

# WOMEN, WAR AND ISLAMIC RADICALISATION

*in Maryam Mahboob's Afghanistan*

FARIDULLAH BEZHAN



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# INTRODUCTION

When in October 2001 American B-52s bombed Afghanistan to oust the Taliban from power, it was also a war of ‘women’s liberation’. Images of veiled Afghanistani women had become ubiquitous and unveiling was synonymous with liberation.<sup>1</sup> But what did America and the Western world know about the status and suffering of Afghanistani women at the time? There had not then been any credible studies of the lives of Afghanistani women and this has remained the case up until the present. During the 1980s almost all studies, especially in the fields of politics and anthropology, were marked in one way or another by the Cold War. The oppression and suffering, as well as the achievements of Afghanistani women, were deeper and greater than most publications suggested. How did Afghanistani women, in all their diversity, live throughout modern

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- 1 Judith Butler questions this interpretation of unveiling as liberation. Taking as an example the well-known images of unveiled Afghanistani women that circulated in the media after the USA invasion of Kabul, Butler asks whether the face, which Emmanuel Levinas claims as ‘a condition for humanization’, can be represented in such a way that the result is dehumanisation (2004:141). According to the concept of the face as explored by Levinas, a face-to-face encounter allows the ‘Other’ to make an ethical claim or demand on the person seeing them (2004:131). However, in these photographs, Butler identifies the viewer as the party constructing a message:

According to the triumphalist photos that dominated the front page of the *New York Times*, these young women bared their faces as an act of liberation, an act of gratitude to the US military and an expression of a pleasure that had become suddenly and ecstatically permissible. The American viewer was ready, as it were, to see the face ... It became bared to us, at that moment, and we were, as it were, in possession of the face; not only did our cameras capture it, but we arranged for the face to capture our triumph, and act as the rationale for our violence, the incursion on sovereignty, the death of civilians. Where is loss in that face? And where is the suffering over war? Indeed, the photographed face seemed to conceal or displace the face in the Levinasian sense, since we saw and heard through that face no vocalization of grief or agony, no sense of the precariousness of life. (Butler 2004:142)



Afghanistan, particularly over the past four decades? How were they treated in the private sphere and the public? And how did they resist wartime mistreatment in Afghanistan, refugee camps or diaspora? Who were the practitioners and sponsors of the violation of the rights and achievements of Afghanistani women? These questions have never been satisfactorily answered.

From 1978 to the removal of the Taliban in 2001, the USA directly and indirectly, explicitly or secretly, supported the fundamentalist Islamic organisations in Afghanistan. By financing, arming and supporting Islamic extremist groups, the USA became one of the main contributors to the violation of Afghanistani women's rights and achievements.<sup>2</sup> So how did the USA reach an understanding of itself as 'liberating' Afghanistani women from the tyrants it sponsored? And is the current war in Afghanistan—the post-Taliban period—instrumental in liberating women, or is it only creating misery of a different kind?

Prior to the 1980s there was little international interest in Afghanistan studies, but after this attention increased on the back of political motivations. Struggling in a bloody war for four decades and representing the internationalisation of the conflict from the very outset, Afghanistan became a 'topic of study'. However, journalistic and research accounts published on the political, social and cultural aspects of Afghanistan in general, and the lives of women in particular, have been mostly stereotypical, with little merit. Mass media on both sides of the conflict, and even international human rights organisations, have provided a very partial picture of atrocities committed

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2 According to most analysts, the USA/CIA funding of the mujahideen during the 1980s was the largest and most expensive covert operation in history. One scholar estimates that Saudi and USA funds allocated to the mujahideen may have amounted to as much as \$5 billion (Rubin 2002:179–81).

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against Afghanistani women during the war. In Western academic circles, including the field of anthropology, studies have mostly been biased and misleading; as Jamil Hanifi notes, they have been ‘framed by passionate politicized discourse’ (2000:292). Official accounts of events by the parties involved (the leftist government, the mujahideen and Taliban) and their supporters, including international supporters, were not transparent but were the products of careful screening. In most cases, they were fabricated ‘realities’ intended to fulfil certain political agendas. Even most Western scholars pursued a specific aim in their studies of the Afghan war in the 1980s and early 1990s. In the case of Western anthropologists, H Sidky writes, ‘anthropologists specializing in Afghanistan who wrote about the war at the time reiterated the United States’s Cold War rhetoric rather than provide objective analyses. Others ignored the war altogether’ (2007:849).

While in the past very little literature existed concerning the suffering of women in the 1980s, in recent times more works have been written that shed light on the harsh experience of women during the war, particularly under the Taliban. Despite the valuable contribution of these works, they do not succeed in revealing the deep injuries that marked the lives of Afghanistani women during this long period and they reveal little of what really happened to women prior to the removal of the Taliban. Most scholars did not bother to report stories of women in refugee camps under the tight control of the mujahideen; because of their political agendas in the midst of the Cold War, they turned a blind eye.

Ironically women’s issues in Afghanistan have a strong link with the Taliban. Since the emergence of the Taliban in the mid-1990s, and especially with their removal from power by the USA-led international intervention in late 2001, women’s issues have become

a prominent topic in the Western media and scholarship. However, most of these reports and writings are stereotypical orientalist views that take little insight from the ground. Interestingly, while Western media and scholarship kept almost totally silent on how women's basic rights to education, employment and healthcare were severely restricted by the pro-Western mujahideen groups during the 1980s and early 1990s, now they have found a new topic for wide discussion.

Another aspect missing in these works is an examination of how women coped with and/or resisted marginalisation, seclusion and gender discrimination. The general impression (derived primarily from media reports) is that Afghanistani women are passive victims of their traditions, customs and religion. Of the dynamism in their lives, there is little to show. Women's struggles to create more space and gain greater agency are almost totally absent from these accounts.

How can one gain a better understanding of what happened to women before, during and after the war? One of the ways to explore the lives of women and the impact of war on their lives is to study the literary works written by Afghanistani women.

This book focuses on the narrative works of Maryam Mahboob: narrative works that represent Afghanistani women of different social positions expressing their oppression, suffering, rebellion, empowerment and need for change. Mahboob's stories portray ordinary women who, under severe socio-political and cultural pressure, eventually rebel; some achieve freedom, while others do not. These narrative works represent an insider view of the various aspects of women's lives.

Both sides of politics in the civil conflict of Afghanistan—the leftist regime and the mujahideen—used literary forms to propagate their causes. But writers and poets who did not share their political

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and ideological outlooks used literature in their own way, to reveal the injustices perpetrated by the warring sides and their impact on the lives of ordinary people. One of the first writers who responded in this way was Mahboob. She used literature as a weapon of the weak and her stories explore the paradoxical impact of war on the lives of women, and their subsequent transformation.

Chapter One deals with literature, politics and women in Afghanistan. Literature is one of the oldest types of art and was highly regarded by rulers, the elite and the ordinary people. Persian literature, also known as Dari, had a rich tradition in Afghanistan during the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras. With its variety of genres, themes and artistic merit, classical Persian literature in the Middle Ages was one of the finest in world literature. Moreover literature is one of the main sources for the study of not only creativity and the spiritual worlds of the people, but also as a source of political, social and cultural development, including in the relationships between people. In the absence of a variety of forms of mass communication and entertainment in Afghanistan, literature traditionally served as the most significant cultural medium. With the politicisation of all socio-cultural institutions in recent times, literature also became politicised. There is hardly a writer or poet who has not been touched by political developments in the last four decades. Writers such as Maryam Mahboob, who did not share the government's or the opposition's political and ideological outlooks, used literature to show not only the deeds of the warring sides, but also the impact of war on the lives of ordinary people. At the same time, in studying a closed society such as Afghanistan, and particularly in exploring a world of women when there are few means to access their everyday lives, literature is of great importance. The works written by women are not

only significant as works of art, but also as the most authentic mirror of a living reality, incorporating women's concerns, their dreams and hopes, their traditional values and their world views. According to Akbar and Muradi, these works express women's ideas, desires and resistance and help other women 'to feel energetic, to not be scared of the noise of guns, of flogging or stoning, and not to submit' (2013:5). However, literature as a source for the study of war, women and the radicalisation of Afghanistani society is one of the most under-researched topics inside and outside the country.

Chapter Two looks at the status of women in Afghanistani society in general and during the war in particular. Since the Taliban came to power in the mid-1990s and were then removed from power by the USA-led intervention in late 2001, the women's 'issue' has become a prominent topic in Western media and scholarship. However, most of these reports lack insight from the ground and do not acknowledge the severe restriction of women's rights by pro-Western mujahideen groups and the Taliban during the 1980s and early 1990s, which were largely met with silence, and approval in some cases, from international observers. Women's invisibility in the public world in 'curious, unsuspected ways ... does meet the physical and psychological need of the Afghan freedom movement', argues the American anthropologist Kathleen Howard-Merriam in 1987:

The Mujahideen (holy warrior) leaders recognize women's importance to the jihad (or holy war) with their exhortations to preserve women's honor through the continued practice of seclusion. The reinforcement of this tradition ... serves to strengthen the men's will to resist [the leftist regime] (1987:104–105).

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Portrayals of the war as a just conflict began soon after the leftist coup of 1978 and the emergence of the armed mujahideen forces. In literary works, such portrayals were dominated by the figures of male combatants and their heroic actions. They were almost always written by a supporter of one side or the other. The mourning of Afghanistani civilians and refugees was little dealt with.

Chapter Three looks at the life and work of Mahboob as a writer. It examines how a female author emerged in a male-dominated field and became one of the most outstanding literary figures of the last four decades. Like some of her female characters, Mahboob encountered hardship, both physically and mentally, in becoming an independent woman and an established writer. Not surprisingly, she dedicates most of her work to women's issues.

Since the very early stage of the conflict, one of the direct impacts of war in Afghanistan was the radicalisation of society. With the rise of the Mujahideen and the Taliban to prominence on the socio-political scene, they introduced a different brand of Islam—mostly rooted in the Egyptian-Pakistani Muslim Brotherhood and Deobandi and Wahhabi doctrines. Even less examined was the radicalisation of Afghanistani society, the most important social development since the outbreak of the war. Radicalisation began in the refugee camps and areas under mujahideen control, but it spread throughout the country once the mujahideen became lords of the land and reached its peak during the Taliban rule.

Chapter Four looks at this radicalisation of Afghanistani society and, via Mahboob's stories, what it meant for various Afghanistani women, be they young or married, elderly or widowed, educated or illiterate.

Another aspect of women's lives missing from intellectual and literary accounts has been the war's indirect impact on women, especially those who migrated to Western countries. In search of better lives, Afghanistani women found new spaces, but also faced new dilemmas.

