[28]

Koofi shares Samar's sentiments. In a September 2020 interview with Al Arabiya English, Koofi asserts that democracy in Afghanistan must be centrally rooted in the development and protection of women's rights; if not, democracy will never be complete. She says,

[27] Samar, 153.
[28] Samar, 154-156.

> We have to make sure that women's issue is incorporated [sic] into any stage during the agreement because I think women's rights in Afghanistan are interconnected with many progress [sic], with freedom of speech, for instance, with freedom of political gatherings and political participation. So, if you really ignore women's rights in this process, that means democracy is not completed. That means other freedoms and values will also be undermined.[29]

Koofi's memoir, in many ways, is an homage to the millions of women who suffered through the turbulence of the past forty years, and, more explicitly, a message to her two daughters on how to navigate the new and emerging society that their mother has helped create. Each chapter of the memoir is concluded with a letter to her daughters, Shuhra and Shaharzad. When analyzing the structure of the memoir, we can infer that Koofi's statements within her letters and the memories she recalls comment on the future of women in Afghanistan. Including letters to her two daughters, hope is stitched into an otherwise heart-wrenching memoir, because she reminds the reader that there is an entire of generation of future women to participate in Afghanistan's democratically developing society. In one letter to her daughters, Koofi writes about the importance of dreaming, especially for a female in Afghanistan. She instructs them to "aim for the stars. That way, if you fall, you land on the tops of the trees. If you don't aim high then all you see is the bottom of the branches."[30] Her letters serve both practically as a way to leave behind messages to her daughters in the event of her passing and morally as a way to inspire her daughters to never stop fighting for a better future, just like she has.

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[29] "Fawzia Koofi: Without Women's Rights in Afghanistan, Democracy Will Never Be Complete," Al Arabiya English, September 4, 2020, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/09/04/Fawzia-Koofi-Without-women-s-rights-in-Afghanistan-democracy-will-never-be-complete.

[30] Koofi, *Letters to My Daughters,* 226.

Power of Community

In *Letters to My Daughters*, various strangers have a particularly powerful impact on Koofi, and, as a result, scaffold the memoir as a commentary on the power of community. During periods when Koofi faces danger or violence, bystanders almost always help Fawzia survive or navigate the precarious situation. Community, for this section, represents the people—family members, extended relatives, strangers, taxi drivers, or even a Taliban soldier—who assist Koofi. Without the help of her community, Koofi might not have survived. At times, such help entails nervous taxi drivers who agree to illegally carry her to other parts of the country. Not only is it illegal for women to ride in a taxi alone without a male relative during the Taliban's control of Afghanistan, but many stretches of the country's road system are dangerous and impassable (and still are to this day). Community help also encompasses the emotional support she receives from her husband Hamid's sister, Khadija. Within the recollections of assistance, Koofi reminds the reader that these are instances of pure kindness, a sense of empathy demonstrated by Afghans of every stripe, including at times by random strangers, who reinforce the strength of community in times of war. Koofi's frequent narration of others' kindness underscores community as a prevailing theme in her life. I believe that her recounting of these moments of community support and intervention, especially when her survival is on the line, is a strategic choice on the part of the author, one that fosters empathy in the reader towards the people of Afghanistan and serves as a conduit through which readers can relate both to Koofi's situation and the plight of her fellow citizens.

In Chapter 10 Koofi retells the story of the arrangements for her engagement to a man named Hamid and the ongoing backdrop of the Taliban's surgency in Afghanistan and their successful campaign to capture Kabul. Once life became too dangerous from the fighting in

Kabul, Koofi informs us that many people tried to flee the city, either to neighboring Pakistan or to the north where a safe zone had been created by the Northern Alliance (a consolidation of the remaining Mujahideen fighters formed in an attempt to stop the spread of the Taliban). Leaving the city was no easy endeavor; the artery roads heading out of the capital were constantly monitored by the Taliban and driving on them was a lethal risk that many did not survive. In the conclusion of this chapter in one of the letters to her daughters, Koofi comments on the experience of escaping Kabul after the Taliban's conquest, foreshadowing the continuing support she and her family receive from other Afghans:

> So many times, I and other members of our family survived because of the kindness of other people. People who risked their own lives to help us, offer us shelter or hide us from danger. All over our country, ordinary men and women opened their doors to people who needed them...Some [war widows] did survive, however, because people who saw them begging on the streets did not walk by. Even though they did not have much themselves, they still gave what little they could. This is what it means to be a true Muslim.[31]

This letter alludes to a larger idea of community in times of civil war and political turmoil, where many innocent women and children are either murdered or must fend for themselves alone in a highly patriarchal society. As the above quotation illustrates, Koofi believes that her country is filled with kind, compassionate, and gracious individuals who not only risk their own lives in the pursuit of saving the innocent, but also epitomize the version of Islam that Koofi espouses. Namely, Koofi references the Islamic beliefs of *Zakat*, a pillar in Islam that requires Muslims to make charitable donations according to their wealth. Islamic legal scholar Mohammad Abu-

[31] Koofi, 129.

Nimer writes that economic justice is an important aspect to promoting both justice and peace in warring countries. Many Islamic institutions teach adherents to approach the needy or those in trouble as a religious duty. One philosophy in the framework of the pillar of *Zakat* is the idea of *sadaqah*, a voluntary responsibility in which "God urges all people to give generously in charity whatever wealth He bestowed on them." [32] Abu-Nimer, then, argues that peacebuilding in Islamic countries is inextricably linked to the promotion of nonviolence and the resistance of injustice in communities.[33] Similarly, Koofi references these philosophies in the above quotation, suggesting that she and those who have helped her family survive are instruments through which, as some Islamicists believe, the framework of *Zakat* can cultivate justice and peace in turbulent areas.

In another instance, when the Taliban comes to Koofi's residence and takes her new husband, Hamid, to jail for reports of political dissent, a taxi driver helps Fawzia chase after the Taliban kidnappers. In that period, women were expected to have a *muharram*, which is a male member of a family who can serve as a legal escort, in order to leave their house and go anywhere in the city or country. After an unsuccessful attempt at engaging one taxi, Koofi flagged down another driver and explained her situation, that the Taliban were illegally taking her husband and she needed to see where they were taking him. She remembers, "he told me to get in…'if they stop the car, say you are my sister, my name is . . , I live in . . .'" She adds that "the driver's actions were another reminder that whatever those in power threw at the ordinary men and women of my nation, Afghan values of decency and kindness prevailed."[34] Remarkably, the car was not stopped and Koofi managed to discern where Hamid was being held

[32] Mohammed Abu-Nimer, "A Framework for Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam," *Journal of Law and Religion* 15, no. 1/2 (2000): 235, https://doi.org/10.2307/1051519.
[33] Abu-Nimer, 236.
[34] Koofi, *Letters to My Daughters,* 148.

and attempted to persuade the guards to let him free. Despite the risk of driving a nonrelated female alone in the reign of the Taliban, where modesty laws were central to their dogma and control, that taxi driver symbolizes the tenacity of community in Koofi's memoir, as well as perhaps the experiences of many others in Afghanistan during this particularly challenging time period. Examining risk that this taxi driver undertook helps to understand the nature of the Taliban's brutal control of women as well as the immense disapproval that many ordinary Afghans had for the Taliban.

When evaluating Koofi's experience with that taxi driver, we can conclude that there must have been also individuals in the ranks of the Afghan military operation who did not necessarily agree entirely with the enforced Taliban doctrines. On one occasion, when Hamid was to be released from the Taliban prison, the actions of a Talib soldier helped Koofi understand that many young men enlisted in the Taliban ranks as a result of fear, necessity, or safety. This young Talib told Koofi and Hamid that he was recently married and that he would help in securing Hamid's release from prison, even if it meant he risked his life with that offer. Koofi recalls, "he risked the wrath of his superiors by making that offer. It was another one of those surprising acts of random kindness when least expected."[35] This memory underscores the severity of the situation in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule. Though this young Talib could quite possibly be executed for showing compassion to detainees and their families, we can infer that he must have been an unwilling player in the lethal war games in the Taliban era. This story indicates that, while many Afghans may adamantly believe in the Taliban's mandate, many more ordinary Afghans have had to exist, persevere, and survive in a country dominated by cruelty and murder. In this vein, any current peace negotiations with the Taliban must be rooted in security

[35] Koofi, 179.

and human rights. Koofi writes in her epilogue that "there needs to be law and order so that ordinary Afghan families can build their lives in safety and peace,"[36] in order for democracy in Afghanistan to be fully realized.

Koofi, however, is skeptical that the Taliban will ever be able to partake in a democratic system. She writes that the Taliban currently argue that their form of Islam is the only system of governance needed for Afghanistan, yet "it has been clearly demonstrated that their interpretation of education and health-care policy greatly oppresses at least half of the population."[37] Koofi remarks that, while her personal belief in democracy allows for everyone to have a political voice, "it is hard to see how the Taliban will ever sit in a parliament alongside female politicians like me."[38] Koofi, nonetheless, concludes with an acknowledgement that there are innumerable challenges (e.g., women's rights, access to education, free and fair elections) facing Afghanistan and its developing democracy. Despite the frequent attempts on her life, Koofi indicates a willingness to perish for the betterment of Afghan society. In this way, perhaps Koofi honors the sacrifices her community members make in allowing her to survive many dangerous situations through her undeniable courage and willingness to die in the hope of a better, more stable, most just, and prosperous Afghanistan.

Presence of Conviction and Hope

Koofi's memoir is predominantly scaffolded by her conviction and hope. Koofi's sense of remarkable determination to survive unnerving, and usually deadly, situations helps the reader understand the extent to which some Afghans have to navigate basic existence. Conviction, in this chapter, refers to the acts of continued persistence in the face of insurmountable danger,

[36] Koofi, 265.
[37] Koofi, 266.
[38] Koofi, 266.

while hope is an encompassing term referencing the prevailing sense of indefatigable resistance that appears throughout the memoir, in times of danger, peace, and reflection.

