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## The Unheard Voices in Pashto Women Poetry

Authors:

**Corresponding Author Name: Ahmad Gul Momand**

Designation: PhD Research Scholar at the University of Lucknow, Department of English and Modern European Languages, Lucknow UP, India

Name: **Zabihullah Firky**

Designation: PhD Research Scholars at the University of Lucknow, Hindi Department, Lucknow UP, India

Abstract

It is argued that Pashto women haven't written their poetry with enough exposure to their untold world which could have been parallel to their men counterparts. It appears that Pashto women poets never tried to be parallel with their men counterparts. Instead, they choose to think and speak for their wishes, cries, thoughts, pains, and joys. In Pashto women poetry we read a lot about their pain and pleas for justice, status, and rights. Women poets have provided details about them in their poetry with oriented thoughts. Much of their subjects for their poetry is nationalism, love, peace, education and moral man. This article will study women poetry and will bring out their themes of their poetry.

Keywords: women, poetry, feminism, Afghanistan

Introduction

Najeem Manaly is a well-known literary figure in Afghanistan and he claimed that main stream literary traditions in South Asia grew on Persian dominated literary tradition for more than ten centuries. This tradition has two very important and yet often ignored characteristics:

1) Strongly related to royal courts, Persian poetry, while extremely vivid, developed and well-established poetics and esthetics codification which lets letter space for real innovations. The discoursed is perfectly polished, the phraseology is precisely codified and poetic imagery follows unanimously accepted patterns. Innovation in such a context is only possible when dramatic historic and socio-cultural changes happen. (Manaly, 2017)

Mr. Manaly offers the example. He believes such dramatic revolution was the firm grip of Safavids over Persia's heartland imposing Shia brand of Islam as an official religion. This situation led many poets, intellectuals and scholars to migrate to India. They then benefitted from the multicultural, spiritual, social and political environment to find new ways of expression, of which we inherited the tremendously creative literary tradition known as the Hindi Style that dominated the poetry traditions of many languages in the whole cultural area where Persian was the dominant cultural medium. (Manaly, 2017)

2) Manaly also believes that Persian grammar has no distinctive representation of gender related realities. Saying that, not only Persian poetic language but poetry of nearly all languages of this cultural area appears to be "gender blind": statics stylistics patterns, cliché based imagery, and sexless discourse made it difficult, if not impossible for the female poets and writers to find their specific expressions. Amongst thousands of shining stars of the poetics Milky Way of the wide space from Kazak plains to the Bengal shores we know few female voices and yet, these voices convey a "masculinized" message in their majority. Very few have dared to speak as women, or if they have done it, under the cover of humoristic witty words. Mahesti Ganjawi (12<sup>th</sup> c) and Zebonesa Makhfi (Awrangzeb's daughter) may be the best examples.

*We could not be kept by the spell of magic*

*We could not be kept sorrowing in a closed room*

*The one whose hairs are like chains*

*Cannot be kept at home tied with chains*

(Manaly, 2017)

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist ideas gained some popularity in our cultural space, Manaly claims. As the feminist trends were part of new ideas borrowed from western countries, it mostly targeted the political discourse and even when some intrusion to the literary space took place it was politically motivated.

In Afghanistan's literary space of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many women have been there but they still did not (or could not) develop a truly female discourse. The cause of the women was courageously put forward but the language remained masculinized. (Manaly, 2017)

Manaly writes that in the 1990s Afghan women were excluded from the public scope. Fortunately, some of the Afghan women who were able to make it to the freedom of western countries raised their voices. These voices, as important as they were for internationally holding the banner of Afghan women's right, had no or had little echo inside Afghanistan. (Manaly, 2017)

As for the Pashto literature, to illustrate the case, during the first seven years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century very few girls and ladies made it. Afghan literature scene. Most of them had won their status during the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of them, as I mentioned above, grounded their creation on the sexless speech pattern of nationalistic and humanistic rhetoric.

New York Times reported about Afghan women risking their life for writing poetry. Griswold writes that to the women of Mirman Baheer, Zarmina is only the most recent Afghanistan's poet Martyrs. "She was a sacrifice to Afghan women," Amail told me. "There are hundreds like her". (Griswold, 2017)

Very few, dared to speak out their own feelings as females. Hassina Gol Tanha, Parwin Malal and Safia Sediqi could be mentioned as illustrating examples. (Manaly, 2017). The following poem by Hasina Gul who wrote several Poetry books and who is well known for his free verse poetry.

Thirst

*Cups full of cold water*

*Lay before us*

*What fear, so averts us?*

*Our throats, dry as wood*

*Our lips spiked with thorns*

*Our tongues are glued in our throats*

*Are we lazy?*

*Or wooden with fear?*

*This feeling of fright*

*Is the reason you are thirsty,*

*Is the reason I am thirsty*

Poetry is always studied for its subjects and contents. Through poetry, we can read about not only the writer but also about the society where the writer resides or resided. Thus, we came to study Pashto women poetry to find out about their world and their stories. Many women who wrote poetry has a lot about women and feminism, but study shows compared to men women did not reveal their story (Dawood, 1960).