Chapter Five explores the transformation of Afghanistani women in diaspora both in neighbouring countries and in the West, as expressed in Mahboob's stories. Indeed, she is the first Afghanistani writer in diaspora to pay much attention to this theme. Through her narrative works, Mahboob depicts the lives, hopes, desires, struggles, failures and achievements of Afghanistani women in various situations in diaspora. The chapter also looks at how migration affected Mahboob's own life, and argues that it changed her worldview, influenced her creativity and transformed her as a woman and as a writer.

# LITERATURE, POLITICS AND WOMEN

In *The Resisting Reader*, Judith Fetterley asserts that ‘American literature is male’ (2003:xii). Persian literature is also ‘male’. Women are so absent from classical Persian literature that Reza Baraheni calls it *tārīkh-i mozakar* or a ‘masculine history of literature’ (1983:3). Literature was regarded as a male prerogative and its themes and the structural elements of its discourse, including the language, were also male-oriented. This was especially true for prose narrative and it remained so until as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As Baraheni argues, women are not only absent from this literature as creators, but also as a real presence; an entire sense of femininity is lacking. ‘All [classical] Persian literature speaks about women in the abstract and almost with a feeling of their absence,’ observes Baraheni, ‘just as one speaks about someone who is not in the room’ (Baraheni 1977:76). While there were a few female poets during this long period,<sup>1</sup> there was a total absence of women from narrative prose.<sup>2</sup>

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1 These poets, from the points of view of quantity and quality of output, are not regarded as comparable to those of notable male poets of the period. For the biographies of classical women poets, see Rahmani 1952.

2 Women made substantial contributions to oral storytelling, but this book is interested in written literature.



Therefore, the emergence of female fiction writers in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Afghanistani literature is not only an important cultural development; it is a historic achievement that marks the end of a thousand-year tradition of exclusion (Bezhan 2007:8).

In Afghanistan in the 1960s, less than 2% of women were literate and from this tiny group a generation of writers emerged. Were they exceptional? Were they from privileged upper-class families? Many of them, like Maryam Mahboob, were neither conspicuously exceptional nor born into privilege. Rather, they came mainly from ordinary urban families. Some of these authors became so prominent that they not only competed with male authors, they eclipsed them in terms of artistic merit. Such was the case with Spozhmai Zaryab and Maryam Mahboob.

What developments allowed women to gain this foothold in narrative writing and create a discourse that was female-centred in its subject matter, structure and language? What socio-historical conditions made it possible for these women to write, and what oppressive or liberating structures contributed to shaping their responses?

Taliban efforts to sever women from the rights and achievements they had gained during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century caused outrage both locally and internationally, but Afghanistani women first spoke out against such policies themselves. However, the subsequent support of the international community, especially feminist organisations, was critical in influencing their respective governments, including the USA government, to back away from early motions to officially recognise the Taliban regime.<sup>3</sup> Afghanistani women defied the Taliban

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3 On the day the Taliban took Kabul, the state department offered them more than an olive branch. 'On the face of it, there is nothing objectionable at this stage' (quoted in Gutman 2008:77). In initiating a deal with the Taliban, the Clinton administration was planning to send an envoy to Kabul and set out 17

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and their 'gender apartheid' polices through a number of forms, and writing was one of the most significant of these.

Of course, it goes without saying that the work of women writers is not restricted to exploring issues and experiences specific to women; however, some women do choose to write out of their own experience, and this work often provides the reader with detailed depictions of women's lives, ideas, emotions and preoccupations, and insight into the writer's understanding of what it means to be a woman in the social context in which they live or have lived. They convey their needs and link these needs with the needs of their society, both at communal and individual levels. In this way, women's writing can provide great insight into the continual negotiation of the relationships between the public and private, and the personal and political. These works can be viewed as 'social' documents, not only in the sense that they 'reflect' society, but also in the sense that the language, subject matter and symbolism they use are social. As Herbert P Philips might argue, these writers are 'socially situated to talk about things that in their culture are judged to be "important"' (Philips 1987:4),<sup>4</sup> but which might otherwise be hidden.

In Afghanistan, women function mainly within the private sphere. For women writers and their female characters, political struggle is mainly defined within the arena of the domestic, which is defined by structures of gender and sexuality, ethnicity and class.

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talking points, including urging the Taliban to send an envoy to represent them in Washington, and the reopening of the US embassy in Kabul. However in the talking points, there was no mention 'of the sudden loss of women's rights' (Gutman 2008:77).

- 4 According to Philips (1987:4), what these writers communicate to their readers is 'totally intracultural in nature' and therefore what 'is being communicated—in content, meaning, assumption, and purpose—is, above all the native point of view.'

As we will see later, Mahboob connects this domestic world to the outside world to show how power structures in the private realm mirror those in the public and reflect the contemporary social and political situation. Mahboob's works of fiction are powerful allegories of gender oppression, speaking not just of the fictional fate of one woman but of Afghanistani women as a whole.

However, depictions of the domestic life of women by Afghanistani writers are radical acts even when they do not draw explicit comparisons between the private and the public. Such subject matter challenges what Judith Herman calls the 'tyranny of private life' historically suffered by women:

The cherished value of privacy created a powerful barrier to consciousness and rendered women's reality practically invisible. To speak about experiences in sexual or domestic life was to invite public humiliation, ridicule, and disbelief. Women were silenced by fear and shame, and the silence of women gave license to every form of sexual and domestic exploitation. (Herman 1992:28)

Women's domestic-based writing represents a different view, one that is usually not seen: that of ordinary and marginalised groups. Stuart Scheingold suggests that such acts of 'literary imagination [are] a counterpart, a complement, perhaps a corrective' to fields of scholarly inquiry such as history and social science.

Novels of political estrangement shift attention from political actors and institutions to the general public—ordinary people whose agency has been appropriated by autocratic regimes, by bureaucratic institutions and by professionals with the expertise to colonize consciousness. (Scheingold 2010:2)

Some of these works that explore the dilemmas and obstacles of women's everyday lives also portray female characters who struggle

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for their rights and eventually change their circumstances accordingly. These characters may serve as 'role models' for women readers who recognise the reality of their own lives and also the means for change. 'Writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*', Hélène Cixous believes, as it is 'the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures' (1976:879, emphasis in original).

Literature does not only depict the world as it is, as Griselda Pollock argues, it can be a force of resistance that reconstitutes meaning:

Images and texts are no mirrors of the world, merely reflecting their sources. Representation stresses something refashioned, coded in rhetorical, textual or pictorial terms, quite distinct from its social existence. (Pollock 2003:8–9)

And to be truly resistant, claims Cixous, women's literature should explode identity, rather than merely reflect it:

If woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man ... it is time for her to dislocate this 'within,' to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it into her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. (Cixous 1976:887)

A writer's aesthetics sense can be part of the act of reconstituting meaning and identity. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith observes, 'aesthetic experience is inseparable from memory, context and meaning, and hence from who we are, where we are and all that has already happened to us' (as summarised in Felski 2003:142).

Why did Afghanistani women gravitate towards literature as a medium of resistance, as a means for expressing women's suffering and exploring the ways that they can seek change? It may be that 'fiction can do the job that history, geography, economics, sociology,

etc, are supposed to', as Deepika Behri believes (quoted in Amirah 2000:240). I would respond to this question with two more points. Firstly, literature has traditionally been 'a domain as well as an instrument of cultural and political contention' in Afghanistan (Ghani 1988:428). And secondly, in the absence of other means, such as the opportunity to participate actively in political organisations, literature serves as an accessible tool for resistance.

### **Islam and women's literature**

Perhaps surprisingly to some, one of the main features of fiction written by Afghanistani women is its lack of reference to religion. Islam as a subject is virtually absent in most of these works. This is the case in the fiction of earlier writers such as Maga Rahmani (b. 1924), and in the work of women of Mahboob's generation like Spozhmai Zaryab (b. 1950). Even in works written in the 1980s that positioned themselves as against the leftist regime, and in works by the new generation of writers such as Homaira Qaderi (b. 1979), there is little reference to Islam.

It is almost as if Islam did not contribute to the lives of these women and to their position in society. Rather, it is the traditions and customs and the general backwardness of Afghanistan that seem at the root of their suffering. Equally, it could be that Islam is so sacred a subject that women writers scarcely dare touch it.

Islam should be seen through the socio-economic and political contexts within which it exists. In order to understand the effects of religion, argues Marina Lazreg, one must 'address the ways in which religious symbols are manipulated by both men and women in everyday life as well as in institutional settings' (1988:95). Hence, gender relations can only be analysed in terms of religion when

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the latter is conceptualised within the relevant socio-economic and political context.

Characterising Afghanistani women only by their religious beliefs is problematic, because there are fundamental differences between and within Muslim societies. Aziz Al-Azmeh asserts that 'there are as many Islams as there are situations that support it' (quoted in Karim 2003:7).<sup>5</sup> Like all other religions, 'Islam has had a contingent nature, influencing and being influenced by the different cultures and societies that it has come to dominate' (Rahnema 2006:31. In Afghanistan, knowledge of Islam was limited to a few rituals and folktales for the majority of people in rural areas, and even for people in most urban areas. Many supposedly Islamic beliefs and practices in fact relate to local pre-Islamic customs. According to Dupree, 'the Islam practised in Afghan villages, nomad camps and most urban areas would be almost unrecognizable to a sophisticated Muslim scholar' (1973:104).

In fact there are few or no boundaries between existing customs and religion. Therefore saints and shrines, magic and shamanism, and tribal codes of honour were given an Islamic colouring. Tribal codes of conduct known as Pashtunwali or 'the way of the Pashtuns' have prevailing status among the Pashtun population. Pashtunwali is central to the tribe's identity and social structure and emphasises honour, chivalry and kinship loyalties. The Pashtunwali code, as described by Rubina Saigol, is 'an informal, unwritten code of ethics around which Pashtuns are expected to order their lives' (2013:50).

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5 'Heresiographers have identified over 72 sects in Islam, each considering itself the 'saved sect', believing the others to be misguided' (Rahnema 2006:31; also see Montgomery Watt 1998:3); contrary to the general view, Islam is a diverse religion. Studies of women in contemporary Muslim countries confirm them as equally diverse in terms of custom and belief. See, for example, Bodman & Tohidi 1998 and Ask & Tjomsland 1998.

Its tenets include *nang* (honour), *ghairat* (pride) and *badal* (revenge). These tenets, which have little to do with Islam and in fact run counter to it in most cases, are largely responsible for the oppression of women in tribal areas, and for the practice of honour killing.