A particularly moving part of Koofi's story is when she attempts to continue her English language classes while in Kabul during the emerging civil war between Mujahideen factions in the early 1990s. As one can imagine, learning English can foster greater opportunities for individuals in developing or non-English-speaking countries. Koofi was determined at an early age to study English and, as her family frequently lamented, to become the president of Afghanistan. Once her family moved back to Kabul after a brief detour to Faizebad for safety reasons, Koofi was able to continue her language courses. Though the city was dominated by individual, warring factions, her mother allowed her to leave the apartment, take a taxi to class, and return alone. Koofi sets the scene for many of her journeys to learn English:

> Packs of gunmen would roam the streets…their choice of target indiscriminate. A crack from a rifle accompanied by the dull thump of the bullet would often send some poor soul toppling to the ground, another desperate search for food, water or medicine brought to a premature end…vehicles often drew the deadliest attention…On more than one occasion, my taxi was targeted by artillery rockets…I would have to walk back again after class, sneaking along alone in the dark. Sometimes it took me two hours to get home…Aside from bullets and rockets, I ran the additional risk of being raped.[39]

Clearly, the process of attending her English classes was terrifying and risky. Her determination to become knowledgeable in English demonstrates an unwavering persistence in the pursuit of her goals. Her commitment to acquiring English language skills undoubtedly outweighed in her mind the possibility of death and rape. This harrowing retelling of Koofi's experience of

[39] Koofi, 76-77.

becoming educated in English illuminates the plight of many in Central Asia as well as other developing countries. Learning English is a critical social tool to help individuals participate in the larger global world. In fact, Koofi helped teach English to orphans when she was a young wife and mother in the early 2000s, suggesting even more so that Koofi has an undeniable determination to educate both herself and others.

While the memoir incorporates elements of Islam, both as a larger backdrop in a predominantly Muslim country and an acknowledgement of her own adamant adherence to the Islamic tradition, I would argue that Koofi's hope is a function of her conviction for a better future in Afghanistan as well as her strong beliefs in a life with purpose rather than her deeply held religious beliefs. In her last chapter, "A Movement for Change," she concludes her memoir with an articulate commentary on the struggles she and her country have faced, illustrating that this memoir is inherently hopeful—a call for a thoughtful consideration of how to create a peaceful, more stable Afghanistan. In that regard, this memoir serves as a mission statement for herself firstly, but secondly as a way to share her hope with others in her community (as well as the world) that has been cultivated during years of precarity:

> We don't have to be a nation that the world either fears as terrorists or pities as victims. We are a great people and we can be a great nation. Achieving this for my country is my life's ambition. I'm not certain what God's purpose is for me, only that he has one. It may be that he has chosen me to lead my country out of the abyss of corruption and poverty or simply that he wants me to be a hard-working MP and a good mother who will raise two shining stars as daughters. Whatever the future holds for me and my nation, I know that God alone wills it.[40]

[40] Koofi, 255.

In this closing statement, Koofi fuses her religious beliefs and her belief in a life serving others, all while supporting the idea that Afghanistan can lay the foundation for a hopeful future. Despite persistent attempts on her life and her history of trauma, Koofi maintains firm confidence in the potential for an Afghanistan without reigns of terror and constant conflict.

Koofi nonetheless laments that she has experienced moments of hopelessness, a sense that her life will never get better. Poignantly, Koofi writes in one letter to her daughters, after the story of Hamid's imprisonment and bout with TB, that "there will be times in your life when all hope and strength leave you."[41] In the midst of these trepidatious times, Koofi instructs her daughters that forfeiting is not an option, especially for the Koofi clan. Remembering how her mother decided not to abandon her in the river ravine even though her entire family's lives were at stake, Koofi tells her daughters that both their grandmother and great-grandmother also encountered tremendous instability and danger. In this candid letter Koofi helps the reader recognize the power of generational struggles, and she even points to her family's previous tribulations as a reason for her unwavering hope in a better future. "Thank God I have both of their blood in me," she writes, "Giving up is not what we do,"[42] suggesting the scope of resilience that Koofi has acquired over the years and through her remembering of family predecessors.

The letters Koofi writes to her daughters after every chapter are, perhaps, the most hopeful parts of the memoir. These letters give vitality to a memoir otherwise entrenched in death and sadness. When she writes to her daughters, we see that Koofi herself has a strong, deep, and immovable capacity to hope and to persevere. In a letter after a chapter retelling how Hamid was arrested the night of the couple's wedding, Koofi again offers wisdom to her

[41] Koofi, 181.
[42] Koofi, 181.

daughters: "the worst thing that can happen to any woman is to lose herself. To lose the sense of who and what she is or to lose sight of her dreams—these are some of the saddest losses a woman can experience…I pray you will never lose your dreams."[43] Dreams, as Koofi suggests, are what make a woman whole or complete. In this way, Koofi informs her daughters that to dream is to be free, and, within this letter's subtext, we can discern that Koofi's letters are a method to illustrate the power of hope in the face of turmoil.

Concluding Remarks on *Letters to My Daughters*

Following her most recent assassination attempt on August 14, 2020, Fawzia Koofi recovered entirely and was nominated to speak at the Nobel Peace Center's Pax 2020 Conference, where she discussed the on-going intra-Afghan peace talks with the Taliban and the struggle for human rights in Afghanistan. Remarkably, she was well enough to travel to Doha and participate in the peace negotiation process that began in late September 2020. Despite the attack on her life, Koofi remains an important negotiator within the current peace forums and has frequently posted on her Facebook account with updates on the process. These most recent events, nonetheless, exemplify the themes discussed in this chapter. When we read Koofi's memoir, the ideas of imminent death, women's rights, the power of community, and the presence of conviction underscore the past and current climate in Afghanistan, because these are themes that are evident across the stories from others in the country. When writing this memoir to recount her life, Koofi demonstrates that there can still be a bright future for Afghanistan, a theme emphasized in her letters to her daughters. Koofi's successes reveal that she has had complicated relationships with systems of power in the country in the past forty years, as despite her many struggles she has prevailed and become one of the most famous female Afghans in

[43] Koofi, 152.

modern time. Her struggle, and in many ways her successes, are a part of the many struggles that other Afghans are experiencing in the present. Without Koofi's candid reflection, the conversation of women (or even any person) in Afghanistan may continue to be clouded in despair and hopelessness. While this story is painful to read at times for its distressing stories, it is important for scholars and the international community to recognize the plight of Afghans when making decisions that have real implications in communities across the country. No more can international intervention neglect the stories of Afghans on the basis of political expediency, because stories like Koofi's help elucidate the ways that Afghans can contribute to a more peaceful, just society. Afghans, as Koofi writes, are not to be "pitied,"[44] for that would overshadow the strength and resilience that most Afghans possess.

Koofi's memoir and her commentary of the events that have transpired in Afghanistan in the past forty years suggest that many Afghans, including Koofi, are willing to risk their lives for the betterment of society and themselves. Living in a constant state of violence must certainly require an incredible amount of conviction and hope, indicating that average Afghans have the capability to overcome the unfathomable brutality that has plagued this country for nearly four decades. At times, though, maintaining hope in the midst of incessant instability is an arduous endeavor; as Koofi frequently informs her daughters, there is no greater and more important task than staying fortified in the pursuit of one's goals for themselves and their country. It is hard to imagine, at least for myself, the amount of resilience one must maintain in order to live a fulfilling life in Afghanistan. It is important, nonetheless, to remember that becoming acquainted with the individual stories of average Afghans is the best tool we can utilize to fully recognize the power of individuals in warzones or other unstable regions. Acknowledging the lived

[44] Koofi, 255.

experiences of Afghans during times of precarity may help to promote stability in the country, because international coalitions will have a more holistic understanding of what it is like to live in past and modern Afghanistan. From Koofi's struggle, it may be possible to balance the scales of intervention in Afghanistan, as we can become more knowledgeable of the complexities within Afghanistan's current social and political landscape.

Chapter 2: Biculturalism and Unintended Consequences

Introduction

On September 12, 2001, Tamim Ansary wrote an email[45] which was shared across the world and catapulted him into national attention. Ansary wrote the email the day after the terrorist attacks on September 11 that were orchestrated by the Taliban in Afghanistan, the country where he was born and lived until age 16 before fleeing to the United States. This email garnered Ansary considerable media attention, because he had a unique perspective as an Afghan and an American. Largely, the email was shared widely in the burgeoning debates on how to address the atrocities of 9/11, because Ansary's position was characteristically distinctive and resonating. In this way, his email helped Americans, at least partially, deconstruct their notions that *all* Afghans are terrorists. Ansary's father, Amanuddin, was an Afghan who worked for many years among the ranks of the government of Afghanistan. After marrying a Finnish-American woman, Terttu Palm, while a student in the United States, Amanuddin was forced to return to Afghanistan with his new wife under the stipulations of the scholarship he had received from the Afghan government. Terttu and Amanuddin gave birth to three children; and Tamim Ansary and his two siblings grew up in a compound just outside bustling downtown Kabul, where he would explore the neighborhood with his sister Rebecca as well as other local children.