When it comes to Pashto women poetry naturally, we are expecting to read some contents that will relate to women but it is not the case. Pashto women poets wrote much under the influence of their men counterparts, and kept their story aside. It means that in women poetry were are looking for their feminine feelings and feminist Jihad against unjust they face. To study Pashto women poetry. (Manaly, 2017)

## Literature Review

If Afghan men are asked about their women and role in their life, they will reply women constitute the backbone of Pashtun society and social organization, but they don't agree to the status which should be given to backbone.

There are Afghan women who wrote their poetry about them without knowing feminism. I would like to relate it to feminism and I would like to report several women poets who wrote poetry for their rights.

### Zarghuna Kakar

According to Mohammad Hotak, the literary works of women date back five hundred years in the history of Pashto literature, and the oldest poetess that we know is Zarghuna Kakar, It is estimated she lived after the year 1471 A.D. She was a learned poetess and was a stylistic calligrapher. She lived in the historic Panjwayi of Kandahar. Her father was Mullah Din Mohammad Kakar, and she was married to Saadullah Khan Nourzai. In 1524 she versified in Pashto the famous Bustan of Shaikh Saadi, and when one writes the history of ethical poetry in Pashto literature Zarghuna Kakar surpasses all others. (Dawood, 1960)

Other works of this eminent poetess do not exist today but Mohammad Hotak has quoted this story from her Pashto Bustan which illustrates the eloquence and fluency of her style.

*A story I have heard*

*Sweeter than honey is its every word.*

*One morning on Eid day*

*Bayazid was on his way,*

*He had come out from a bath*

*And was walking on the path.*

*Someone threw down some ash*

*Unknowingly from a stash,*

*His face and head were soiled*

*And his clothes were spoiled.*

*Bayazid thanked God with grace*

*And said as he cleaned his face:*

*"I am worthy of this fire*

*May it burn my attire,*

*Ash I do not despise*

*Nor will I complain in guise."*

*Wise men seek to be humble*

*With pride they do not rumble,*



Rabia is another old Pashto poetess who, according to Mohammad Hotak, lived in Kandahar during the reign of Babur Shah. Mohammad Hotak has recorded one of her quatrains in his book. The author does not say much about the life or family of Rabia. But even this one quatrain is very valuable, both from the viewpoint of meaning and wording, and it seems that Rabia was an experienced poetess and deep thinker who lived to the year 1541. (Dawood, 1960)

Poets have found many and varied subjects in the life of man on love and pain. Mawlana Balkhi wrote:

*With love, the earth of man was made of mud,  
Untold mischief and suffering were born in this world;  
A hundred times was the vein of soul pierced  
A single drop dripped to the ground;  
And they called it the heart.*

In the same vein Rabia also has a quatrain which embodies some very deep meaning. The Sufi and the Ishraqi scholars believe that man has been separated from a supernal origin and that his soul is always seeking its original source and that the world is a home full of the pains of separation. Therefore, we hear a continuous and interrupted wailing of separation everywhere. In the words of Rabia Balkhi. (Habibi, 1980)

*Since I was cut off from the reed-bed,  
Men and women have cried over my separation.  
Whoever is left from his origins  
Of necessity must seek the day of unification.*

Rabia also pictures the world of separation, a world full of pain and sorrow, and man's role in it in these words:

*He brought man to the world's mire  
And put his inner body on fire,  
By creating hell on earth called separation  
To endure, if you Divine love desire.*

(Habibi, 1980)

## The Unheard Voices in Pashto Women Poetry

Safia Siddiqui, an Afghan woman poet born in Nangarhar Province in the eastern part of Afghanistan. Safia went to Zarghona High School in Kabul. And later, on due to his keen interest in literature, she obtained a master's degree in Pashto literature from the University of Peshawar, Pakistan. (Budder, 2010)

Safia has been writing poems for a very longtime. She has published her three collections of poems. Lopata (women's scarf as translated in English), the first collection of poems was published in 8 volumes by the Writers' Association of Afghanistan. Her poetry is praised by her readers regarding women rights and it has been considered as a modest voice of common Afghan woman. Safia Siddiqui is fluent in Pashto, Dari, English and Urdu. But she writes poetry mostly in Pashto language. In addition to being a good poet, Safia is also a good writer, has written a number of short stories and a dozen of jokes. (Budder, 2010)

Sadiqulah Badder writes that for the past two decades, Pashtun poets have paid close attention to the inclusion of feminine sentiments and emotions in their poems. Until now, our poets have not been able to express their feelings due to the prevailing traditions in the society. In the sixties, to some extent, this feature was noticed, which was very popular in the cultural circles. If we take a quick look at the Pashto poetry movement during the fifties and sixties and especially the poems of female poets. If the names of the poets had not been written with the poems, it would have been difficult to decide that these poems should be the poems of a woman. Because in those poems our poets have embodied the sentiments of male poets. Among the group of poets who have paid the least attention to this specialty, three names are most notable: Kobra Mazhari, Parveen Malal and Safia Siddiqui. (Budder, 2010)

she was recognized as one of the best poets in the cultural gatherings. Safia Siddiqui is a poet of our time, who, among other poetic beauties, paints a good picture of feminine sentiments in her poems and holds a special place among the women poets of her time. (Saddiqi, 216)

In the following poem was written in Pashto language and translated as following. Safia wishes her dream completed prior to have been woken up by Moazzin's call for prayer around 4:45 am in the morning.