While all Muslims 'adhere to a set of beliefs in common, a vast plurality exists not only in cultural but in religious behaviour' (Karim 2003:7). The different responses of Afghanistani women to Islam are linked to the politics of their communal identity. There are a great number of differences between women according to their religion (and sects such as Sunni or Shiite), region, ethnicity, class and education. Putting all Afghanistani women in one basket, a basket labelled 'Islam', does not lead to a thorough understanding of their status and dilemmas. It reduces the complex politics and social dynamics of the Afghanistani people to only one of its aspects (even if it is a significant one). Thus, the apparent rejection of such reductionism by Afghanistani women writers may be interpreted as yet another act of resistance.

However, in traditional Afghanistani culture, traditions function in the context of Islam and Islam supports men's tight control of women and the family. As argued, the line between religion and tradition is almost non-existent, particularly for ordinary people, and this runs both ways. As Farida Shaheed insists:

what women in most Muslim societies share is that the cultural articulation of patriarchy (through structures, social mores, laws and political power) is increasingly justified by reference to Islam and Islamic doctrine, a process facilitated by Islam's central role in the self-definition and cultural reality of Muslims at large. (1995:79)<sup>6</sup>

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6 It is not only Islam, the scriptures of other major religions justify the same subordination of women to men:

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In Muslim communities, women and women's conduct are commonly seen as 'symbols of communal identity and markers of "tradition" and culture' (Chhachhi 1991:162; see also Basu 2011:3). Muslim communities everywhere are consequently preoccupied with the position of women and their roles in the family and community. For Muslim women, whether they live in a Muslim country or belong to a minority Muslim community, there is an ongoing pressure to be seen as loyal to Islam. Muslim women in these communities are also perceived as 'the carriers of culture' (Rosario 1996:209) and if their dress or appearance shows a 'Western' influence, they are regarded as having been corrupted by Western values. As a result, women are expected to suppress their own needs and rights in favour of the Islamic, cultural and national interests. Mahboob is the first Afghanistani female author who explores the impact of Islam on the lives of Afghanistani women.

### Women and the war story

Not all Afghanistani writers of the war era explicitly explore the conflict their country has struggled with over four bloody decades, but the impact of the war can be discerned in all of their writing, even if the impact is an indirect one.<sup>7</sup> As Miriam Cooke asserts, all

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According to the Hindu *Code of Manu*, "in childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth, to her husband, [and] after the husband's death, to her sons. A woman must never be free of subjugation." In the orthodox Jewish prayer that a male repeats daily, there are the words, "I thank Thee, O Lord, that thou hast not created me a woman!" The New Testament instructs: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church ... Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. (Quoted in Stepaniants 1992:239)

- 7 Even a few authors such as Rahnoward Zaryab and Akram Osman, who apparently in their writings stood outside the war, were nevertheless also influenced by it.



people ‘who have lived through a war, even if on the margins, have participated’ (1988:2). Those who write during the war, Cooke argues,

do so because they hope, however forlornly, to intervene in the situation and thus make a difference. Such writing is an integral part of the war endeavour, and as such it has new and often surprising things to say. (1995:7)<sup>8</sup>

The last four decades of war have had a complicated impact on women and their literature, much of which is devoted to the war and its impact on their lives. While women fiction writers, including Mahboob, had begun to emerge before the war, it was in wartime that their literature reached new dimensions. Earlier writers continued writing and published their best works during this period; meanwhile, a new generation of writers began to make themselves heard. Women’s literature in general, and their fiction in particular, gained recognition and women were published with greater frequency. Some female writers became the pioneers of certain genres of fiction. Sphozhmai Zaryab was the first Afghanistani author to write antiwar fiction, and Mahboob was the first author to write jihadi fiction.<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to Larry P Goodson’s claim that the publication of Afghanistani literature declined during the war period, with only the ‘diaspora organizations such as the Writers Union of Free Afghanistan show[ing] any vitality’ (2001a:129),<sup>10</sup> a large number of literary works

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8 According to Cooke ‘these war texts may also have a unique and important role to play, because they not only reflect but may sometimes interact with the events and mood of the conflict’ (1995:9).

9 For Zaryab and her contribution to antiwar fiction, see Bezhan 2011, 2014.

10 Interestingly, the Peshawar-based Writers Union of Free Afghanistan paid little attention to literature and to the publication of literary works.

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were published inside Afghanistan during this period, especially by the Afghanistan's Writers' Association (which Goodson fails to mention). In addition to organising a series of literary meetings, seminars and conferences, the Writer's Association published some 300 books of poetry and fiction, which eclipses the total number of works published in Afghanistan between the introduction of printing in 1873 and 1978. While in the past there were only a tiny number of women writers in Afghanistan, a relatively large portion were represented in this number.

Opportunities for publication created by political and social developments during this period can account for some of this growth. The leftist government, for example, established the Afghanistan Writers' Association in which all writers could gather, regardless of gender, ethnic group or political affiliation. It also gave writers the opportunity to present their work to the public on different occasions and in different forms, and it allowed for the publication of their work, especially in book form. Women were active participants and their involvement with the association consolidated their position as writers.

It was not only the leftist regime that contributed to this increase in Afghanistan's literary output. The opposition established cultural committees in Pakistan and Iran that were responsible for political, ideological and cultural activities, including publishing books, newspapers and journals.<sup>11</sup> One of their main intentions was to encourage

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11 Thus the only independent literary association (from the mujahideen groups) in the diaspora was Ittehad-i Newisendagan Azad Afghanistan (Writers' Union of Free Afghanistan) established in 1985 and sponsored by the West. Its main goal was to publish works on the Afghanistan conflict written by both Afghanistani and foreign authors. It had little interest in literature. The other two Western-sponsored organisations with somewhat similar goals were Markazi Saqafati wa Farhangi Afghanistan (The Afghan Information Centre) and Shura-i Saqafati Jihad-i Afghanistan (Cultural Council of Afghanistan Jihad).

authors to write in support of ‘their’ war. However, it was only Jamyat-i Islami Afghanistan (the Islamic Association of Afghanistan) that established a ‘writers and poets association’ in 1988.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1980s no writer in exile, especially in Pakistan and Iran, could write and publish without the mujahideen parties’ approval (Olszewska 2007:208). The mujahideen did not have much sympathy for women’s literature, just as they did not have sympathy for women’s political participation. Thus, no exceptions were made for female writers of so-called jihadi-fiction.

With the outbreak of the civil war in the early 1990s, which saw the emergence of the Taliban, conflict became more ethnicity- and gender-based. Ethnic differences aside, the parties shared the same ideology: they were all fighting for the establishment of an Islamic state. Under these circumstances, some of the warring parties established literary associations outside Afghanistan in order to increase ‘awareness’ of the ethnic and cultural background of the groups they claimed to represent, and possibly to establish a sense of solidarity with their cause. At the same time, Afghanistani citizens (many of them women) who were angry and devastated at what was happening in their homeland, gathered around these organisations, looking for a means to convey their hatred of the war and the gender apartheid policies of the Taliban.

The most significant of these literary organisations was established in Mashhad, Iran, with the help of one of the factions of Hezb-i Wahdat Islami (Islamic Unity Party). This organisation succeeded in publishing two successful literary quarterlies, *Dur-i Dari* (literally ‘The perilled Persian language’) and *Khatt-i Sevum* (literally ‘The

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12 Correspondence with Fazil Rahman Fazil 5 July 2006, the president of the association.

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third line'), to which many female writers contributed.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it was these two journals that introduced some of the new generation of women writers, especially from the Hazara group, an oppressed ethnic minority. It is worth noting that these two journals, throughout their publication, avoided overt political content, concentrating instead on cultural issues and literature.<sup>14</sup>

Another significant effort to defy the Taliban's gender apartheid was the establishment of underground literary courses by young women in Afghanistan, especially in Herat. These courses taught the art of writing and facilitated discussion of students' writing, some of which was successfully published. From these courses a few outstanding writers and poets such Homaira Qaderi, Khaleda Khorsand and Nadia Anjoman emerged. While these courses were not linked to any political organisation and their apparent aim was only to foster literary activity, their existence had political implications. They challenged the Taliban's edict that women had to remain behind the walls of their homes and to engage in domestic affairs only. These young women had different ideas. The establishment of the writing courses in the face of potentially severe consequences demonstrated the determination of women to take their destiny into their own hands. Support was received from male members of their families and the wider community who, in allowing women's attendance, providing them with rooms, or assisting with teaching,<sup>15</sup> risked severe punishment, as the Taliban held men accountable for the alleged crimes of the women in their family and they did not permit interactions between women and men who were not related by blood or marriage.

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13 *Dur-i Dari* came out in 1997.

14 *Dur-i Dari* was replaced by *Khatt-i Sevum* after 13 issues.

15 The man who taught in the underground literary course was Nasir Rahyab, a well-known scholar and a professor at Herat University.

## Politicisation of women's literature

While the earliest women's literature of Afghanistan's modern era was inherently political due to its depiction of women's oppression, it developed a more explicitly political focus as Afghanistani literature became increasingly politicised in the early 1980s.

Just as women's political alliances differed, their approaches to narrating the war also varied. Some praised the government's army officers and revolutionary corps (see Torpekay Qayum),<sup>16</sup> some expressed admiration for the mujahideen (Maryam Mahboob in her early works), while others were critical of both sides of the conflict (Spozhmai Zaryab). Some writers imagined the war through the eyes of men, and others portrayed its effect on women.

From its very early stages, the war was a reality that affected every citizen, no matter where and how they lived. Its impact was as severe and wide-ranging as the influence Samuel Hynes attributes to the First World War in *A war imagined*:

It brought an end to the life and values...but it also did something more radical than that: it added a new scale of violence and destruction to what was possible—it changed reality. (1991:xi)

Some women writers chose to depict the severe impact of war on the Afghanistani population and on women in particular. In these works of fiction, women are eyewitnesses to the destruction of their rights, their homeland, their homes and their personal belongings. 'If we wish to approach the dynamics of war and not just to repeat

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16 Qayum (b. 1958), who began writing fiction in the early 1970s, was distinguished for the genre, theme and method of writing from her contemporary female writers. She chose the novel and socialist realism. Qayum published three novels in the 1980s, *Wa sukot shekast* (*And the silence was broken*), *Faryād-hāy shekasta* (*Broken cry*) and *Qurbāni begunā* (*An innocent sacrifice*), which are centred on revolutionary and class struggle themes.

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canned tales of heroism and victimization, we should listen to these writers' words', argues Miriam Cooke. 'It is this literature ... that can teach us about war, about the ways in which people negotiate violence, and about construction of counternarrative' (1995:7).