[45] The email, from pages 289 to 292, describes Ansary's confusion over hearing Americans claim that the US should bomb Afghanistan "back into the Stone Age." Ansary writes that Afghanistan has already been bombed, its hospitals crumbled, its schools demolished, its roads unearthed, and its fields ruined. His email urges readers to think "Nazi" when they hear "Taliban"; "Hitler" when they hear "Osama Bin Laden"; and "the Jews in concentration camps" when they hear "the people of Afghanistan." In essence, the email is a plea to sympathize with the other victims of the Taliban beyond those killed during the attacks of 9/11: the people of Afghanistan. Without addressing the Taliban, the email posits, the world is flirting with a war between fundamentalist Islam and the secular West.
Ansary, Tamim. *West of Kabul, East of New York: An Afghan American Story*, First edition (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

Ansary's memoir is a recounting of a "world that existed much more recently, traces of which still linger in the social memory of the Islamic world."[46] Writing this memoir, according to Ansary, was in response to the questions the media kept asking him about his other home, a projection to explore "the dissonance between the world I am living in now and the world I left behind."[47] *West of Kabul, East of New York* offers an illumination of the particular perspective of a bicultural individual who has experienced both pre-fundamentalist Afghanistan, the Islamic world, and the United States. Ansary's recollections of his travels around the United States and the Middle East, as well as his childhood in Afghanistan, offer insights into the ways that foreign policy can have unintended consequences abroad as well as an increasing process of bifurcation between the secular West and Islamic civilizations. In this memoir, Ansary's travels and reflections on his coming-of-age story elucidate an important narrative concerning reconciliation and multiculturalism that contributes to the study of Afghanistan and especially the evaluation of its potential futures.

When reading memoir or other forms of creative nonfiction, we can evaluate the reasoning for the author to publish their story, which is an important aspect to consider in the context of Ansary's memoir. What are his motives? To whom is he speaking? For what purpose? Ansary, however, is explicit in his acknowledging for whom his memoir is written. First, in the prologue, Ansary writes that before 9/11 he had grown distant from his Afghan roots; though raised in Afghanistan, he did not attach himself to or identify with Afghan culture. After his email lamenting the events and misrepresentation of Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 went viral, he realized that he "did have plenty to say about Afghanistan, Islam, and

[46] Ansary, 11.
[47] Ansary, 10.

fundamentalism, because I have been pondering these issues all my life—the dissonance between the world I am living now and the world I left behind, a world that is lost to me."[48] In a way, Ansary seeks through his memoir to destabilize the harmful notions of Afghanistan that were rapidly spreading post-9/11. His memoir is powerful because his identity represents two very distinct sides of the world post-9/11: the United States/the West and the "East," in this case Afghanistan and centers of international terrorism. Ansary's biculturalism allows him to speak to an American audience in a way that Koofi cannot. Ansary writes that his dual identities had caused him turmoil all his life, leading him to travel across the Middle East in search for truth and a unified self. He claims that "I spoke for Afghanistan [in writing his memoir] with my American voice, and while I was writing, my two selves were fused."[49] Ansary's *West of Kabul, East of New York* certainly serves as an important piece of subjective knowledge about Afghanistan.

Recently, history and cultural studies scholars have begun to examine the role of memoirs and historiographic writings in their power to create a national historical heritage. One Turkish historian in particular, Doğan Gürpinar, writes in the journal *Turkish Studies* that modern memoir has a developing role in mechanizing the promotion of various ideological, religious, or political motives. In essence, memoirs appear to be, at least in Turkey (and perhaps in Afghanistan), functioning as a tool for groups to foster certain subjective accounts of history. Gürpinar argues that "at such a juncture, historical accounts and memoirs as providing historical authenticity and reliability gained market value albeit the publishing industry remains of miniscule marketing value in Turkey," indicating that memoir and autobiographical writing is

[48] Ansary, 10.
[49] Ansary, 283.

serving as a conduit to promote versions of certain historical accounts. This quote explains how memoirs are becoming popular in Turkey for individuals to express a different perspective on national historical topics, even though the market for memoirs in Turkey is not keeping pace. This indicates that individuals are using memoirs to correct a perceived narrative of a story, event, land, or period, similar to why Ansary writes his memoir. Though Gürpinar argues that the memoir publishing industry in Turkey may be partial to memoirs propagating an approved historical account, the concept of memoirs becoming instrumentalized in promoting certain historical perspectives is evident in Ansary's *West of Kabul, East of New York*. Ansary speaks of a world "lost" to him and his fellow Afghans, an Afghanistan that has been haunted by the previous forty years of conflict and warring, factionalized ideologies. When examining the particular message this memoir is propagating, Ansary clearly seeks to inform his audience of the lost Afghanistan, a nation that was not always ensnared by violence and belligerent soldiers. Rather, Ansary tries to humanize Afghanistan, in an effort to inform others, especially Americans, about the ways in which many Afghans are unfortunately entrapped in precarity and instability. When deciding what he can do after his viral email, he laments to a friend "maybe I can help Americans see that Afghans are just human beings like anyone else."[50]

It is not uncommon, indeed, that memoirs are written to correct a narrative or history imposed on a group or culture. In an article in the *Journal for Iranian Studies*, Amir Khadem analyzes graphic memoirs as a way to explore trauma and recollection. Khadem writes, "there is a proclaimed sense of social responsibility, a self-identified task of witnessing and remembering, that shape these graphic narratives."[51] Much like the authors of the graphic memoirs that

[50] Ansary, 10.
[51] Amir Khadem, "Framed Memories: The Politics of Recollection in Mana Neyestani's An Iranian Metamorphosis," *Iranian Studies* 51, no. 3 (May 4, 2018): 480, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2017.1338400.

Khadem studied, Ansary similarly felt compelled to share his story, however it was to be received, in order to fulfil his personal uneasiness with the post-9/11 narrative of Afghanistan.

In recent scholarship concerning memoir or other forms of written word from regions formerly known as the Orient, some scholars argue that many authors face the concern of creating disinterest in Western audiences by authentically recalling their individual stories, in part because Western audiences usually expect theatrical representations of war, violence, and turmoil. Khadem analyzes the manipulation of audience expectations for authenticity in Neyestani's *An Iranian Metamorphosis* in an effort to show that memoir writing, especially autobiographical content from non-Western regions, is both dictated by and enhanced through an authorial maneuvering inside the "dichotomy between authenticity and efficacy."[52] While I believe this practice is certainly prevalent in Koofi's *Letters to the My Daughters*, Ansary's memoir is specifically important in the study of Afghanistan and the role of memoir in public opinion, because he explores his bicultural experience. Ansary utilizes his unique perspective as an Afghan American to symbolize the increasingly complex demography of Afghanistan as well as to connect with his assumed Western audience. Actually, his entire audience is Western, because his memoir has only been translated into German.[53] Having his memoir only translated into languages not commonly spoken in Afghanistan, *West of Kabul, East of New York* becomes a memoir read almost entirely by Western audiences, suggesting that much of the memoir's lessons are directed towards American and western audiences. Regardless, Ansary even comments on his biculturalism in the final paragraph of the epilogue, writing "I am a kaleidoscope of parts now—and so is Afghanistan. So is the world, when you get right down to

[52] Amir Khadem, "Framed Memories: The Politics of Recollection in Mana Neyestani's An Iranian Metamorphosis," *Iranian Studies* 51, no. 3 (May 4, 2018): 485, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2017.1338400.
[53] Ansary, Tamim. *New York ein Leben zwischen den Kulturen*, 2003.

it."[54] The question that arises is whether this demonstrable mechanism is effective in cultivating a change in the discourse on Afghanistan or even the perception of Afghanistan by its readers. Though this is difficult to discern, compelling memoirs, according to memoirist Mary Karr in *The Art of Memoir*, must employ an authentic and honest narrator. "Each great memoir lives or dies based 100 percent on voice," she writes. In this manner, voice becomes the "big bandwidth cable that carries in lustrous clarity every pixel of someone's inner and outer experiences."[55] Karr, who has written notable memoirs such as *The Liars' Club* and teaches memoir at Syracuse University, argues that voice is more than mechanics like tone, syntax, and diction. Rather, "[voice is] an operative mindset and way of perceiving that naturally stems from feeling oneself alive in the past,"[56] which both determine the effectiveness and captivation of a memoir.

Ansary certainly establishes his own voice, and therefore allows for an authentic, enriching engagement into the mind of an Afghan American. Some of Ansary's most poignant comments are when he discusses the duality of being an Afghan American, an individual oscillating within an enigmatic liminal space. One such passage follows when Ansary discusses the growing Afghan refugee population in his home state. This following quotation discusses Ansary's thoughts when helping to organize a fundraiser for Afghan refugees fleeing the country, a time when Ansary became aware of the worsening situation in Afghanistan:

> After that night, I receded from the committee. I lost faith in my ability to work on any project with other Afghans. They operated by rules I could not decipher. But others receded, too, as their private lives rose around them like floodwater. Their families were

[54] Ansary, *West of Kabul, East of New York,* 285.
[55] Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir*, Reprint edition (Harper Perennial, 2016), 35.
[56] Karr, 36.

> coming, and they couldn't spare time or energy for refugees in Pakistan. They had refugees of their own to worry about, right here in the United States: parents, siblings, cousins…[57]

In working with fellow Afghans, Ansary finds himself unable to adequately adapt to the cultural "rules" by which his Afghan comrades abide. He compares this dissonance to deciphering a code, something so foreign that he is unable to unlock it without a key. Ansary equates his hesitance to participate to "floodgates" filling the private lives of both himself and other fellow Afghans. The word "private" is distinctly important in this memoir, as well as other in Afghan memoirs, because a profound chasm between private and public spheres is characteristic of Afghan society. It seems unlikely that Ansary would unintentionally describe this tension with insinuations about the public/private dynamics of Afghanistan, especially because he writes about it frequently (namely, the first chapter[58] describes in detail the dynamics of family compounds in Afghanistan and in his particular family). Moreover, this quotation is important in developing the impact of this memoir on the reader because of Ansary's ability to reinforce his argument that the problems emanating from Afghanistan are evident in the United States. When Ansary writes that he and his fellow Afghan compatriots have trouble focusing on the refugee situation abroad, he confides with the reader about his growing uneasiness with the fundraiser, because, in fact, he and his compatriots are all a part of the diasporic community, and they all have family members attempting to flee or survive the volatile situation in Afghanistan. The last sentence of the quote, though, is especially powerful for Ansary as a memoirist, because it reveals the emerging "truth" within Ansary and his story: biculturalism, though uncomfortable, is

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[57] Ansary, *West of Kabul, East of New York,* 237.