## An Incomplete Dream

*What a lovely night it was  
Such a blessed night  
I still remember when you  
Came to my room  
Without worrying  
That someone could see you, [could] condemn you  
You sat on the edge of my bed  
And my tongue was caught in my throat  
And, you also  
Were burning like a candle in the night  
You could not speak.  
Only our eyes looked into each other  
Our hearts beat  
Our lips remained silent  
Then our eyes started to speak  
Began exchanging the secrets of our hearts  
I complained to you, you complained to me  
Everything became a complaint  
Eyes complaining, hearts complaining, hopes complaining  
We disappeared, lost in each other's eyes  
Then the Moazzin's call for prayer awakened me  
"O believers, prayer is better than sleep"  
I said, "Indeed," but I wish my dream had been completed*

(Saddiqi, 216)



In one of her long poems, Mursel Ahmadzai excused for not celebrating something that is called victory by Afghan men because being woman she would be still treated inferior to men. As she put it:

My dear Afghan lions!

*My earthly heroic brothers!*

*Congratulations on your victory*

*Congratulations on this success*

*I feel too the pain and joy of this nation*

*But no way, I can express my joy*

*I can't shout (hail) for this great victory*

*I am still a shame in this country*

*I am shame for all men (because of my sex)*

*I can't celebrate this national victory with you*

*I can't call your name openly*

(Ahmedzai, 2013)

Belinda Budri is another Afghan woman who expressed her feelings in one of her poems about her difficult life losing her friends to wars. In her poem *Eid, beautiful Eid, I apologize*, Belinda explains that she can't celebrate Eid which is supposed to be a joyful day due to war that costs her friends lives. (Budrai, 2016)

Eid, beautiful Eid, I apologize

*I can't celebrate you this year*

*I burned my hand drum*

*My songs are dead*

*Though, I have my long skirt full of jewelry, and*

*Yes, I still have that blinking long scarf, and*

*The bag of Nakrizy (a particular botanical color) lying somewhere in the shelf*

*But I'm sorry*

*I can't celebrate you, this year  
 Today, half of my friends do not live  
 They and their hand drums were burnt (by the endless war)  
 Eid, O! Eid, you can see how many houses were destroyed  
 You see, our graveyard is getting bigger and bigger  
 I am sorry,  
 I can't celebrate you, this year*

Zarghona Wafa Zazi is another Afghan young writer. Tradition practiced in Afghanistan for thousands of years unchanged institutionally marginalizing women is one of the biggest concern of Afghan women poets. Women poets found tradition as problem and found education as a solution. (Malikzay, 2011)

In the following poems we read about the problem and solution and indomitable will of the poets for not getting back from her will to change the society. One of her poems, I translated as followed:

*How long I would be tied (?)*

*By the cuffs of our tradition*

*By the glory of education*

*I will decorate my self*

*I will not tolerate*

*An atom of curtly and oppression*

*I will not sit calm*

*Even if you cut my nose and ear\**

*I will not give up*

*I will show the world of my brave and Afghan self*

Zarghanoa Zazai warned men that their rule is ended and there is no fear of sacrificing only to win liberty for women in Afghanistan. (Malikzay, 2011)

*Even if you cut my nose and ear*, this line refers to several news reports where women were persecuted for writing poetry in Afghanistan. Griswold reported exploring despite the high risk of persecution Pashtun women dared to write what they feel and what are in their mind. (Griswold, 2017)

\* For more information read Griswold news report.

### Ogai Miwand

Another Afghan female poet writes in her poems that her life is so sad and miserable. (Malikzay, 2011) A piece of her poem is translated as followed;

*My every hope is washed in dirt  
Don't listen to my story- it is too sad*

Hia Khatak is a young Pashtun woman from Peshawar, Pakistan who wrote about immoral men in Pashtun society. In South Asia women are called *maal* (good stuff) *shay* (item) by men. This kind of sexual harassment and abuse is reported by Hia as following (Khatak, 2019).

*They (men) call women 'a good item'*

*The man of Bengal is better than this (Pashtun) man*

*Those who have no respect for their families and themselves*

*A lying dog in the garbage is better than these men*

## Conclusion

There are many young women writing poetry and if there is no survey held about them those voices will never be documented. In their poems we read about wars, demand for education, gender discrimination, social injustice and many other social concerns.

Ulfat Ara, Awlia Ahmedzai, Asma Mehmoodi, Bibi Hava, Basira, Brekhna, Basnoorah Sapai, Pukhtana wafa, Palwasha Salarazai, Pakiza Faizi, Toorpekai Haqiaar, Javida Salihi, Hamida Saba, Hafsa Rana Sapai, Hasna Kawser, Khushnuma Tanha, Sanga Jabarkhil, Roqiqa Rahmani and many more.

All this precious work of women poetry needs to be documented and studied as a moment aligned with other South Asian literature in societies where women are considered not good enough to be human.

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