Can these works be considered as social and political documents as well as reliable sources of information? In 'Gender and violence in the Lebanese war novel', Evelynne Accad suggests that works of fiction can be just that:

Creative works are more appropriate than other works to be analysed and give us the "total" picture because not only do they include all the various fields—social, political, anthropological, religious, and cultural—but in addition they allow us to enter into the unconscious and imaginary world of the author, with all the implications in hidden meanings and underlying significance, an author reflects his or her own individual vision, which is linked to the collective imaginary. What he or she says is an image of his or her society. The tension between the individual and collective imagination adds complexities and subtleties not found in more direct scientific documents. Literature thus covers the most complete domain. It can make us grasp the whole picture because it is multidisciplinary and reflects the complexities of a situation. (Accad 2007:299)

The war compounded historic problems of gender discrimination and oppression for women writers, but as discussed, it also opened up spaces for women to make themselves heard and saw the emergence of a new generation of female writers. No writer better represents these paradoxical changes than Maryam Mahboob, who in her writing captures the fractured interactions of individual life stories that construct and represent 'the people' and 'the truth' about war, displacement, radicalisation, marginalisation and diaspora.

# AFGHANISTANI SOCIETY AND WOMEN'S ISSUES

Maryam Mahboob writes 'true' stories about Afghanistani women. She writes about women at home or in diaspora, in peace or wartime, single or married, young or old, illiterate or educated, but she mainly deals with the position of women in the family and in society. Her main characters are rooted in Afghanistani society, where the roles of men and women are determined by a patriarchal system. In order to analyse her works, we need to see what it means to be a woman in Afghanistan.

## **Women and socio-cultural restrictions**

According to Chow and Berheide (1994:14), patriarchy can be defined as 'the principle of male dominance that forms both a structure and ideological system of domination in which men control women'. In other words, patriarchal society promotes male privilege. Allan Johnson describes it thus:

Patriarchy's defining elements are male-dominated, male-identified, male-centred, and control-obsessed character ... Patriarchal culture includes ideas about the nature of things, including men, women, and humanity, with manhood and masculinity most closely associated with being human and

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womanhood and femininity relegated to the marginal position of “other”. (Johnson 2005:38–39)

While patriarchy in Afghanistan has all these general features, it is situated in ‘the patriarchal belt’, and is an extreme case of what Deniz Kandiyoti terms ‘classical patriarchy’ (1988:278–81). Its characteristics vary by ethnicity (*qawm*), social class (*tabaqa ijtemāi*), region (*manteqa*) and sect of Islam (*mazhab*). The family structure is based on this system in which men have the power to determine the status and roles of women and children within the family. In this structure, women are conceptualised through their relationships with men and are thus recognised as wives, mothers or daughters. Because gender relations are ‘concerned with how power is distributed between the sexes’ (March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay 1999:18), they are based on male superiority and female submission.<sup>1</sup>

For Butler, gender is not biological, but something that is socially constructed in relation to our environments and performed through the body:

Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repletion of acts. (2006:179)

Notions of gender are similarly described by Ortner and Whitehead as ‘largely products of social and cultural process’ that inform our ideas of ‘what men and women are, what sorts of relations do or should obtain between them’ (Ortner and Whitehead 1989:1).

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1 Pankhurst notes that ‘gender includes the way in which society differentiates appropriate behaviour and access to power for women and men. In practice, this has entailed the privileging of men over women’ (Pankhurst 2004:26). According to Yuval-Davis, ‘women’s oppression is endemic and integral to social relations with regard to the distribution of power and material resources’ (1997:7).



Gender is also seen as a lens through which difference can be understood more generally. This includes those ‘categorizations of persons, artefacts, events, sequences, and so on, which draw upon sexual imagery—upon the ways in which the distinctiveness of male and female characteristics make concrete people’s ideas about the nature of social relationships’ (Strathern 1988:xi). As a concept, gender ‘orders a wide range of values and ideas’ (Strathern 1989:70). Eve Sedgwick argues that “‘male/female’ functions as a primary and perhaps model binarism affecting the structure and meaning of many, many other binarisms ... [it is] inextricable from a history of power differentials between genders’ (Sedgwick 1990:27–28).

In Afghanistan, gender (*jens*, *jensyat*) is understood in the sense of gender identity and gender relations, based on the binary categories of ‘man’ (*mard*) and ‘woman’ (*zan*).<sup>2</sup> Gender distinction plays an important role in the organisation of everyday life. The function of gender, as Christiane Harzig notes, can be tracked again and again in people’s everyday activities, ‘in the constructions of meaning as well as in the unspoken assumptions that form the essence of institutions and laws’ (Harzig 2003:50).

Fatima Mernissi argues that women’s sexuality is seen as a threat to Muslim social order in Moroccan culture (1987:30–42) and the same argument could be equally applied to Afghanistan. Understood as ‘the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential’, and the cause of social chaos (*fitna*) (Mernissi 1987:44),<sup>3</sup> female sexuality must be accordingly controlled. This assumption justifies women

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2 There are no words for female and male in Persian.

3 According to Audrey Shalinsky, the ‘use of the singular, *zan* (woman), connected to the lack of fidelity, emphasizes the innate or generic quality of women’s faithlessness’ (1986:327).

being kept at home and confined to the household world; otherwise they might invite disorder into society.<sup>4</sup>

### The family

Family is the nucleus of society in Afghanistan. The extended family is central to the identity of the individual and the reputation of an individual reflects on the family. According to traditional marriage customs, young people, in particular women, have little or no say in choosing their spouse. Early arranged marriage is a common practice. Divorce is very rare, especially in rural areas and it is viewed as dishonourable. A man rarely marries a divorcee. It is also dishonourable for a widow to return to her natal family. Instead, she will often marry the dead husband's brother, especially if she does not have male children. A widow with sons can refuse to be remarried and may succeed in managing an independent household of her own (see Tapper 1991:183–86). While the family may restrict a woman's autonomy, it is also a cause for family solidarity and protection. Although subordinated, women are protected by male members of the family at all costs.

Gender relations differ according to social class, ethnic group, religion and even region. However, the family is the primary space in which political, economic and cultural functions are performed. An individual's honour, his or her social status, and personal codes of conduct are largely determined by the family. As Suad Joseph and Afsāna Nağmābādī argue, 'family functions as the primary social

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4 In discussing women's sexuality, Muslim jurists use the word *yuftinu* (with the same root with *fitna*), which literally means 'to charm or enamour someone'. Therefore these jurists intimately connect seduction with sedition (Pandolfo 1997: 156–62; see also Mernissi 1987:41–44).

institution' in a patriarchal culture where 'authority remains in the hands of the elder males' (2003:510).<sup>5</sup>

Moghadam notes that men exercise 'control over women in two crucial ways: by controlling marriage and property and by barring landownership for women' (2003:241). Gender relations are rooted in notions of personal property and, in Afghanistan, women are the personal property of the male members of her family. Two common practices of marriage illustrate this: the first is the *toyāna* or bride price, which is an agreed amount of money the groom pays to the bride's family;<sup>6</sup> the second is the *badal* or 'blood payment', which is a common custom among Pashtuns, in which a woman is given in marriage to another household to settle a feud caused by injury or death. One of the immediate results of this notion of women as property is women's submission as well as their segregation. As the property of another, for instance, women do not have the right to leave the house without the permission of a husband or male relative. This practice allows men to maintain their possessions.

This is tied to the notion of honour. Ideas such as *hujb* (shyness), *sharm* (shame), *ifāt* (chastity) and *nejābat* (decency) are regarded as essential qualities of womanhood. The woman is seen as being at

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5 'Women's reproductive roles were more fetishized in the context of Afghanistan's ethnic, tribal and kinship-based patriarchy in which women, labour and land are owned by men' (Joseph & Nağmābādī 2003:134).

6 The bridegroom pays a considerable amount of money to the bride's family (*toyāna*), depending on the region, the social and economic reputation of the woman's family, and even the skills she has. For example, in northern parts of the country where women work in the carpet weaving industry, their skills and the type of carpet they weave are significant factors in the amount of money demanded for their dowry. In some areas people pay the required sum in kind such as cows, bulls and blocks of land. As a result, the woman becomes the property of the man in the new household. The only difference between her and other commodities in the household is that the husband has exclusive sexual access to her.

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the core of the family's honour.<sup>7</sup> In honour-based societies such as Afghanistan, women's chastity could be said to represent the family's 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 2005:178). The primary obligation of women is to uphold family honour by conforming to the norms of accepted behaviour (Tapper 1991; Grima 1992; Dupree 1998). The demands and restrictions on women make them completely submissive to the men of their families. For a woman to protest against any physical or mental abuse by her father, brother or husband, would be to bring disgrace to her family. Women are denied the opportunity to fully exercise their personal authority in public affairs or within the family.

### Women and obedience

The idea that obedience is an essential virtue of womanhood is used to control women's bodies and their mobility. Obedience is considered the core condition necessary to maintain familial and marital relationships. It is believed that marriages will not work without wives' subservience to their husbands. Parents, husbands and those outside the family admire an obedient woman and regard the quality of obedience as a source of pride for women. The result is the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo and dominant gender norms in the family and in wider society.

The following passage was recorded during field research conducted in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Sheghnan, a town in Badakhshan (north-eastern Afghanistan). The passage related to a social tradition current among the Sheghni ethnic group and shows a clear picture

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7 'Several cultural theorists have pointed out that, in many cultures, women are believed to embody the essence of their culture and group identity, and are thought to be repositories of family honour' (Mahalingam 2013: 123).

of family structure, the position of women and the etiquette of social intercourse. According to this tradition, the mother of the bride delivers the following ten pieces of advice to her daughter on her wedding night:

1. For all your life you have to be faithful to your husband.
2. You have to get up early in the morning every day and keep yourself and the house clean and tidy up.
3. You have to keep clean your, your husband's and your children's clothes.
4. You have to be nice to your husband and never make him upset, as this may weaken love.
5. When your husband is hungry try your best to feed him and never argue with him when he is hungry, because men get angry quickly when they are hungry.
6. Try hard to spend little money and save, as there is nothing better than this in life.
7. You have to follow your husband's ideas, because disagreement brings disharmony between you.
8. You should indirectly encourage your husband to like home, because men naturally do not have much interest in domestic life.
9. You should be nice and behave well to the father, mother, brother, sister and other relatives of your husband. This will improve your status among them.
10. Until the end of your life you have to have in mind that you should have a flourishing home and your husband should be happy with you. (Badakhshi 2007:198–99)

This advice shows the position of women in the family, and emphasises that woman's virtues should be her obedience, docility, sense of duty, respect and submission.