[58] Ansary, Tamim. "Villages and Compounds." in *West of Kabul, East of New York: An Afghan American Story*, First edition (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 15-31.

an aspect to reconciliation. In other words, if we replace biculturalism for *multi*culturalism in *West of Kabul, East of New York*, we can start to discern the most persuasive argument this memoir offers. Indeed, Ansary argues in his epilogue that "surrendering to diversity is probably the only plausible path left to attaining unity…and I suspect I may not have to decide who I am in order to take some part in this impending Afghanistan."[59] Ansary's psyche as well as his cultural references in this quotation help illustrate the constant confusion he faces being an Afghan American and help cultivate a compelling story to which readers can relate.

Another quotation illustrative of Ansary's convincing voice concerns him negotiating love in the United States. In this episode, Ansary contemplates what he wants out of love and who could bring him the joy of a love marriage. This scene helps the reader enter Ansary's psyche as he processes what love is for someone with a hyphenated identity:

> At home, the whole gang was on the back porch, barbecuing chicken. The fridge bristled with cold beers. Debby was there with her boyfriend of the time, but I wasn't jealous. I was floating in a happiness hard to define—it had something to do with being in the privacy of my hidden world, back in the compound. But the focal point of my happiness was Debby. Who was like my relative. Who was like a cousin to me. And Afghans, you may remember, prefer to marry their cousins.[60]

Suffusing the description of his pursuit of Debby with Afghan references is integral to the development of the theme of biculturalism in the memoir. In the first passage of the memoir, Ansary denotes his status as an Afghan American, signaling that his story will revolve around issues of dual identities. When analyzing how effective Ansary's memoir is in constructing an authentic voice, this quotation is an example of Ansary constructing a trustworthy narrator,

[59] Ansary, 285.
[60] Ansary, 106.

because he never allows the reader to forget his Afghan roots. Besides the Afghan references in this quotation, his usage of incomplete sentences creates a sense of consciousness that is powerful in memoir. Without allowing the reader into the "writer's insides" where "you never lose sight of the ego's shape, its blind spots, dislikes, wants," a memoir will lose its audience and candor.[61] In this quotation, it is possible to feel Ansary's bewildered desire for Debby, a yearning for the instinctual love usually only requited by family, because of his references to the private sphere of Afghan family compounds. Interestingly, Ansary also establishes his voice by invoking common misconceptions of Afghanistan through humor. By noting a common belief that many Afghans marry their cousins in a short, concise sentence, Ansary is able to continue constituting his own unique voice; and, as a result, the memoir is effective both in fostering a convincing narrative on Afghanistan and engaging an audience in the story of an interesting Afghan individual.

Islam vs. the West

Certainly, the binaries within this memoir abound. With the title including two distinct locations, it is natural that the memoir will explore notions of dualism. The greatest binary, though, constructed in Ansary's memoir is the relationship between the West (namely, the United States) and the "other," or Islamic countries. Ansary occupies a unique position in this binary as he is both Afghan and American. He laments, "growing up bicultural is like straddling a crack in the earth. If the cultures are far apart—like those of Afghanistan and America—one feels an urge to get entirely over to one side or the other."[62] Bicultural individuals like Ansary are constantly renegotiating various aspects of their identities when presented with different situations and places. While Ansary tends to switch between his American and Afghan identities

[61] Karr, *The Art of Memoir,* 47.
[62] Ansary, *West of Kabul, East of New York,* 279.

fairly easily (e.g., living in the US, actively utilizing Persian, maintaining contacts in Afghanistan), his story is peculiar in that the bulk of Ansary's memoir is *within* the liminal spaces of being an Afghan and an American.

To begin, the memoir is structured partially in chapters delineating cities that Ansary visited on a personal/work international adventure he took at age thirty-one. This structure helps the overall impact of the memoir in complementing the dynamic of biculturalism, because it gives Ansary an opportunity to navigate a world in between his two homes, allowing for a compelling coming-in-self narrative.[63] This trip, in part sponsored by a local news outlet, was intended for Ansary to document various Islamic communities in the Middle East and to write "the real story of Islam," as at this time in the early 1980s most in the West "had only the vaguest notions of Islam itself." Even the initial desire to journey across the Middle East was a result of Ansary's confusion over the increasingly common misconceptions about Islam, writing that "these stories always dwelled on the punishments prescribed in the *sharia*…[that] thieves should have their hands cut off…[but] I had never heard of a hand being chopped off."[64] Despite reservations of leaving his newly found lover, Debby, Ansary left the United States for Europe and eventually North Africa, beginning in Morocco. When in Tangier, Morocco, Ansary began conversing with anyone who was willing; he had a rehearsed conversation starter about his dual identity to utilize when necessary. He comments on the process of continuously telling listeners his somewhat false story (that he was interested in practicing Islam, when in fact he was not), writing "I got the cover story out with less compunction than I had feared, because it was so close to the truth. So close that I felt my psyche leaning out of myself to hear their answers—

[63] Coming-in-self is a term I coin for this paper, because Ansary's experience coming to self-discovery/acceptance happens after he is an adult. In this way, I felt that "coming-in-self" is a more accurate term to elucidate Ansary's unique perspective and journey.
[64] Ansary, *West of Kabul, East of New York,* 108.

almost as if I had a personal interest in this issue and not merely a journalist's curiosity."[65] This betrayal of truth, offering a story to strangers primarily rooted in reality but not completely, appears to weigh on Ansary's conscience. Perhaps, he felt uncomfortable misrepresenting reality with religiously oriented individuals. Perhaps, though, Ansary was simply uncomfortable, as he has always been, in his biculturalism. The attraction of connecting to his Islamic and Afghan roots clearly confounds Ansary and his sense of self. He writes, "the accident of history that gave me a divided soul has always been the original fact. It planted in me a troubled sense of duty that has never ceased to nag,"[66] demonstrating the gravity of simultaneously invoking American-ness and Afghan-ness. I argue that Ansary's constant straddling between being an American and being an Afghan has left him feeling a responsibility to incorporate both aspects of himself in his life and community. When the world found out that the Taliban, an organization created in the early 1990s by Afghan mujahideen, was responsible for the attacks of 9/11, Ansary's first reaction was to voice his Afghan-ness to his friends. While that email quickly became viral, the email serves as an example of Ansary's peculiar and pervasive sense of connection to a country most often misunderstood.

The dichotomy between Islam and the West in *West of Kabul, East of New York* is also illustrated in historical references. This entire memoir is entirely rooted in postcolonial notions of the "other" and the power struggle between the West and the East. In Orientalist arguments, the West dominates the East through military intervention, social policies, economic reliance, and educational programs. Ansary frequently notes historical elements as a means to reinforce the notion of Islam versus the West, because in traditional Orientalist frameworks the West has attempted to dominate the East through intellectual, cultural, and political means. Ansary's usage

[65] Ansary, 130.
[66] Ansary, 282.

of historical aspects is an effort to instruct the audience on a particular interpretation of history, one where the world is an undulating system of force. In this way, by suffusing larger historical events with his individual history, Ansary exemplifies the growing tide of misinformation contributing to terrorist organizations like the Taliban:

> To the untutored eye, history looks like a wriggling snake pit full of disparate but interwoven dramas; the Romans battling the Parthians, Columbus discovering America, the Industrial Revolution, World War II, etc..[67]

In introducing historical struggles for power inside his recollections, Ansary seems to suggest that all history, whether the past or present, is a function of dominance and control. In Part One of the memoir, entitled "The Lost World," Ansary summarizes his perception of history in a way that reinforces the binary between the powerful and the powerless—or, implicitly, the West versus the East:

> The cosmic winner is always change, except change can never settle in as the permanent state. History is a river, except people can live only in lakes, so they dam the current and build villages by still waters–but the dam always breaks. And always, some folks ride the flood, screaming slogans and exulting. Ultimately, those folks disappear in the foam and tumult, and when the waves die down, you always find the bureaucrats in charge again, saying 'okay, we've slipped downstream, but this is where we should build our Permanent Home.'[68]

This extended metaphor serves as a literary tool to inform the audience of Ansary's personal connection to both those riding the waves downstream and those left behind. This metaphor has two interpretations. Firstly, those "folks" riding the waves downstream represent the radicalized,

[67] Ansary, 256.
[68] Ansary, 50.

individuals who are overcome by change and disorder and in turn are swept away in the waters of exultation. The ones who are left behind are stranded upstream, without resources and abandoned. Yet in the end, the same "bureaucrats" are still in power. In this interpretation we see an unconquerable struggle over change, as change here is represented by water. From here, we can discern that Ansary is commenting on the nature of power. To him, control is an arbitrary, incessant dictation from those firmly rooted in powerful positions, because it is impossible to command forces of nature. Secondly, this metaphorical anecdote emphasizes the complicated struggle to control historiography. Here "Permanent Home" represents the desire to dictate origin stories, or a shared cultural narrative. Though the "bureaucrats" may continuously stay in power, how many permanent homes can be built before they are all swept away? In essence, Ansary is critiquing the notion that there is one *true* Afghanistan or one kind of *true* Afghan. If a permanent home is so easily moved, is its foundation truly that firm?

