



# Landays: Analysis as Women's Song of Protest

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## Abstract

*Landay* is a form of oral poetry. It consists of couplets; the first line consist of nine syllables and the second line consists of thirteen syllables. *Landays* are the poems sung mostly by women to the accompaniment of the hand-drum, until it was banned by the Taliban. *Landays* are intrinsically tied to the lived-realities of women. They are sung at the village well, accompanied by peals of laughters and mockery. They are improvised and sung at weddings and funerals. *Landays* celebrates earthly desires and passions. The subject of love is one prominent theme of *landays*. Women would sing of burning desires and illicit affairs. This paper seeks to explore how *landays* are songs of protests – against the society that taboos romantic love and women's desires. *Landays* provides 'safe' platform for a woman to protest due to its anonymous nature. The author of a *landay* is generally anonymous. They are the songs passed on from one generation to the next, where the best ones are embedded in the collective memory of the people. This paper will also comment on how the internet has provided new platform for expression and imbue it with new meanings for the next generation.

**Keywords:** *Landay, women, protest, solidarity, oral tradition, internet.*

## Introduction

Oral traditions express self-identity and uphold social organizations, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. While being a wealthy repository of mythical, legendary, and historical past, it provides examples for the sustenance of contemporary social order. It articulates protest and dissent and simultaneously voices concerns of reforms and redress. (Kharmawphlang & Sen, 2005.)

*Landays* are the informal Afghan oral tradition passed on from one generation to the next amongst women. Translated literally *Landay* means “the short one” and is “indeed, a very brief poem consisting of two verse lines of nine and thirteen syllables respectively, without any obligatory rhyme but with solid internal scansion. Depending on the region it is vocalized in different ways and frequently punctuates conversations.” (Majrouh, 2010). An oral-tradition that is closely intertwined with the lives of women in Afghanistan, it is a crude expression of women’s experiences and does not emulate any poetic traditions. It sings the worldview of the Afghan women unadulterated by any outside influences. It is a song of forbidden desires and longings. It is a song of passion and grief. It is a song of anger and rage against the patriarchal society. It is a song of love and loss. *Landays* are songs of hope; they are a celebration of earthly life and passions. Its brevity and informal nature, its anonymity makes it the perfect medium for a woman to express herself in a society where women’s voices are subjugated. *Landays* are far removed from formal education. *Landays* does not belong to any particular poet. They are an impromptu poem, recited or sung by any woman at any particular moment or event:

In Pashto, they lilt internally from word to word in a kind of two-word lullaby that belies the sharpness of their content, which is distinctive not only for its beauty, bawdiness, and wit, but also for its piercing ability to articulate a common truth about love, grief, separation, homeland, and war. Within these five main tropes, the couplets express a collective fury, a lament, an earthy joke, a love of home, a longing for an end to separation, a call to arms, all of which frustrate any facile image of a Pashtun woman as nothing but a mute ghost beneath a blue burqa. (Griswold, 2015)

Unlike the literature of the educated men in Afghanistan, *Landays* does not aspire to lofty themes and are fluid in nature. With no religious motifs and aspirations, women would recite or perform the *landays*, alter it to suit her predicament and improvise it to voice their suppression and oppression. The fluid nature enables its survival as an art form in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, this anonymous poetry stands out because of its almost timeless emulations. Every afternoon, when village girls go to get water from the spring or when they dance and sing at a celebration or a wedding, new *landays* are improvised and the best ones then immediately become anchored in the collective memory. (Majrouh, 2010)

Women folk would gather at weddings and perform *landays* accompanied by hand drums. The Taliban banned both men and women from playing the hand drum as they believed that it is against the dictums of Islam:

If you hide me from the Taliban  
I'll become a tassel on your drum. (Griswold, 2015)

This *landay* is a reference to the Taliban’s fundamentalist propaganda in Afghanistan, “traditionally, *landays* are sung aloud, often to the beat of a hand drum, which, along with other kinds of music, was banned by the Taliban from 1996- 2001, and in some places still is” (Griswold 2015). *Landays* are

different due to the constant presence of women. Elsewhere she is the 'muse' for a male poet; in a *landay* she imposes herself as the absolute poetess, the creator and the subject. It is a poem that requires her active participation and centrality. This active participation and centrality are denied to women in Afghanistan in all areas of life. Hence, *landays* provide space in a society that denies women's liberty and autonomy.