### Women and honour

The meaning of honour in Afghanistan is multidimensional and encompasses familial respect and social prestige. The ways it is upheld are equally complex. 'Honor', argues Frank Stewart, 'is a notoriously paradoxical topic, and one of its most famous puzzles is the effect that women's behavior can have on men's honor' (1994:107). A woman's body, sexuality and name are the bearers of *nāmus* (honour and modesty), but this *nāmus* belongs to the male members of her family, kin, community, tribe and nation. A woman 'can help or hinder honor, but she cannot control it', claims Benedicte Grima, (1992:164; see also Tapper & Tapper 1992). Women may represent 'collectivity, honour and unity' but they are ultimately 'excluded from the collective "we" of the body politic, and retain an object rather than a subject position', argues Nira Yuval-Davis (1997:47).

One explanation for this idea of women as conveyors of honour is the symbolism attached to their biological capacity for reproduction. As Suha Kudsieh has it, 'women are considered fertile bodies that "reproduce" certain racial and ethnic groups' and therefore 'can be seen as reproducers of ethnic and cultural boundaries' (Kudsieh 2003:202). The highly gendered nature of the concept of honour may be discerned from the common usage in Afghanistan of the word *nāmus* to denote a wife or any other woman belonging to a man, such as mother and sister or daughter (see Tapper 1991:16–22, 107).<sup>8</sup>

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8 Tapper notes that a 'man's *nāmus* depends on the propriety first of his mother, unmarried sisters and daughters and occasionally more distant female agnates, and

Since the family's honour is vested in its female members, women's activities are closely guarded. Any compromise of that honour by its female bearers is considered dangerous and punishable by families. In order to protect women from danger and strangers, gender segregation and female seclusion is imposed and women's honour is understood and socially constructed largely through the concepts of veiling and modesty. However, the application of these restrictions is not rigid. They come into play in certain social situations and vary according to age, marital status, ethnic group, social class and family. Young women in particular are subject to strong pressure to remain modest, while for older women modesty is a less important condition of morality and they are not expected to be veiled as often. Veiling is situational and usually has to be observed in public areas or according to the status of the male relatives being met. It is more prevalent among traditional families in cities and towns and less observable in rural areas, where women are actively engaged in economic production and contribute substantially to the family economy. Veiling there is impractical and does not match their style of life. Nomadic women almost never cover their faces.

If the perception of honour is upheld through social behaviour that conforms to certain codes of conduct, and may be lost through an act that violates them, its recovery may be attempted by 'returning the offensive act' (Knudsen 2003:109). It is in this context that 'honour killing' takes place.<sup>9</sup> If a woman's honour is violated by her engagement (or alleged engagement) in relations with a member of

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second, his wife' (1991:107).

9 'Honour killings forms part of what has been termed "traditional justice" or "tribal justice", a contested form of private retribution that many find unwarranted' (Knudsen 2004:1). It is common both in Western and traditional societies (Baker, Gregware & Cassidy 1999:164–84; Dogan 2011:423). Honour killing is not specific

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the opposite sex outside of marriage, this may lead to the loss of her life, usually at the hands of the man of the family. She is killed because she has brought shame (dishonour) to the family: 'the spilling of the blood of the victim is seen as necessary to erase the shame she has brought upon her family by her sexual misconduct' (Abu-Odeh 2005:221).<sup>10</sup>

Although modesty is justified by religious texts, especially the Koran,<sup>11</sup> it is also connected with cultural codes and social traditions. The code of modesty imposed on Afghanistani women is based on custom rather than the Koran. Tahire Kocturk argues that the 'honour ethic' predates Islam and is 'is based on the belief that women cannot be trusted to protect their chastity in the best interest of the patriarchal system' (1992:56).<sup>12</sup> This system of enforced modesty functions to preserve patriarchal control by excluding women from decision-making in relation to marriage or ownership of property, controlling women's sexuality, restricting their autonomy and maintaining men's guardianship and dominance. The sociocultural effects of 'imposed' modesty are the result of its operation as an ideological

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to a certain society, but is 'an integral part of the process of killing women by their families or intimates, regardless of where the woman lives' (Baker, Gregware & Cassidy 1999:164; see also Abu-Odeh 1996; Dogan 2011).

- 10 According to Malti-Douglas there is a connection between a woman's body and its commercial significance that brings honour into play. She asserts that a 'woman's body is seen as a commercial object, whose value is linked to its "honor" [... and] if absent, will surely lead to her death' (1991:142–43).
- 11 'And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to be modest, and display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not reveal their adornment save to their husbands or fathers or husband's fathers, or their sons, or their brothers or their brothers sons or sisters' sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigor, or children who know naught of women's nakedness'. (Koran 31:24)
- 12 'The honour ethic, as it applies to women's sexuality, is not specific to Islam; it is observed in other religions as well [and is] still deeply entrenched in most Christian Mediterranean societies' (Kocturk 1992:56).



social control mechanism.<sup>13</sup> Hafizullah Emadi points to men's common use of the term 'woman' as an insult to opponents as an indicator of the inferior position in which women are held in an honour-ethic society (1991:225).

## The veil

Muslim women in general and Afghanistani women in particular are characterised by the veil. Nilüfer Göle calls veiling the 'emblem' that reconstructs the Otherness of Islam for the West (1996:1). The veiled woman is one of the universal images of the Third World woman in Western feminist discourse, which Chandra Talpade Mohanty refers to as existing 'in universal ahistorical splendor, setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing first/third world connections' (1991b:73). Ahmed notes that, to the West, veiling is 'the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies' and the symbol 'of both the oppression of women ... and backwardness of Islam' (1992:151–52). The portrayal of the practice of veiling in the Western media, in the words of Catherine Daly, tends 'to depersonalize, essentialize and even objectify Muslim women as no more than a head covering' (2000:147). In this way, 'Muslim female subjectivity is obscured by the mythology of the veil' (Jarmakani 2011:229).

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13 However, Nancy Tapper's fieldwork with Durrani Pashtuns in northern Afghanistan shows that, in practice, gender relations are more complicated. Although both men and women 'accept' the superiority of men, and 'in spite of Durrani statements that the control of women is the most important dimension of these ideologies [of responsibility and honour and shame], it is clear that claims to an honourable status depend far more on the economic and political resources a man controls than on the behaviour of the women of his household' (Tapper 1991:238–39).

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*Parda* or *chādari* or *hijāb* (usage depends upon region) are various styles of head and body coverings adopted in cultures where Islam is practised (see El Guindi 1999:157).<sup>14</sup> These words are often used, inaccurately, to refer specifically to women's head coverings. *Hijāb* does not necessarily require the wearer's face to be hidden, but 'all of the hair, the neck and arms must be covered' (Khattab 1994:17). Hanna Papanek, who conceptualises *parda* as a 'separate world' and a 'provision of symbolic shelter' (1973:292), notes that the 'crucial characteristic of the purdah system is its limitation on interaction between women and males outside well-defined categories' (1973:289). It is perceived as a protection against the outside world, particularly against men outside of the family. Historically, the concept of *hijāb* is a much broader concept; it refers to the act of covering and the covering practices of both women and men (El Guindi 1999).<sup>15</sup> Because veiling is assumed to be a means to exert men's power over women's bodies, the practice of veiling is considered by some as the cause of the subordination of women and the backwardness of their treatment (Hekmat 1997:183).<sup>16</sup> Veiling is the most visible symbol of modesty. The veil, then, is not only an item of dress that has evolved over time, but more specifically is an item of dress that defines women as female (Daly 2000).

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14 While increasingly Muslim women are veiling, there are a wide range of styles and multiple meanings attached to its practice (see MacLeod 1992; Abu-Odeh 1993; El Guindi 1999; Boullock 2002).

15 The word *hijāb*, according to anthropological and Islamic feminists, refers to space or dimension, which usually stands for 'a sacred divide or separation between two worlds and two spaces: deity and mortals, good and evil, light and dark, believers and nonbelievers, aristocracy and commoners' (El Guindi 1999:157).

16 However, Hekmat believes that while Muslim women acknowledge that veiling has operated within the network of the patriarchal system that regulates and controls women, they also use this institution to liberate themselves from male dominance and to gain freedom and agency (1997:183).

Afghanistani women wear two different types of veiling, the *chādar* and *chādari*, and both are considered an expression of modesty.<sup>17</sup> The *chādar* is a two-dimensional, square or rectangular-shaped garment, similar to the Western scarf or shawl. Though the style of wearing varies, typically a *chādar* covers the head, hair, neck and shoulders of the wearer and protects these parts of the body from view. It is worn in both private and public contexts and is subject to style variations and personal aesthetic preferences. The *chādari*, which is greatly favoured by the Taliban, is a three-dimensional, vertically panelled, seamed and pleated loose garment that encloses the entire body of the wearer in order to obscure her from view. It is considered a ‘full veil’ and is worn over a woman’s ordinary clothing, including a *chādar*. A rectangular area of open-work embroidery covers the eyes and provides limited vision for the wearer as well as minimal visibility to the observer. It is worn primarily in public outside the home (see Daly 2000). Contrary to Lila Abu-Lughod’s claims that the Taliban enforced the dress code most common to tribal areas (2002:785), *chādari* was and still is common only in urban areas and among non-Pashtun women. Women in tribal areas never cover themselves from head to toe.

The veil was officially lifted in Afghanistan in the early 1920s by the Young Afghan reformist government (1919–29).<sup>18</sup> This provoked

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17 Kazem claims that the *chādari* was not part of Afghanistani women’s clothing, but was introduced from India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He argues that until the late 1830s women were not obliged to wear the *chādari*. It was brought by the Indian Muslim women who accompanied British troops in the First Anglo–Afghan War (1839–42). During the war, the Afghan *ulama* issued *fatwās* forbidding women from leaving home without covering themselves, so they wore the newly introduced *chādari* when leaving home (Kazem 2014). With the country further declining politically and economically, the *chādari* became compulsory, especially in the cities.

18 Queen Suraya was the first Afghanistani woman to discard the veil in 1928 (Poullada 1973:83–84) and an estimated 100 women, mainly wives of government officials, followed suit (Gregorian 1969:244).

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widespread rebellion and cost the government power. In 1959 the veil was lifted again, but this time unofficially and without any publicity.<sup>19</sup> From the early 1960s, with the growth in women's education and employment, women increasingly abandoned veiling, especially in the cities. With the ratification of the 1964 Constitution of Afghanistan, women gained the right to vote for the first time.<sup>20</sup> The same decade saw Afghanistani women serve as ministers and members of parliament for the first time. According to Muhammad Ali, 'the most fundamental movement' during this period was 'freeing Afghan women from the veil' (1969:82). Following the 1978 coup, a main priority of the leftist regime from the very outset was the emancipation of women through education and employment. For a regime determined to change Afghanistani society through radical reforms, veiling was the very symbol of backwardness.