No. In short, Ansary argues that Afghanistan is like a "glass vase pounded by rocks for twenty-three years," but also like a kaleidoscope.[69] Without accepting the unchangeable forces of nature (i.e., demographic change), Ansary implies that Afghanistan may never possess a solid, firm, and permanent home. Nonetheless, Ansary's historical anecdotes reveal his deep "concern about the history of the *East* as written and influenced by the *West*,"[70] according to Silke Schmidt in *(Re-)Framing the Arab/Muslim: Mediating Orientalism in Contemporary Arab American Life Writing.* Schmidt, an interdisciplinary scholar of the Middle East and political science, argues that one of Ansary's main objectives in writing *West of Kabul, East of New York* is to correct the Orientalist history that has been written and conceptualized in modern times

[69] Ansary, 284-285.
[70] Silke Schmidt, "(Re-)Framing the Afghan Fundamentalist in West of Kabul, East of New York," in *(Re-)Framing the Arab/Muslim*, Mediating Orientalism in Contemporary Arab American Life Writing (Transcript Verlag, 2014), 216, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxs1s.7.

about the East. While I think this is accurate, as it is clear that Ansary's writing is engaged with postcolonial philosophies, I posit that Ansary advocates for the West to resist continued intervention until Afghanistan and its communities can self-champion and self-organize. Instead of focusing on how the West can remedy its failed policies and employ better, more effective policies, Ansary argues for the complete reorganization of international intervention in countries like Afghanistan. While Schmidt offers valuable insight into the various frameworks of objectives Ansary uses in the memoir to inform Orientalism and parlances about Afghanistan, in my opinion, Schmidt's evidence can also be read as a signal for no further Western intervention until more productive discussions happen relating to the impact of Orientalism in foreign policy.

Connecting to the extended metaphor about change discussed earlier, Ansary recollects a time when his father was promoted to oversee an irrigation project with the Helmand Valley Authority. His family moved to a small city called Lashkargah where many of his neighbors were Americans, as the United States had funded the development project. In keeping with his historical connections, Ansary compares this project to the immensely successful irrigation programs of the Ghaznavid Empire, where the state used the Helmand River to create, "according to legend, 'the breadbasket of Asia.'"[71] These irrigational systems were so successful that societies were able to survive in the extremely volatile weather of the Dasht-e-Margo Desert. However, after the Mongols invaded the region including Afghanistan, Genghis Khan is said to have salted and completely ruined the irrigation canals in order to solidify his power. Ansary succinctly recalls the failure of this foreign development project:

> When the government of Afghanistan decided to irrigate the desert, the administrators never intended for the water to bring up salt and ruin the soil, which caused the official

[71] Ansary, *West of Kabul, East of New York,* 57.

> government farms to fail. They fell afoul of the law of unintended consequences…when the government built dams to tame the Helmand River, it did not take into account that remote villages downstream had developed intricate systems over the centuries…when the river's patterns suddenly grew regular, the ancient systems no longer worked. Those villages never knew why the river was flowing differently, only that their crops were failing. Unintended consequences.[72]

Though this program was intended to help the communities in Afghanistan, inadequate knowledge of the local population, its history, and economy led to a complete failure, most likely resulting in insecurity for those impacted. Most importantly, though, Ansary notes that the American-sponsored Helmand Valley Authority's mission "was not just to build dams but to impose Western progress on the Afghan people."[73] One application of this objective included constructing a school for both the American and Afghan children and shipping young males from local villages into Lashkargah, clothing them in uniforms, housing them in a large communal dormitory, and paying for their American-funded education.[74] Schmidt, in their analysis of Ansary's memoir, concludes that "the irrigation project and the supposed ingenuity of American engineers thus serves as a metaphor of the well-known Orientalist reflex to convert barbarism into civilization by means of *development*, *modernization*, and ultimately *Westernization*."[75] This is a classic, if not precise, manifestation of Orientalist intervention and domination, where the West is both a generous sponsor and a hegemonic entity.

As the example of the Helmand project illuminates, many of the foreign interventions in Afghanistan that Ansary discusses have resulted in negative consequences for local communities.

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[72] Ansary, 83.
[73] Ansary, 69.
[74] Ansary, 69.
[75] Schmidt, "(Re-)Framing the Afghan Fundamentalist in West of Kabul, East of New York.", 216.

Other reforms instigated by foreign governments featured in the chapter "Unintended Consequences" are focused on women and men's education, land reform, and urban development. In this chapter, Ansary employs an effective epistrophe—"unintended consequences"—to emphasize the evidence of reckless foreign aid to Afghanistan. This epistrophe also, in my opinion, suggests the necessity for more conscientious intervention in developing countries like Afghanistan. When Ansary ends each paragraph with "unintended consequences," he attaches each instance of failed foreign intervention with the concept of haphazard aid. So, when Ansary uses "unintended consequences" anywhere else in the memoir, it is impossible to ignore the instances of demonstrably negative consequences of certain foreign policies. It is the concept of unintended consequences that is reiterated, and through this repetition Ansary argues for a careful consideration of unexpected results, usually ineffective or harmful outcomes that Ansary promises "you can count on."[76] Ansary is very intentional in creating a theme of unintended consequences in this memoir. Among the various policies enacted by foreign governments he mentions, all have in some way or another resulted in continued destabilization, insecurity, or violence. Ansary is forthright in acknowledging that some foreign policies have been employed benevolently, yet he is also candid when noting the disadvantageous consequences of certain policies, such as the Helmand River Authority Project and education programs sponsored by the United States.[77] Notably, Ansary does not discuss a foreign policy enacted in Afghanistan that he deems constructive or effectual, leaving room for further exploration and analysis.

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[76] Ansary, *West of Kabul, East of New York,* 85.

[77] Ansary writes "but they kept educating boys: Westernizing them, secularizing them, deculturing them; they kept churning out high school graduates, far more than the country's only university could accommodate…Blithely, they kept adding to a class of underemployed, semi-educated misfits looking for answers their culture couldn't give them. Unintended consequences" (81).

The Role of Family in Conception of Self

The concept of family in Afghanistan, as in most other predominantly Muslim areas, is deeply rooted in the idea of separate private and public spheres. The private domain is representative of the personal autonomy each family member enjoys inside the home. According to Islamicist Mohsen Kadivar in *An Introduction to the Public and Private Debate in Islam,* in the household, a person has the "freedom of choice."[78] That is, individuals—especially women, who face restrictions in the public sphere—are able to navigate the home freely. On the other hand, in the public domain, "the management, improvement, and alteration of the public sphere are the prerogative of the citizenry," meaning that all matters in the public domain can be seen, surveyed, and surveilled by others.[79] In the public domain, in other words, a person is socially censored; what a person does in the public domain must be socially and culturally acceptable. The private domain, on the other hand, permits a person freedom to do what is otherwise unacceptable in the public, such as unveiling for women. The Ansary family in Afghanistan was devoted to this philosophy. In some Islamic cultures, like Afghanistan, the housing compound of the family is the physical manifestation of these cultural and religious codes. In other words, the compound represents the private sphere and anywhere outside of the compound is the public domain, where certain other standards are expected for individuals concerning how to appear in the public. The private sphere can even include distant relatives' compounds. For example, Ansary writes that "the many compounds of a clan like ours formed a sort of secret urban village."[80] The network of compounds, according to Ansary, created a sense of "ease, comfort,

[78] MOHSEN KADIVAR, "An Introduction to the Public and Private Debate in Islam," *Social Research* 70, no. 3 (2003): 669.
[79] KADIVAR, 662.
[80] Ansary, *West of Kabul, East of New York,* 31.

and the freedom to let down one's guard."[81] Inside this private world, Afghans are not only able to find an escape from the public domain but foster an incredibly strong sense of family. From this idea, we can evaluate how the role of family impacts both the memoir and Ansary as an individual.

When Ansary moves away from Afghanistan, he finds himself attempting to maintain communal living arrangements. In Portland, where he lived for twelve years, he remembers "I was part of an intimate community…a closely interwoven network of friends and lovers numbering perhaps two hundred, just about the size of the Ansary network in Kabul and Deh Yahya."[82] When Ansary finally leaves Portland for his "first real job," he seeks out another communal living situation. At this time, he was independent and separated enough from his Afghan roots that he "no longer felt the bicultural alienation of my childhood."[83] While Ansary does not include many examples of his assimilation into American culture, his persistence to seek living circumstances similar to those typical of Afghan culture seems to suggest the continued identity negotiation usual for a bicultural individual. Reading into these choices, it appears that Ansary, despite having been removed from Afghanistan for nearly a decade and a half at this time, maintains parts of his Afghan culture in unique and perceptible ways.

For example, when discussing such familial constructions as marriage, Ansary is unable to detach his Afghan psyche from his American psyche, rather maintaining the cultural framework of two distinct private/public worlds: "It took months for me to admit to myself finally that what I wanted was Debby herself. But we were roommates…locked into this accursed confidant thing—how to change the footing?"[84] Though Ansary acknowledges that in

[81] Ansary, 17.
[82] Ansary, 101-102.
[83] Ansary, 104.
[84] Ansary, 106.

the United States relationships are to be sought *outside* of the home, he is unable to neglect his affinity for his housemate, Debby. He writes, "yet right in the middle of my enjoyment, I found myself swamped by an utter *longing* to go home—and why? To tell Debby."[85] It is plausible, indeed, that Ansary could have simply fallen in love with one of his roommates, as this seems reasonable. The attraction to Debby, however, appears to be intertwined with his notions of family. When he accepts his desire for Debby, he does not compare her to an American cultural reference. No, Ansary compares her to a cousin, referring to the common practice of marrying cousins in Afghanistan, so as to keep intact the private world (the home).