In the context of Afghanistan, it is impossible to talk of a monolithic women's experiences given its cultural, ethnic and linguistic plurality. The plurality of women's experiences within the context of androcentric Afghan culture is difficult to comprehend and study as women are relegated secondary status in the society. Women's participation in the public space, her access to formal education is strictly monitored and controlled in Afghanistan. Women's participation in the public arena is curtailed by the succession of one oppressive regime after the other. Woman's expression of her desires and opinions is a taboo in Afghanistan. Compelled to stay at home, women are forced to give up formal education - all in the name of honour. The patriarchal code of honour silenced women's voices.

### Songs of Protest

One of the main themes of *landays* is the theme of protest. Afghan women are treated as secondary subjects right from birth. They are taught to accept their fate, trained to be silent by their family. They are taught to work ceaselessly for their families without any time off. Chores and works are segregated on the basis of gender. Women work ceaselessly for their families from dusk till dawn. Yet, there are hardly any *landay* that complains of her physical sufferings and pain, "yet these women never bemoan their slave labor. Rare are the *landays* in which they mention their 'velvet fingers' that gathers the kernels of wheat or the all too heavy jars that make their back ache" (Majrouh, 2003).

*Landays* are an expression of the collective furies of women. Lamenting the subjugation of the soul, *Landays* are a means of outlet of the trauma of constant subjugation in a society that treats women as second-class citizens. *Landays* can be referred to as songs of protests; protest against the injustice women suffered in the name of honor, "she spends her entire life in a state of inferiority, subordination, and humiliation. Even her husband does not stoop so low as to eat with her" (Majrouh, 2003).

When sisters sit together, they always praise their brothers.

When brothers sit together, they sell their sisters to others. (Griswold, 2015)

This *landay* protests the commodification of women in the society. A woman is sold off often to meet the financial needs of her family. A woman is often married off to an old husband, who fails to satisfy her needs. A young bride is often married off to feed the lust of a tyrannical husband:

Cruel people, who see how an old man leads me to his bed

And you ask why I weep and tear out my hair! (Majrouh, 2003)

Making love to an old man

Is like fucking a shriveled cornstalk black with mold. (Griswold, 2015)

Women will protest and lament over their ill-matched conjugal life through *landays*. A woman will sometimes be married off to a young boy, whom she has to take care of, like a son. She hardly has a voice in choosing her own husband. The boy- groom is referred to as the “little horror” in the *landays*:

When you come to our house, my love, the “little horror” grows angry.

Don't come again. Hereafter I will give you my mouth between the double doors. (Majrouh, 2010)

In Afghanistan, marriage is hardly associated with romantic love and passion. It is more of an economic transaction, where women are forced to participate. In most of the *landays*, women protests against the marriage that is arranged for her, by the male-members of her family. It is just an arrangement where she is expected to produce male heirs, who will eventually perpetuate the cycle of subjugation. Marriage is marked by constant strife and violence. Afghan women could hardly expect conjugal bliss and romantic love to stem from marriage. Love is a sentiment sought outside of marriage. It is reserved for illicit affairs. Love is a sentiment that is shared with their secret lovers, not with their husbands:

A woman's love is taboo, banned by the prohibition of the honor code of Pashtun life and by religious sentiment. Young people do not have the right to see each other, love each other or choose each other. Love is a grave mistake, punishable by death. The unruly are killed, in cold blood. The massacre of lovers, or of one of them (always and without exception the woman), initiates the never-ending process of vendetta between clans. (Majrouh, 2010)

In matters of love, the belligerent woman expresses her feelings and protest through *landays*. The romantic *landays* are voices of protest against the society that taboo a woman's love and desires. In a society, where the mere mention of passion and sexuality incurs harsh recriminations, *landays* are the space through which a woman expresses herself. Used as an exaltation of the human body, they become the agency with which women touch upon the themes of sexuality and desires with brutal frankness. *Landays* are, a celebration of the sensual side of women, the forbidden fruit, wherein women celebrate carnal desires. It is a celebration of illicit desires and secret lovers - the relationship that is banned by the society:

Last night I was close to my lover, oh evening of love not to return again!

Like a bell, with all my jewels and deep into the night, I was chiming in his arms. (Majrouh, 2010)

My mouth is yours, devour it and be not afraid.

It is not made of sugar that might be dissolved. (Majrouh, 2010)

The woman who sings of illicit love and desires is a stark contrast to the ‘ghost’ behind the blue burqa. Through the *landays* a totally different side of Afghan women than that presented through popular culture and international media can be seen. She is not the meek and subservient woman but a woman filled with desires and passion challenging her lover to love her fiercely:

Yet, if the Pashtun woman invites the man to loving, she never appeals to him with her tenderness or sweetness. She provokes him in his honor and his dignity, but in this intrepid game it is she who takes the greatest risks. For the man can defend himself. flee, seek refuge in a distant land, while the woman has no such recourse. If she is discovered she can only let herself be slaughtered. Nevertheless, haughty as she is, she will not make any allusion whatsoever to the obvious danger that lies in wait for her. (Majrouh, 2010)

In the *landays*, women invert the Pashtun male code of honour and uses it against him. She invokes the fierce warrior to love her and challenges the warrior to transgress all boundaries of propriety and risk his life for her:

Come and kiss me without thinking of the danger.