Due to the radicalisation of society after the empowerment of the mujahideen in 1992, modesty was given an Islamic connotation and was forcefully implemented.<sup>21</sup> When the mujahideen and the Taliban enforced the veiling and seclusion of women, whether in Afghanistan or in refugee camps in Pakistan, it was claimed as a proper reflection of the traditional modesty of women, as well as a requirement of *sharia*.<sup>22</sup> According to them, veiling and seclusion

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19 Indeed the initiative and the campaign for lifting the veil at this time came from the students and teachers of the newly established collage of midwifery. The government agreed and quietly put it into practice (see Farhang 1992:689).

20 According to Dupree, 'the emphasis on the legal equality of women is one of the more important aspects of the 1964 constitution' (1973:532).

21 Radicalisation or Islamisation of a society takes place when political Islamic activists 'advocate total adherence to the *shari'ā* ... as formulated in the medieval period and see in Islam a monolithic religio-political to countervail competing Western ideology' (Afsaruddin 1999:4).

22 *Sharia*, or Islamic law, was developed from the Koran and *hadiths* by four traditional law schools, each of which was regarded as authoritative in one or another part of the Islamic world. In Afghanistan the Hanafia School is considered the authoritative school.

were directly tied to the preservation of both Islamic morality and traditional culture.<sup>23</sup> This was a distinction between state-imposed modesty discourses and family-based ones. Under these restrictions, Afghanistani women struggled to define themselves in their social, economic and political spheres. For the Taliban, unveiled women could not exist in public. To be a woman, a Muslim and Afghanistani is an identity that is frequently essentialised by wearing the veil and observing modest conduct.

### **Revolution, jihad and women**

The war in Afghanistan is a stark reality for women. The war began in 1978 after the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) staged a coup and wrested power from Muhammad Daud, who himself had come to power through a coup five years earlier. In 1973, Daud, a member of the royal family, brother-in-law and first cousin to the king, had ended the decade of democratic experiment of 1964 to 1973. He had previously served in various capacities, including as prime minister from 1953 to 1963. Daud established a republic in which all power was accumulated in his own hands and ruled with a rod of iron. While his success in taking power was aided by young military officers, some of whom belonged to the PDPA, in order to cement his absolute power he suppressed all political groups in the country, from the Islamist to the social democrat to the pro-Maoist and to the PDPA. After Daud imprisoned almost all leaders of the PDPA, the military wing of the party staged a coup in April 1978

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23 As Charlotte Bunch argues, fundamentalists in every religion, including Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, 'insist that women identify with the particular narrow identity of their group and disavow "the other". Most demand that women be carriers of the cultural purity of their group' (Bunch 2001:133).

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and Daud, his entire family and most of his cabinet ministers were killed.

The pro-Soviet PDPA established the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (seen as a Communist regime in the West), which aimed to implement rapid socio-political, cultural and economic transformation through reforms announced in the form of decrees. Three decrees—Nos. 6, 7 and 8—were the main planks of the program of socio-economic transformation. Decree No. 6 was intended to put an end to land mortgage and indebtedness; Decree No. 7 concerned the status of women; Decree No. 8 controlled the distribution of land to the peasants. According to Decree No. 7, the *mahr*, or dowry (the mandatory amount of money or possessions, often a combination of both, which formed an essential part of the formal Islamic marriage contract), paid by the groom to the bride at the time of marriage for her exclusive use,<sup>24</sup> was fixed at 300 AFN. The decree also forbade forced marriages and made sixteen the minimum age for engagement (the usual practice was for girls to be married immediately after puberty). At the same time, the PDPA created more opportunities for greater participation of women in government, education and the workforce. The intention was to bring about rapid social change and to unify a population that had diverse linguistic, ethnic and religious characteristics. These radical measures, difficult to implement in a predominately traditional Islamic society, caused immediate resistance because they touched culturally, socially and economically sensitive issues. Opposition came from different segments of society, particularly in the rural areas,

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24 *Tuyāna* (bride price) is different from *mahr* (dowry), which is an essential part of the marriage contract in Islam; it is specified as a payment to the bride herself by the groom.

where apparently the provision of literacy courses for women caused great concern.<sup>25</sup> This opposition was fuelled and exploited by the mujahideen groups, now operating from outside the country, mainly from Pakistan.

The Afghan war that commenced in the late 1970s has mostly been fought in the name of revolution and jihad. The war has involved many players, but no winner, and so heroes and villains, revolution, jihad and democracy have become interchangeable. For example, the mujahideen, who fought against the leftist regime between 1978 and 1992, were considered freedom fighters and liberators, but are now called fundamentalists, warlords or terrorists. But it is not surprising that the heroes of the past have become the villains of today; the idea of jihad was a vehicle to mobilise the people to fight the pro-Soviet leftist government in the 1980s and it is now utilised by the Taliban to fight against the pro-American government. What has not changed is the central role of women's issues to the warring sides. Although women themselves have not been main players, their causes have been at the centre of political and ideological discourse. The PDPA claimed that their revolution aimed to transform Afghanistan from a backward, feudal, peasant and tribal society into a modern one. Women's causes had a central position in the process.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the mujahideen wanted to preserve the position of women and standards of modesty and seclusion according to the teachings of Islam and traditional

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25 It happened that in Kandahar, 'three literacy workers from the women's organization were killed as symbols of the unwanted revolution' (Moghadam 1994b:223).

26 "The Main Outlines of the Revolutionary Tasks" proclaimed the eradication of illiteracy; equality for women; an end to ethnic discrimination; a larger role for the state in the national economy; and the abolition of "feudal and pre-feudal relationships"—code of the power of landowners, traditional leaders, and mullahs, especially in the countryside' (Braithwaite 2011:42).

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practices. In part, the USA invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to free Afghanistani women from the clutches of the Taliban and to end gender apartheid. In this way, women's causes have been one of the driving forces of major political developments in Afghanistan in the last four decades.

As will be discussed later, the war had had a paradoxical impact on the lives and status of women. The political and ideological undertakings of the warring sides had different implications for women, depending on which side of the conflict women were caught on. Women who lived in urban areas during the 1980s found good opportunities for education and employment, whereas those who lived in refugee camps in Pakistan did not. Women who lived under Taliban rule were deprived of basic rights, they had no access to education or employment, they were obliged to cover themselves from head to toe and they were even forbidden to step outside their homes without the company of a close male relative.

The leftist government's failure to implement reforms that would have changed the social fabric of Afghanistan (Rubin 2002:116–117) was due not only to the widespread resistance led by the mujahideen, but also to the government's heavy-handed approach in the early stages. Most analysts argue that 'the violence of the state rather than its reforms ... lay at the root of the crisis' (Dorransoro 2005:96). The government's repressive measures included the imprisonment and execution of tribal and religious leaders, urban intelligentsia and even pro-Marxists, and led to its increasing unpopularity.<sup>27</sup> Two factors further deepened the crisis: the increase of covert support for the

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27 The party was also engaged in fighting within its own rank and file, which resulted in the ousting and murdering of its leader, Noor Muhammad Tarki, and the purging of many military officers from the army and the party. For more on the leftist government reforms and the internal and international response, see Braithwaite 2011.



mujahideen by the USA and other countries, and the invasion of the country by the Soviet Army. The government that came to power in the late 1979 had softened most of its original measures. It avoided Marxist rhetoric and included some non-party members in the government. But in the face of the Soviet invasion, and the increasing military, financial and psychological aid to the mujahideen, it could not win the war. With the escalation of violence, the majority of the Afghanistani people were caught between two warring sides. Contrary to mujahideen publicity and the general view in the West, the majority of people, including women, favoured reforms and did not want to live under a fundamentalist Islamic government (Blum 2004:347). The majority of Afghanistani people have not resisted the pro-Western government's socio-political reforms since the removal of the Taliban in 2001.

Despite its obstacles, the leftist regime achieved significant advancement of its aim to improve literacy, including that of women. According to Keshtmand, government reforms resulted in an increase in literacy of up to 30% by the end of the 1980s (2002:859). This was a substantial change in a country that prior to the 1978 coup had one of the highest rates of female illiteracy—98%.<sup>28</sup> However, these changes occurred in the cities and did not really touch the rural areas where the majority of women lived. When the leftist regime collapsed in 1992, 50% of the students and 60% of the teachers at Kabul University were women. In addition, 70% of all schoolteachers, 50% of civilian government workers and 40% of doctors in Kabul were women (see Skaine 2002:27; Nawid 2007:65). According to the World Development Index, by 1990, 34% of the

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28 Not surprisingly, in the words of Matsumoto, people look 'at the Communist era as a "golden age" of literacy' (2013:42).

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formal labour force in Afghanistan was female (see Amiri et al 2004: 287).

The mujahideen had a different view of the women's issue and saw the government's challenges to the status quo as one of the main reasons for their uprising. They maintained that defending Islam and the homeland meant first of all preserving the honour of women, whose rights and status should be regulated according to their interpretation of *sharia* law. What the leftist government framed as efforts to emancipate women were considered by the mujahideen as evidence of a conspiracy to corrupt women and the whole of the Afghan Muslim nation. When the mujahideen came to power in 1992, they imposed their views on women throughout the country by issuing *fatwās*. One *fatwā* via the Supreme Court on 27 August 1993—“*Fatwā-i sharia satr wa hijāb*” (A *sharia fatwā* on women's covering and *hijāb*)—clearly drew the boundaries for women's deportment:

Women are to cover themselves completely; are not to wear attractive and colourful clothing and decorative accessories; are not to wear tight and revealing clothing; do not wear perfume; their jewellery must not make any noise; they are not to walk gracefully or with pride and in the middle of the sidewalk; are not to talk to strangers; are not to speak loudly or laugh in public ('*Fatwā-i shari satr wa hijab*').

This decree was the beginning of a new era in women's appearance and status, a complete departure from official policies since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now it was the state that imposed compulsory veiling on women and restricted their movement, education and employment.

## **Women in the refugee camps**

Afghanistani women living in refugee camps represent one of the biggest groups of displaced people in modern history, and this remains a current issue, as many of them are still struggling in these camps. Two-thirds of Afghanistan's 25-million population were displaced and around five million ended up in refugee camps in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Migration started with the 1978 coup and with every significant political development in the last four decades new groups of people were displaced. The second wave began after the collapse of the leftist regime and the empowerment of the mujahideen in 1992. The third happened when the Taliban came to power in 1996. Women and children, who are described and defined as 'vulnerable groups' (El-Bushra 2000:13), have made up the largest number of displaced persons. In this way, migration and displacement have become the nucleus around which the history of Afghanistani women has revolved in the last four decades.