In the final section of the memoir, Ansary offers a more somber recollection of the idea of family. This part of the memoir revolves around the epoch of the rise of the Taliban, when insecurity, instability, and depravity led to hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to other countries. Ansary reflects on this experience, of having to navigate a loss of both a former existence as an Afghan community member and a world that has become so dislodged from his personal experience in Afghanistan. When he reflects on the impact of the diaspora on the virtues of family, though, Ansary allows for a larger conversation on the future of Afghanistan to be had:

> I think all of us Afghans tried at first to establish here a sense of those private family villages we grew up with, but in America, you can't keep out what is public…I often heard stories of grandmothers moving restlessly from household to household, city to city, coast to coast, unable to find contentment anywhere. I believe they were looking for the heart of the clan, the household so deeply private that they could be surrounded only by their own…They were looking for a mythical place that didn't exist, that couldn't

[85] Ansary, 105-106.

exist, in America.[86]

This quotation exemplifies the sacred notion of private/public life expressed in many Islamic societies, but also underscores the dissonance of diaspora and cultural displacement. Though Ansary perhaps was better equipped to navigate dual cultures because of his hyphenated identity, it is clear that many displaced Afghans are unable to recreate the conditions necessary for contentment or cultural inclusion as they are in Afghanistan. Of course, the general sense of loss in this quotation indicates a desire for a return to the "mythical" pre-war Afghanistan. When reading this memoir, especially this quotation and other parts of the final section, the reader is confronted with a call to reconciliation, or at least acceptance. In other words, Ansary challenges the reader, whether Western or Afghan or a mixture of the two, to recognize the entirely altered circumstances in Afghanistan. When his Afghan peers' "talk of going home, so common at first, faded" as the situation deteriorated in Afghanistan, plans to return to the same country vanished. As a result, this bloodied Afghanistan has been morphed into a fractured, seemingly unidentifiable entity. Nonetheless, Ansary offers words of wisdom in his epilogue, reminding the reader that "the lost world will not be reconstituted."[87] What rises from the ashes will be completely novel, built on a "kaleidoscope" of fractured pieces.[88]

Concluding Remarks

In Tamim Ansary's memoir *West of Kabul, East of New York*, the struggle between East and the West, and more specifically, Islamic countries and the United States, becomes a paramount idea evaluated. Ansary's bicultural experience offers a unique and powerful perspective in studying the state of Afghanistan's past forty years as well as its potential future.

[86] Ansary, 265.
[87] Ansary, 284.
[88] Ansary, 285.

Being both an Afghan and an American, Ansary recollects his coming-of-self in the stories he remembers of traversing the Islamic and Western worlds. His journey to understand both himself and aspects of his culture(s) creates a memorable and illustrative example of what it means to be an Afghan, American, and anything in between. His memoir offers insights into how Afghanistan might look if members of the international and Afghan communities reconcile with differences, whether they be historical, religious, cultural, or otherwise. Ansary, in conclusion, argues that the Afghanistan he once knew as a teenager will never return, but the country beginning to emerge post-Taliban control will be completely dissimilar to his previous experience, similar to what Koofi postures in her *Letters to My Daughters*.

For this chapter, the most instrumental aspect of Ansary's memoir is the idea of unintended consequences. A large part of Ansary's life in Afghanistan centered around witnessing the unexpected results of foreign and domestic policies. When Ansary suggests that much of foreign aid is categorically a failure, he indicates that serious reconsideration must be had before more intervention takes place in the country. Ansary, in my opinion, argues that foreign policies directed towards Afghanistan must only be enacted with thoughtful, comprehensive, and respectful understanding of the situation. Finally, Ansary provides both a unique perspective on Afghanistan and a reflective guide to navigating Afghanistan in the readers' lives. From his email, we learn that Afghanistan has already been "bombed to the Stone Age," so what else can one do besides look to the future? This chapter posits that Ansary's memoir can be utilized in promoting a different narrative of Afghanistan, one that is more sincere, empathetic, characteristic, and hopeful for the future.

Chapter 3: Surveying Afghanistan in Poetry

Poetry in the Persian world has a rich history and strong presence in modern times. When I was in Tajikistan, it was common for people to recite poetry on the streets and other venues. One of my closest friends had memorized selections from the epic poem *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi and would recite it to me while we enjoyed our afternoon green tea. Poetry, or poetic expression, has been seminal in forming identity, community, and culture in the Persian world, and the tradition of poetry remains a very important aspect of greater Persian culture. Scholar Muhammad Sharifi, in his chapter "Language, Poetry, and Identity in Afghanistan: Poetic Texts, Changing Contexts," argues that Persian poetry in Afghanistan "is influencing and shaping national discourse over the issue of identity, especially during the past several decades of invasions, wars of resistance, state failure, and proxy war[s],"[89] highlighting that poetry in Afghanistan is a tool to assess the current state of affairs in the country. In this way, I will use Dari poetry to argue that poetry can be used by scholars and policymakers to understand and create aid programs for Afghanistan. Sharifi notes that "a poem is produced within a context, which includes the life of the author, the audience for whom he or she writes, and the background relationship of various social, historical, moral, ethical, and valued cultural norms and practices,"[90] emphasizing the idea that poetry is a social and cultural barometer capable of examining a particular region or group of people through the perspective of an individual writer.

This chapter offers selections of Dari poems translated with the help of my Persian professor, Dr. Hossein Samei. The authors include Parwin Pezhwak, Azizullah Ima, and Homeira Nakhat. Parwin Pezhwak is an Afghan woman who grew up in Afghanistan before the

[89] Mohammad Omar Sharifi, "LANGUAGE, POETRY, AND IDENTITY IN AFGHANISTAN:: POETIC TEXTS, CHANGING CONTEXTS," in *Modern Afghanistan*, ed. M. NAZIF SHAHRANI, The Impact of 40 Years of War (Indiana University Press, 2018), 57, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv8j6dx.9.
[90] Sharifi, 58.

Soviet invasion in 1978; shortly after the war ensued, Pazhwak fled to Pakistan and eventually sought asylum in Canada, where she lives currently. Her most well-known published works include *Sea in Dew* and *Gems and Stars,* the former a collection of poems and the latter a collection of short stories.[91] Azizullah Ima is an Afghan male who appears to be living in Switzerland, according to his Facebook page.[92] Homeira Nakhat is a renowned Afghan female poet who passed away in 2020 from cancer; she was living in the Netherlands at the time of her death.[93]

How do these poems inform the academic discussion of Afghanistan? From the writings of Pazhwak, Nakhat, and Ima, themes of precarity, anticipation, hope, and frustration emerge and reveal the diverse emotions within these Afghan poets. Even more so, these poems equip scholars and policymakers with an instrument through which the broader cultural, social, and cultural world can be studied. For example, reading Pazhwak's "Death of Sun" cultivates an understanding of the immense anger that some Afghans possess towards the senseless violence beginning during the Soviet invasion. "Death of Sun" also illustrates the bewilderment of a young Afghan woman who must navigate a world where safety is not guaranteed. "The City is Lonely" similarly reveals the deep desire for reunification, the hope that a new, peaceful epoch may come in the near future (sadly, though, Nakhat will never see her dream come into fruition). On the other hand, "Stone Me" allows the reader to feel the antipathy of the narrator towards antiquated and discriminatory practices towards women in Afghanistan. When we analyze "Stone Me," we are able to understand that, because this particular poem was written by a man,

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[91] "زنده گینامه | پروین پژواک," accessed March 29, 2021, http://ppazhwak.hozhaber.com/?p=420. (in English, self-wrote biography from Pazhwak's website)

[92] "(1) Azizullah Ima | Facebook," accessed March 29, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/azizullah.ima/.

[93] dailyetilaatroz, "*روزنامه اطلاعات روز*," حمیرا نکهت، شاعر سرشناس افغان در ۶۰ سالگی درگذشت (blog), September 4, 2020, https://www.etilaatroz.com/106035/homeira-nakhat-famous-afghan-poet-has-died-at-age-of-60/.

poetic expression is helping individuals process anger, sadness, exhaustion in the midst of a host of pressing challenges in Afghanistan through the usage of irony.

Though all of the poems evaluated in this chapter are solemn in nature, I want to emphasize that these authors/poets do in fact write beautiful pieces on love, happiness, excitement, and joy. Pazhwak's *Sea in Dew*, in fact, is primarily about her beloved, with many poems discussing her affection for the one she loves. In this vein, I argue that poetry in Afghanistan serves a vessel through which emotions can be shared and transported to those willing to listen. It was important for me to include poetry in this thesis for two reasons: firstly, I find it difficult to examine aspects of a Persian culture without including poetry. In Koofi's memoir, for example, she frequently notes how her father would make them listen to him as he recited from the works of great Iranian and Afghan poets. This reference serves as an example of a broader cultural phenomenon within Persian cultures. Poetry, therefore, is intrinsic to the study of Afghanistan as well as its future, because Afghan writers employ poetry in order to elicit an emotional response in readers about their own lived experience. Secondly, my decision to include poetry in this thesis came in response to a year's worth of research into Afghanistan and its tragedies, which helped me realize that I could not study Afghanistan without conveying the innate humanity within each Afghan I read. Poetry and memoir, in other words, helped me conceptualize how policy in Afghanistan is lacking a humanistic perspective. Highlighting and discussing the important lives and diversity of emotions that each one of these poets possess in some way can help recalibrate future discourse on Afghanistan towards alleviating the pain and turmoil that so many Afghans continue to experience, because this chapter serves as a reminder of the shared humanity within us all. Unlike memoir, poetry cultivates a greater scope of

emotionality under the veil of abstraction, offering an important other facet to the study of written texts in Afghanistan and how they can aid foreign policy discussions.

Poetry, furthermore, has the unique ability to transcribe at times incomprehensible feelings. Writers also use poetry to convey a message about a particularly troublesome topic to an audience in abstract terms. The same process is evident in social and political poetry as well. Poetry of political commentary opposed to the ruling party has a particular place in Afghanistan, because of the emergence of a poetic tradition in Afghanistan named "poetry of resistance."[94] Resistance poetry, a trend to which all of the poets I have included subscribe, evokes a sense of understanding to an otherwise unfathomable situation. This poetic trend, and social and political poetry more generally, helps authors navigate potentially dangerous environments of their host countries (where freedom the press is basically nugatory in Afghanistan) because authors can conceptualize their opinions in subjective, abstract, and emotive ways. In this vein, poetry is critical in this thesis because, unlike memoirs, poetry can offer a more passionate and evocative understanding to the issues in Afghanistan.