What does it matter if they kill you!

True man always die for the love of a beautiful woman. (Majrouh, 2010)

She cracks bawdy jokes about sex and honor. She teases men about their cowardice in bed and in war. Through these sexually explicit *landays*, she undermines the social code of honor:

May you be found cut to pieces by a trenchant sword,

But may the news of your dishonor never reach my ear. (Majrouh, 2003)

She taunts men and challenges their sense of virility. She mocks their weaknesses at the very skills where a Pashtun man is expected to display great skills - sex and battle. These explicit songs of desires are scandalous; it signifies rebellion and protests against the society:

Is there not one man here brave enough to see

How my untouched thighs burn the trousers off me? (Griswold, 2015)

One common motif in *landay* is suicide. Afghan women have little fear of death. The *landays* are testament to the world – affirming the ethos of these women. There is hardly any mention of the soul and the afterlife in the *landays*. Being a celebration of flesh and blood, they are a longing for all the earthly desires and pleasures denied to her by society. The only way for a woman to protest against the injustice meted out to her is through *landays* and suicide. *Landays* enable her to protest without compromising her identity. Suicide is the ultimate act of protest, as it is a medium through which she claims absolute rights over her body. Her body is nothing but a vessel through which the male member of her society plays out their notion of honor. By committing suicide, she establishes herself as the absolute mistress of her body:

It is known that the tribal code of honor considers suicide a cowardly act and that Islam forbids it. A Pashtun male never resorts to it. By eliminating herself in such accursed way, a woman thus tragically proclaims her hatred of the community's law. Even her choice of the means by which to die emphasizes the iconoclastic meaning of the sacrifice: it is made only with poison or deliberate drowning. (Majrouh, 2003)

She challenges her cowardly lover. She would rather die than have her lover lie that she is afraid to kiss him. Pashtun women takes pride in their bravery. They are not scared to love. They love, risking their life. Often, they die for love.

Embrace me in your suicide vest

But don't say I wouldn't give you a kiss. (Griswold, 2015)



## Conclusion

*Landays* are signifiers of female solidarity in a society that allocates minimum space for women and their desires. *Landays* are often sung at the village well, accompanied by peals of laughter. They are embedded in the collective memories of the women-folk, sung to commemorate life events. This oral tradition is deeply entrenched in the psyche of Afghan women that even in the age of social medias and internet, it has carved a space for itself. Numerous *landay* Facebook page are created by the younger generations. Social media provides platform for the oral tradition to thrive and connects Afghan diaspora scattered across the globe. The internet has provided platforms for women to express love and protest against the rigid dictums of the society:

Daughter, in America the river isn't wet.

Young girls learn to fill their jugs on the internet. (Griswold, 2015)

In Pashtun society, the river bank where women gather to fetch water is the site for forbidden romance. Men are forbidden from visiting the river banks. The chore of fetching water gave women some mobility and freedom to leave their homes. The internet now replaces the river bank as a site of romance. Now women can meet and carry out illicit affairs over the internet. The tradition of women meeting on the river banks and exchanging witty *landays* are now replaced by social network site like Facebook, which allows them to connect to wider audiences.

How much simpler can love be?

Let's get engaged. Text me. (Griswold, 2015)

I lost you on Facebook yesterday.

I'll find you on Google today. (Griswold, 2015)

“Pashto Landay” is a popular Facebook page where Afghan women all over the world share *landays*. In the era of rapid globalization and easy access to the internet, the *landays* as an oral tradition that give voice to Afghan women is not rendered obsolete. In fact, *landays* as a medium of articulation that voices the lived realities of Afghan women is even more relevant. Its rendition in written forms in books and across the internet shows that Afghan women are not isolated in their sufferings. *Landays* are constantly evolving through re-telling and “sharing” over social medias, enabling it to acquire new meanings and significance for the next generations. *Landays*, through, social medias, opens up vistas for new creativity and ensures a permanence in a different medium. In a way, “sharing” over social media allows Afghan women to define their existence by “retrieving metaphors from the ‘imaginative experience’ of orality to deal with present realities”. (Ao, 2005)

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