There is a general consensus among Western scholars that many women and their families left Afghanistan after the 1978 coup due to the government's introduction of a universal literacy program for women (see, for example, Dupree 1984 and Centlivres-Demont 1994). While this might have been a motivation for some families in rural parts of the country's south and east, it was not true for the majority of people in other areas, who had generally shown interest in the expansion of educational institutions for their children.

In the decades following 1978, access to education remained a strong concern of the Afghanistani diaspora. According to a 1998 study by the International Consortium for Refugees in Iran, the number one priority for Afghan families was educational opportunities for

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their children (Squire and Gerami 1998:21).<sup>29</sup> In a 1996 study conducted by Peter Marsden among the Afghan communities in Iran, he found the main deterrent to returning to Afghanistan was its lack of good education opportunities, especially for girls (Marsden 1996:8). Despite severe restrictions by the mujahideen, some private schools were established in Peshawar, Pakistan, where Afghanistans sent their children, both boys and girls in the 1980s and 1990s. In Iran, one of the demands displaced Afghanistani communities have made of the Iranian government is for it to allow their children to attend school and to facilitate literacy courses for women (see Hoodfar 2004; 2010). In an effort to encourage the repatriation of Afghanistani migrants and refugees, Iran has accommodated only a limited number of Afghanistani students (Chatty 2010:8). These restrictions have been met with various strategies, such as borrowing identity cards from Iranians or Afghanistans with legal access to education, and the establishment of 'informal, self-directed and self-funded schools for ... children' (Chatty 2010:8) These informal Afghan schools were established in a number of Iranian cities, but especially Mashhad, and were attended by both boys and girls.

Similarly, many Afghanistani women attended literacy courses after settling in Iran (Hoodfar 2004:158). While the creation of literacy courses for women in rural Afghanistan in the early stages may have been politically heavy-handed and resulted in some families opposing the program, the government did not have the means to establish literacy courses all over those areas, let alone force

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29 Interestingly, this study among Afghan refugee women shows that 'the top priority identified by almost all the groups was education: for the Hazaras it was education in general, but especially literacy; for the Pashtun women it was skills training'. These women believed that they could improve their lives if they had some education (Squire and Gerami 1998:21).

women to attend the courses, and in reality they had little impact on rural regions throughout the government's time in power. Usually the courses operated only in semi-major towns around the country. It was there that some people may have resented allowing female members of their family to attend the courses.

The Soviet Union and the USA contributed equally to mass migration. When Russian soldiers came under rocket attack or were ambushed, they bombed the entire village, which caused mass migration among the villagers. By arming the warring sides, the violence spread. The USA 'spent billions of dollars to recruit, pay, train, and equip large numbers of Afghan migrants [who became mujahideen] to sabotage public projects, civil sector infrastructure, and implement hit and run operations against Soviet and Afghan forces' (Hanifi 2000:294). While the mujahideen operated almost freely in rural areas, and could easily push the population to leave, they adopted new strategies in urban areas. The guerilla attacks and sabotage operations were conducted by various squads that trained in Pakistan under the operations director for Pakistan intelligence, Brigadier General Muhammad Yousaf, whose strategy was 'death by a thousand cuts' (Yousaf and Adkin 1992:146). Their apparent mission was to bomb military posts and assassinate Russian and Afghan military and high-profile officials. Because these targets were well protected, civilians were the main casualties of their operations and these tactics created an environment of fear among the general population. The mujahideen's main civilian targets were educational and cultural institutions. Urban and rural schools were burned down and their teachers were killed. Kabul University was a particular target, despite the fact that the majority of the university's staff were not PDPA members. The mujahideen considered all professors

fair game because they were 'poisoning young minds with Marxist anti-Islamic dogma' (Coll 2004:132).<sup>30</sup> The cinema, the theatre and Afghanistani artists were considered un-Islamic as well and became targets. In this way, the spread of violence and the environment of fear pushed people to leave Afghanistan for neighbouring countries.

### War and propaganda

The warring sides each made heavy use of propaganda to publicise their causes, highlighting their own successes and their opponents' failures.<sup>31</sup> They used radio, audiocassettes, documentary films, books, newspaper and night letters. Their propaganda had three targets: members of their own group, the Afghan population at large and the international audience. In addition, international supporters of both sides disseminated propaganda in their own media in favour of the side they supported. Russian and Eastern Bloc media, for instance, gave ample publicity to the leftist regime, depicting it as a just government that was fighting to modernise Afghanistan against fundamentalist groups backed by regional reactionary regimes and an imperialist West.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote that 'the Spanish war is a bad war ... and nobody is right' (1989:456). The same could be said of the

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30 All these methods have been used by the Taliban since their removal from power in 2001.

31 One of the effective ways the USA supported the mujahideen was by providing them with 'psychological' support. In 1983, for example, the USA formed the inter-agency Afghan Working Group, which met twice a month to discuss ways to increase media coverage of the war and generate sympathy and support for the mujahideen. To make the mujahideen themselves active on the propaganda front, the USA Information Agency subcontracted Boston University's College of Communication to train the mujahideen to use television, radio and newspaper to advance their cause (Blum 2004). The American diplomatic mission in Pakistan became a centre of briefing about the war in Afghanistan. Foreign journalists, who had poured into Pakistan, but could not travel inside Afghanistan, relied heavily on these briefings.

Afghan war. An enormous number of Western publications exist on the atrocities committed by the Soviet troops in Afghanistan, but, during the war, little was known about the conduct of the mujahideen and the ways the West, especially the USA, supported them. 'American policy went beyond supplying the resistance [mujahideen] groups with weapons', David Gibbs argues. 'For an extended period, US policy aimed at increasing the intensity of combat, while undercutting efforts to see a diplomatic solution to the Afghan war' (2000:244). According to Gibbs, Afghanistan's fate was not really a central issue for USA, 'it was a pretext to elicit public support for rearmament' (2004:308). The USA had begun supporting the mujahideen months before the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet army. Indeed, the USA administration had decided the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) should take 'a leading role inside Afghanistan six months before the Soviets invaded' (Tadman 2013:32). As the USA, and especially the CIA, saw it, Afghanistan would become the USSR's Vietnam. In August 1979, three months before the Soviet intervention, a declassified State Department Report stated:

The United State's larger interests ... would be served by the demise of the Taraki-Amin regime, despite whatever setback this might mean for future social and economic reforms in Afghanistan ... the overthrow of the D.R.A [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan] would show the rest of the world, particularly the Third World, that the Soviet's view of the socialist course of history as being inevitable is not accurate. (Quoted in Blum 2004:347)

The USA knew backing the mujahideen and supporting their activities would undermine progress and modernisation, facilitate the spread of radicalism in Afghanistan and alienate the most progressive

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sections of the elite. However, strategic considerations and potential damage to the pro-Soviet regime were more important factors than undermining modernisation in a country under the Soviet Union's sphere of influence since the Second World War. The invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet troops later 'served to provide cover for the US intelligence agency's actions' and, if anything, offered the Carter administration an opportunity to arm more of the mujahideen once the war began (Tadman 2013:63).

USA support for the mujahideen was one of the key elements in the invasion (Gibbs 2004:312–13).<sup>32</sup> Using the CIA's 'elaborate propaganda network', the USA supported the mujahideen by running wide ranging publicity campaigns to encourage the 'massive exodus of migrants from Afghanistan to embarrass the Soviet Union and the government it supported' (Hanafi 2000:293). The push for the mass emigration of the Afghan population was one the strategies of the mujahideen in the 1980s. The refugees actively participated in the conflict as labourers and military recruits and their exodus provided political legitimacy for the guerrilla groups and created pressure on the PDPA government (Loescher 2001:41). In addition, because the refugee camps in Pakistan were directly controlled by

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32 In a 1998 interview with the French press, the former national security advisor Zbigniew Brezeninski spoke about the secret aid to the mujahideen and how it provoked Russia to invade the country:

According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Mujahiddin began during 1980, this is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979. But the reality, closely guarded until now, is completely otherwise: Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention ... It had the effect of drawing the Russian into the Afghan trap ... The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter, essentially: 'We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war'. (Quoted in Gibbs 2004:314)



the mujahideen groups (with the help of Pakistan and international aid agencies), international aid was distributed through them. The donor community, eager to support the politics of jihad, channeled its aid through the mujahideen groups. The mujahideen, in turn, used foreign aid as a tool to enlist the support of the refugees. In fact, refugees arriving from Afghanistan 'were obliged, if they wanted to qualify for rations, to become affiliated' with one of the mujahideen groups (Weinbaum 1991:77). This was a blatantly political use of aid that made the refugees 'pawns in the larger geopolitical struggle' (Loescher 1993:89) and, in this way, whole refugee camp populations came under the tight control of the radical Islamists.

The camps, which consisted of the families' compound, military training section, weapons deposit and *madrasas* (or religious schools), served as a means of radicalising Afghanistani youth (see Turton and Marsden 2002; Tomsen 2011).<sup>33</sup> Foreign fighters, mainly from the Middle East, brought a new brand of Islam—Wahhabism—and a new brand of political Islam into the camps, and it was from these camps that the Taliban emerged in the early 1990s.

The political and social structure of the camps supported religious and social conservatism and in this environment women were further subjected to seclusion and oppression, to the point of being prevented from leaving the camps.<sup>34</sup> It is these conditions that Maryam Mahboob depicts in her narrative works. Mahboob's writing challenges the

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33 According to Peter Tomsen, the American ambassador to the mujahideen in Pakistan in the late 1980s, 'these madrasas turned young Afghan refugees...into fanatics trained to kill Muslims and non-Muslims alike on command' (2011:377).

34 Note that the condition of Afghanistani women refugees in Iran was completely different, especially with regard to access to education and social interaction. They had the opportunity to receive formal education; particularly those women who arrived in Iran prior to 1990. Unlike in Pakistan, only a very small number of Afghanistani refugees in Iran (less than 2%) ended up in the camps. The majority were dispersed in urban areas (see Squire and Germi 1998:19; Chatty 2010:7).

myths and propaganda created by the warring sides in the Afghanistan conflict and demonstrates what Goodman terms the 'misogynist underpinning of those myths' (1998:278).