We begin with Pazhwak's "Death of Sun" (مرگ خورشید), a vivid poem describing Pazhwak's intense emotions during the Soviet war. The poem's narrator has a first-person perspective to the events described in the piece, because the narrator uses "maa," the pronoun for "we" in Persian. For the purpose of this chapter, I assume that this poem is from the perspective of Pazhwak herself. Pazhwak wrote this poem in 1982 when she was 15 years old, offering the perspective of a teenager during the bloody years of Soviet interference. This poem is filled with

[94] آريا فاني, "روايت تعهد ادبي در شعر مقاومت افغانستان از رهگذر بررسی آثار خليلالله خليلي و پروين پژواك," *IranNamag* (blog), accessed March 25, 2021, https://www.irannamag.com/article/%d8%b1%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%8a%d8%aa-%d8%aa%d8%b9%d9%87%d8%af-%d8%a7%d8%af%d8%a8%d9%8a-%d8%af%d8%b1-%d8%b4%d8%b9%d8%b1-%d9%85%d9%82%d8%a7%d9%88%d9%85%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%81%d8%ba%d8%a7%d9%86%d8%b3%d8%aa%d8%a7/.

drastic and hyperbolic language. From the beginning of the poem, we see that the situation in Afghanistan through Pazhwak's eyes was disastrous:

... و

انگاه

خورشید سرد شد

و ستاره ها بر زمین فروریختند

حفره های عمیق را به وجود اوردند

حفره های عمیقی که صدای دردناک تهی بودن

از انها برمیخاست

… and

The sun became cold

And the stars fell down to Earth

The stars created deep pits

From those deep pits the painful sound of emptiness

Was arising.

The ellipsis in the very beginning of the poem suggests that this is a story taking place within an evolving situation. Introducing the poem with a sense of continuation creates the impression that the poem is set not only within a particularly bloody epoch, but also in the aftermath of turmoil or disaster. For example, "the sun became cold" and "the stars fell down to Earth" further highlight how the narrator is existing in the midst of a seemingly apocalyptic world. Are these really stars from outer space, though? I argue that Pazhwak is referring to bombs and missiles falling from the sky, creating "deep pits" where the "painful sound of emptiness" diffuses. Remember that during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the nationalist resistance,

Mujahideen, were in active combat with the Soviets in an effort to rid the country of outsiders. During this time, mass casualties and civilian deaths were commonplace. While precise estimates are difficult to make because Afghanistan has never conducted a full census, nearly "1.5 million Afghanis were killed before 1992,"[95] an unfathomably large number for a country with an estimated 13 million people in 1980 according to the World Bank.[96] How else can Pazhwak illustrate the plight of her country in this poem, and how might this poem foster a better understanding of Afghanistan for policymakers and academics?

Pazhwak, like many poets, utilizes anaphora in order to emphasize her sentiments. The following quotation is from the next stanza of "Death of Sun," where she repeats the word "here" (اینجا) so that she can fully articulate the unfortunate, drastic situation in her country. Pazhwak's usage of anaphora not only illuminates the turbulence of Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation, but underscores the simultaneously worsening aspects of her country due to violence and war:

اینجا تاریکیست
اینجا برگ های آرزو برباد رفته اند
اینجا چه بس استعداد ها که ناشاد رفته اند
اینجا پرنده ها را سر بریده اند
اینجا کتاب ها را برای گرمی اتاق
سوزانده اند
اینجا نهال ها را برای کوبیدن اطفال
از بیخ در آورده اند

[95] "Afghan War | History & Facts," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed March 18, 2021, http://www.britannica.com/event/Afghan-War.
[96] "Population, Total - Afghanistan | Data," accessed March 18, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=1978&locations=AF&start=1970.

Here it is darkness

Here the leaves of desire have gone with the wind

Here a lot of talents who are unhappy have left

Here they have beheaded the birds

Here they burn books for warming their rooms

Here the seedlings for beating children have been brought from the roots

Continuing with the imagery of a world with a dead sun, cratered by bombs and missiles from which emptiness seeps, Pazhwak tells the reader of important aspects of Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. To me, the "leaves of desire" suggests the people in this sunless world are entirely hopeless, because the kindling for aspirations has been taken with the wind, precluding anyone from practicing hope again until this season has passed. Perhaps, though, Pazhwak is referring to natural autumnal hibernation, so eventually these leaves of desire may return and grow in the midst of this world. The next three lines are more literal in meaning and are illustrative of aspects of the Soviet-Afghan war that Pazhwak witnessed. Pazhwak writes that "many talents which are unhappy have left," stating that the conflict during this time in Afghanistan resulted in what is known as a "brain drain," the process of educated and talented people emigrating their home countries due to economic insecurity or underdevelopment.[97] The next line, where Pazhwak writes "they have beheaded the birds," indicates a mass desecration of nature and livelihoods. The Taliban and Mujahideen fighters are known to use decapitation against their enemies. Beheading as a practice in Muslim communities has been around since the time of the Prophet, and decapitation is an important tool that creates fear within enemies.[98]

[97] "Brain Drain and the Politics of Immigration - FPIF," Foreign Policy In Focus, February 25, 2014, https://fpif.org/brain-drain-politics-immigration/.

[98] "Mujahideen Desecration: Beheadings, Mutilation & Muslim Iconoclasm — Anthropoetics XII, No. 2 Fall 2006/Winter 2007," Anthropoetics, June 3, 2016, http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1202/muja07/.

Ritualized killings is but one aspect of Afghanistan that Pazhwak invokes in this part of her poem. When she writes "they burn books to warm their rooms," we learn that individuals burn books, namely knowledge, in an effort to keep warm and, most likely, stay alive. Interestingly, the final line of this portion of the poem reveals that the "seedlings for beating children have been brought from the roots." When translating this sentence, one might want to translate the verb in this sentence (از بیخ در آوردن) as "to uproot," which would change the meaning of the sentence and not compliment the previous lines as it suggests an overcoming of child beatings. However, a more literal interpretation of this line allows for a better understanding, stating "the seedlings for beating children have been brought *from* the roots." This line suggests that the practice of beating children and child abuse in general has been fostered inside Afghanistan during the tumultuous years of internal conflict. In fact, a UNICEF report notes that in the first six months of 2015 4,824 children in Afghanistan experienced some type of abuse.[99] Pazhwak's "Death of Sun" comments on the situation in Afghanistan, helping to color the impact of violence in the country.

While poetry can help scholars evaluate society and culture, another important aspect of poetry is its ability to exemplify the raw emotions of an author. One reason poetry is effective and why poetry most likely is a pertinent component of Persian cultures is the way that words, rhythm, and meaning coalesce into an impactful and poignant experience. And from this experience, cultural scholars have an opportunity to utilize poetic expression in analyses of various questions. In this way, when I read Homeira Nakhat's "The City is Lonely (شهر تنهاست)," I was struck by how much emotion I felt: sadness, longing, desire, hope, anticipation. Nakhat's "The City is Lonely" is a freestyle poem centering on the narrator's desire for

[99] Naeem Poyesh et al., "Child Notice Afghanistan 2015," n.d., 56.

someone/something to return to the city. The poem shares the request from the narrator for the lost to return by connecting sunrise as a future reunion. One could understand this piece as a love poem, describing the narrator's desire for their beloved; however, I argue that it is much deeper than a simple love poem. This piece is a homage to a place before the mass departure of its inhabitants, a request for those who have left to return. In essence, a plea for a return to normal. The following section is the conclusion to the poem, which illuminates the narrator's farrago of emotions:

می نشینم تشنه

عطش آلود صدای قدمت!

دیدنت

نام رهایی

دیدنت آزادی

دیدنت عصمت فریاد زمین

به گلوگاه زمان

دیدنت

فرصت دیدار دو

چشم نگران

در عبور خطر از خط زمان

دیدنت حاجت هر روزه من

می نشینم سر راه

به راه آمدنت!

I wait thirsty

Thirsty for the sound of your footstep!

Seeing you

Is the name of emancipation

Seeing you is freedom

Seeing you is the Earth's shouting innocence

Coming from the throat of time

Seeing you

Is an opportunity to see

For two worried eyes

In the passing of danger through the line of time

Seeing you is my daily need

I am still waiting

On the road of you coming!

In this quotation Nakhat utilizes three senses predominantly in order to advance her emotional appeal: hearing, sight, and taste. The first two lines describe how the narrator is "thirsty" for the mysterious "you," articulating a need to be quenched in the future. The anaphora "seeing you (دیدنت) emphasizes the pressing need of reuniting with those who have left, creating a sense of urgency in the narrator's plea. Intensifying the narrator's necessity for reunion, Nakhat says that "seeing you" is both emancipation and freedom. Liberation from whom, though? As I posit that this poem is arguing for a return to a more vibrant, normal Afghanistan, I suggest that in this poem Nakhat is "seeing," imagining a city in Afghanistan full of life and vivacity. For example, in one part of the poem, the narrator speaks about her hopeful reunion, writing that when "you" eventually come back, the "streets will become a garden, no not a garden! The essence of

spring."[100] In other words, Nakhat is fantasizing about a potential time in Afghanistan, when the city is no longer empty, dead, and in the shadow of the night. Sharifi argues that "the importance of Persian poetry in today's sociocultural situation of Afghanistan is also due to its ability to portray emotive, idealized images and expressive forms,"[101] indicating that Persian poetry has the tendency to describe abstract ideas and themes through emotive, vivid descriptions. Obviously the return of the narrator's "you" would not actually bring spring, but Nakhat metaphorically compares this reunion, or restoration of Afghanistan, to the very nature of spring, namely renewal and rebirth. Envisioning the return of the "you" with the advent of spring infers that Nakhat believes the future for Afghanistan to be possible as long as there is a return of its people, the emergence of the footsteps of her desired. Indeed, Nakhat suggests that her thirst for reunion will be quenched by the homecoming of a healthy and green city.

While Pazhwak's and Nakhat's poetry is metaphorical and abstract, some Persian poets use satire as a means to critique Afghan culture and society. Azizullah Ima's "Stone Me (مرا به سنگ زنید)" questions the common practice of stoning women in Afghanistan and violence against women in general. Initially, I was concerned that a male writing about violence against women through the perspective of a woman would be problematic. However, Ima's position as a male creates an interesting juxtaposition between patriarchal standards and counternarratives in Afghanistan. In this poem, the narrator commands that she be stoned, because she is a woman. The narrator questions the inexcusability of women's violence, indicating the hypocrisy of patriarchal laws that are used to harm and murder innocent Afghan women. Ima contextualizes

[100] کوچه ها باغ شوند؛ باغ نه! ذات بهار

[101] Mohammad Omar Sharifi, "LANGUAGE, POETRY, AND IDENTITY IN AFGHANISTAN:: POETIC TEXTS, CHANGING CONTEXTS," in *Modern Afghanistan*, ed. M. NAZIF SHAHRANI, The Impact of 40 Years of War (Indiana University Press, 2018), 59, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv8j6dx.9.

the poem with a reference to a woman named Farkhonde. Farkhonde was an Afghan woman who was brutally murdered on the streets in 2015. After a false rumor was shared that she had burned a Quran, nearly 150 men attacked her, beat her, dragged her along the streets, and eventually burned her until she was dead. Especially after an investigation revealed that Farkhonde had not actually burned a Quran, her death marked a chilling, seminal step in the movement for women's rights in Afghanistan. During her burial and funeral procession, women painted their faces red, shouted "We are also Farkhonde," and refused to allow any man to help to carry her casket. The events after Farkhonde's death undeniably marked an inflection point in some Afghans understanding of misogyny in the country, and Ima's poem reinforces the emerging recognition of the necessity for change in Afghanistan for women's rights and welfare.[102]

One excerpt from "Stone Me" also includes anaphora that is repeated in some variation four times throughout the poem. Ima's usage of this rhetorical device heightens the criticism that he is conveying. Structurally, repeating this phrase represents the many strikes that a man would carry out on a woman, further enhancing both the brutal imagery of this poem as well as its overall message. The narrator demands:

مرا به سنگ زنید!

من زنم

شما مردید

و بار بارِ دگر دَم ز نام و ننگ زنید

مرا به سنگ زنید!

Stone me!

I am a woman

[102] "Farkhunda: The Making of a Martyr," *BBC News*, August 10, 2015, sec. Magazine, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33810338.

You are a man

And any other time you speak of saving your face

Stone me!

The exclamatory statement repeated at the beginning and the end of the quotation underscores the narrator's frustration with the situation of women in Afghanistan. Instead of existing in a world where women are unjustly attacked, the narrator wishes to be stoned. The narrator writes later, "I am a woman like Farkhonde / Kick me,"[103] implying that being a woman in Afghanistan will inevitably lead to violence and abuse. Similarly, the narrator questions the reader, "should you not hang me?"[104] In a context where women are murdered by the hands of self-righteous men, how else might the narrator escape this eventuality other than death? Nonetheless, this excerpt undoubtedly comments on the possibility of a better future for women in Afghanistan. By satirically critiquing the common practice of stoning women, this poem engenders a discussion on the ingrained misogyny and patriarchy of Afghan society. The narrator laments to the reader to "Don't wait, quickly, make me halal/And stone me!,"[105] creating a comparison between halal (that which is lawful) and the open act of stoning. Ironically commenting on the practice of stoning highlights the disdain Ima feels towards the abusive treatment of women in Afghanistan and helps illuminate how poetry can enhance existing emotions and desires for a particular issue like women's rights.

When reading from Pazhwak, Nakhat, and Ima, the emotions of anger, exhaustion, belonging, determination, and grief expand the narrative of Afghanistan. Instead of Afghanistan

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[103] من زنم چو فرخنده/لگد زنید

[104] مرا به دار چه‌کار؟

[105] دگر بحل نکنید، زود، بی‌درنگ زنید/مرا به سنگ زنید

being likened to a place of sadness and despair, this poetry offers a more comprehensive depiction of Afghan society. Incorporating poetry into future discussions of Afghanistan's future must be included, because I am afraid that the full scope of Afghan emotion will be neglected for political expediency or short-term benefit. I argue that poetry has the important ability to highlight raw feelings, attitudes and thoughts that are sometimes too difficult to express without poetry's abstract sensibilities. Without poetry in future deliberations for Afghanistan's coming decades, I would posit that the status quo will be maintained. And what benefit is that for anyone?

Last Words

When I began this project, I knew that I wanted to focus on Afghanistan in some way. I desired to combine my Persian language and area competency into an interdisciplinary thesis. While my college career has indeed centered on the impact of stories on communities and culture, I never would have thought that memoir and poetry would be the mediums through which I studied Afghanistan. Focusing on memoir and poetry has helped me realize not only the wider context in which Afghanistan and its people exist, but also has fostered a conviction to champion storytelling as a critically important aspect of development, community, and scholarship.

Reading from Koofi, Ansary, and the aforementioned poets, I gathered thematic lessons that scholars should continue studying (e.g., women's rights, culture vs human rights, unintended consequences), but these sources have conveyed a very important message to anyone interested in studying/helping Afghanistan: without an understanding of its people, history, culture, and many perspectives, equitable aid is almost always impossible. In other words, Koofi's and Ansary's memoirs not only inform the academic community of unique perspectives of two Afghans, but also can instruct us on what has worsened, helped, or stymied the development of this dynamic country. Poetry, as well, has the power to impart emotions and feelings to an audience in order to catalyze positive, meaningful, and reconciliatory progress.

One aspect of this research that would be interesting for enhancing this interdisciplinary scholarship is the inclusion of actual policy in the discussion. While I initially wanted to include some specific policies, I instead chose to focus on how memoir/poetry can serve as a tool in foreign policy and international development. By including specific legislation or reforms that have been enacted in Afghanistan, we might have a clearer perspective on how lived experience

is implicated through either advantageous or unintentionally negligent policies. In this way, I see ethnography and interviews as the best means through which policies and their outcomes can be fully examined.

An example, furthermore, of how memoir and poetry can be a tool for foreign policy discussions is the 2020 Taliban-US Peace Treaty. In this historic agreement between the US and the Taliban, the US will withdraw its troops from Afghanistan in May 2021, the US and Taliban will exchange prisoners of war, the Taliban will not harbor individuals who may harm the United States, and the US will support intra-Afghan peace negotiations. In the original document from the State Department's website,[106] the language of the treaty does not include a single reference to human rights, community welfare, women's rights, or any other humanitarian issue. While this agreement, according Lindsay Maizland of the Council for Foreign Relationships, is "the first step to ending the more than eighteen-year war that has killed more than 157,000 people,"[107] the treaty explicitly lacks sufficient language that would protect against human rights abuses. Having the US categorically neglect to include human rights provisions in its peace treaty with the Taliban is akin to ignoring the human rights abuses utilized to justify the War on Terror in the first place (i.e., Laura Bush's "Save the Women" campaign that I discuss in Chapter 2). If US and Taliban talks had been inaugurated with a reading of Koofi or Nakhat, I argue that this would have set the stage for a more equitable and comprehensive peace treaty, because those stories and experiences would be at the forefront of the negotiations.

Orientalism, moreover, underscores how the present peace discussion between the U.S., Taliban, and the national government of Afghanistan can be aided through the inclusion of

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[106] "Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.Pdf," accessed March 25, 2021, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf.
[107] "U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed March 25, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-taliban-peace-deal-agreement-afghanistan-war.

memoir and poetry within policy circles. For example, Mohammad Samiei in his article "Neo-Orientalism? The relationship between the West and Islam in our globalised world" postulates that current discourse on the Middle East continues to propagate Orientalist ideas, such as an "essentialized" Middle East. That is, some scholars and researchers on the Middle East continue to promote the idea that all societies within the Middle East share some ethereal, universal dogma.[108] This process is dangerous, of course, because it does not take into the account the plethora of contexts, perspectives, and motivations that individuals possess in various situations. Samiei argues, thus, that the study of the Middle East must continue to emphasize the diversity and plurality of the Middle East, or else orientalist parlances and practices will continue to persist. How might we avoid essentializing Afghanistan as peace with the Taliban is potentially on the horizon? I argue that memoir and poetry can help to alleviate the persistent tendency to obscure or neglect the variety of individual perspectives and agenda from all stakeholders in peace negotiations. If memoir, poetry, or other forms of written work were to be assigned for all diplomats involved during the upcoming intra-Afghan negotiations (as of 4/9/2021), it would be easier for all parties to conceptualize and understand the perspectives of some individuals who will be impacted by the peace policies.

In concluding this thesis, I emphasize that memoir and poetry must have a place in future discussions of Afghanistan. How might the current intra-Afghan peace talks transpire if they were to be complemented by a poem from Ima or an excerpt from Ansary's memoir? I posit that Afghans would begin to acknowledge their shared history, story, and experiences. The power of storytelling is that we become more attuned to the similarities of our individual lives and we, as a result, create empathy for the one whose stories we listen to and recognize. The infusion of

[108] MOHAMMAD SAMIEI, "Neo-Orientalism? The Relationship between the West and Islam in Our Globalised World," *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 7 (2010): 1149.

written word and conceptualizations of self in discourses about the future of Afghanistan must be at the root of Afghan's reconciliation negotiations, because how else may Afghans and the international community advance towards a better, more stable Afghanistan? When we articulate and listen to the experiences of others, we become more empathetic and compassionate towards those with whom we may disagree or otherwise disdain. That is, memoir and poetry have the innate function of cultivating respect and benevolence for individuals or a group of people obscured by rage, pity, or grief. By spotlighting the recollections of Koofi, Ansary, Pazhwak, Nakhat, and Ima, I believe this thesis may help scholars, policymakers, and the international community recognize the importance of sharing and telling stories. From this practice, we can imagine a future in Afghanistan where the streets are lively, and gardens are blooming.

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