### **Women and the family economy**

It is presumed that one of the reasons for women's subordination is their lack of contribution to the family economy or the idea of the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the consumer. But in reality women both in the cities and rural areas contribute to the family economy, though their income belongs to their menfolk and they have little control over it.<sup>35</sup> Since the early 1960s women increasingly found employment in the cities, especially in teaching, administration and manufacturing. In a sample of women from the early 1970s, 42% had formal education and 41% worked outside the house; 71% were teachers or students (Rubin 2002:79). This, however, was limited to the younger generation of the upper and middle classes in Kabul. In the 1980s women found greater opportunity for employment in almost every field, including the security forces. Even a considerable number of public transport drivers in Kabul were women. In some rural areas in the north and west, women contribute between 80% and 90% of the family income, whereas in the most conservative southern areas among the Pashtun population women's share is only 15% (Maletta 2008:180; Rezaie 2011:247). Most of the rural economy is based on agriculture and pastoralism, where women are the main producers. Women also are the main producers in the fields of carpet weaving and handicrafts. Nevertheless in some

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35 Tapper notes that the segregation of men and women 'is related to the division of labor by which women are confined to domestic activities, while economic and political decisions outside the domestic sphere are the prerogative of men' (1991:105).

rural areas women's role in economic production makes a significant contribution to social, political and economic decision-making. For example, in the nomadic economy in which there is a division of labour, shepherding and marketing activities are typically carried out by men, while dairying and wool production are the responsibilities of women.

### Women and traditional space

In order to present a true picture of the lives of Afghanistani women—not a stereotype—there are two questions that need to be discussed. Firstly, is there any dynamism in the lives of women in the context of the existing socio-cultural structure? In other words, is it true that modesty and segregation make Afghanistani women completely submissive and obedient? Secondly, if socio-cultural and political conditions are so tilted towards women's subordination, what agency do women have?<sup>36</sup> Can they only comply with the restrictions and accept their subordination, or can they (at least some of them) challenge these 'norms'? These are the questions Mahboob asks in her short stories.

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36 While generally women in Afghanistan have little say in social and political issues, there are some examples that contradict this rule. For example, Josiah Harlan, who visited Afghanistan in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, writes this about Hazara women:

Hazara men display a remarkable deference of the opinions of their wives, especially on grave occasions, which impresses a stranger with surprise, when that deference is contested with the indifference and contempt usually prevailing amongst Mohammedans in their treatment and opinion of the sex. The sexes participate in the domestic responsibility and in the labours and pleasures of their conditions. Seclusion of the women is not practiced, less dependence being placed on bolts and bars for the preservation of female virtue than is allowed to sense of prudence and the influence of honour. They associated with them as equal companions, arrogate no superior pretensions of pre-eminence, consult with them on all occasions, and weighty matters, when they are not present, defer a conclusion until the opinions of their women can be heard. (Harlan 1939:121–22)

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It is true that in Afghanistan the honour of a man is connected to the perceived behaviour of the women of his family. However, it is arguable that this perception allows space for women to develop what Nancy Tapper terms their 'subversive' power. There are 'certain possibilities for women's action which, while they are implicit in the dominant ideologies of gender espoused by both men and women, nonetheless are constructed in opposition to the ideals of male dominance which they contradict', she argues (1991:21). This provides an alternative discourse and an informal agency for women based on a set of practices that publicly present as reinforcing male dominance.

Traditionally in Afghanistan, women are excluded from men's gatherings, even in their own homes, but as Nancy Tapper's fieldwork shows, this is not a blanket rule. Among Durrani Pashtuns, who are supposedly one of the more conservative groups in Afghanistan, households reflect little sexual segregation. Durrani women are less restricted in their environment and are able to entertain 'male guests when no adult male is present or available' (Tapper 1991:105).

Contrary to what is generally understood of gendered segregation in the Middle East, Leila Ahmed argues that women may also be the subjects who desire it. One of the meanings of the harem is *harrām*, which translates as 'forbidden'. Ahmed asserts that

it was women who were doing the forbidding, excluding men from their society ... it was therefore women who developed the model of strict segregation in the first place. Here women share living time and living space, exchange experience and information, and critically analyse ... the world of men. (1982b:529)

In these segregated spheres women use sexually explicit or 'coarse' language, and are anything but shy. They sing songs and recite oral poetry in which they can freely express a range of sentiments that

cannot be regarded as modest in the public context.<sup>37</sup> Most lyrics of women's songs and folk poetry, for example, convey sexual references both in Persian and Pashto. And because the audience for these songs and poems are women, they do not provoke any resentment in the community, even in the tribal areas. Anthropological research, even among the most conservative groups (such as the Pashtuns in the east), show that women, through their own types of music and poetry, such as *landay*, express a female world.<sup>38</sup> Inger Boesen found this to be the case with Pashtun women and their practice of storytelling and recitation of poetry in eastern Afghanistan:

women hold another divergent view of their situation which is expressed in the form of an oral poetry that exists as 'folk ballads' or is composed spontaneously for a specific occasion ... *Landays* are always sung, accompanied by the women's instrument, the taborin (*tsamba*), and the singing of *landays* is only performed when no men are near. (Boesen 1983:104)

In these *landays* women express their deepest feelings, fantasies, needs and ideas, especially in relation to their sexuality. According to Boesen, 'women's divergent consciousness, as expressed in the *landays*, in many ways rejects ... male control of their persons, proposing instead a model of women's management of their own bodies and their emotional life' (1983:108). These *landays* show not only one aspect of women's emotional lives, they also demonstrate

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37 See Doubleday 2006, which is based on her memoirs in Afghanistan in the early 1970s.

38 A *landay* is made up of two couplets, the first shorter—nine syllables—and the second longer—twelve and thirteen syllables (Hewadmal 1987:177). Jon W Anderson notes that *landays* 'are the preferred voice for speaking of vitality, passion, exuberance and other qualities' (1985:207), and Majrouh asserts that they speak to 'the themes of love, honor, and death' (2010:xvi). *Landays* can be found among different Pashtun communities in south and east Afghanistan. For examples of *landays* translated into English, see Majrouh 2010.

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what goes on in the sexual relationships of women outside marriage in a conservative society that ostensibly forbids such relationships (1983:108). This is equally true of the epigrammatic *dobaiti* (two lines) or *chārbaiti* (four lines) in the Persian-speaking territories in north, west and central Afghanistan, mainly among the Tajik and Hazara communities. The *dobaiti* or *chārbaiti* are commonly sung by women and accompanied by the *dāria* (a tambourine-like drum played by women) and they typically speak of the female world, expressing women's emotions, needs and sentimental feelings.<sup>39</sup> Tajik society is considered to be more open than that of the Pashtuns. However, the explicit references to the world of women and love affairs that are characteristic of the *dobaiti* and *chārbaiti* caused the religious establishment in the Hazara communities to forbid their performance (Khawari 2003:8). This has not stopped their widespread popularity among the population in general, and women in particular.<sup>40</sup>

Although Afghanistani women generally face marginalisation and oppression, the diverse customs within Afghanistani society and the alternative female discourses fostered in female spaces and expressed strongly in musical and poetic forms such as the *landay* and *dobaiti* suggest that there are spaces in the traditional way of life for women to challenge dominant gender ideologies and practices.

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39 For more information about the *dobaiti* or *chārbaiti*, see Doubleday 2011.

40 For a fine collection of Harazagi *dobaities*, see Khawari 2003.

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## Chapter Three

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# MARYAM MAHBOOB AND HER SHORT STORIES

### Short biography of Maryam Mahboob

Maryam Mahboob was born in 1955 in Maimana in northern Afghanistan. Her mother, Belqis Mahboob, was a housewife and illiterate, her father was educated and worked as a public servant in various provinces of Afghanistan. Like many intellectual women in Afghanistan, Mahboob's education was supported by her mother despite her mother's own illiteracy. Mahboob received her primary education in Maimana and Herat, and her secondary education in Kabul. She later received a BA from Tehran University. This provided her with an opportunity to become deeply familiar with the condition of Afghanistani women in various areas of the country and abroad.

Mahboob was acquainted with literate and illiterate women, and urban and rural-based women. She worked as a journalist on two leading publications in the early 1970s, *Zhwandoon* (Life) and *Anis* (Companion), where she published most of her short stories before leaving Afghanistan. Mahboob went to Pakistan in the early 1980s because of her opposition to the leftist government. She emigrated with a peer group of writers and artists that included her future

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husband and in Pakistan she supported the mujahideen and their cause. However, the socio-political environment in Pakistan was such that, as a female writer, she had to live in hiding and publish under a pseudonym, despite the fact she had been the first author to write 'jihadi' fiction. This experience was a tough lesson on how the mujahideen treated ordinary people, and women in particular, and it led her to a different understanding of the true nature of the jihadists. In order to find sanctuary, Mahboob moved to India after just a year in Pakistan. Although the Indian government supported the leftist Kabul regime, the mujahideen groups were very influential, even in Delhi. In 1986, Mahboob emigrated to Canada, where she continues to live with her husband, Zalmai Babakohi, a writer and poet. In the early 1990s she contributed to the establishment of a short-lived newspaper, *Wāzha* (The Word) and since 1996 she and Babakohi have published a bi-weekly newspaper, *Zarnegār*, which is one of the major Afghanistani newspapers published outside the country. Since its inception, Mahboob and Babakohi have expanded *Zarnegār* to publish books and the press has so far published two collections of Mahboob's short stories.<sup>1</sup>

Despite being a political writer, Mahboob was not a member of any political party or organisation. Her early works were strongly concerned with class struggle—a Marxist theme—yet she did not support the leftist regime, which advocated such ideas in its official policy. After the emergence of the new regime and the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, she became disillusioned with the government. Mahboob not only abandoned class struggle as the focal point of her short stories, she began to write works in support

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1 The press also published Zalmai Babakohi's *Pawrāna-hā dar zemistān parwāz mekunand* (*Butterflies fly in the winter*) in 2008.



of the mujahideen, a change of philosophy and approach that was perhaps due to her nationalist sentiments. But, as discussed above, her support for the mujahideen was short-lived. After residing in areas under their control, including Peshawar, Mahboob became one of the most vocal opponents of the mujahideen and the atrocities they committed.

Mahboob's approach to writing fiction sheds light on the cultural conditions of a country that lacked formal opportunities to learn the art of writing and had a limited capacity to publish its writers. The school curriculum lacked any subject on contemporary literature, let alone creative writing or even composition. Thus, no guide to the art of fiction was available to Mahboob. Yet she had to find a way to learn. She started writing fiction when she was a student at Aysha Durrani High School in the 1960s. According to her own account, she was a member of a group of five girls who were committed to reading contemporary literature and to writing. They regularly read novels published in Iran, watched movies (mostly Indian and Iranian) and produced synopses of them (encompassing their subjective responses) to read to their peers. They also tried their own hand at writing stories. However, they had no one but each other to read their stories, nor did they contemplate seeking publication in magazines or newspapers, neither of which were available in the school library.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Mahboob published her stories in a children's weekly, *Kamkyāno Anis* (Little Companion), after graduating from school.<sup>3</sup> This shows the difficulties young people in general, and women in particular, had in becoming published writers in Afghanistan in those days.

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2 Personal communication, October 2013.

3 The weekly *Kamkyāno Anis* was the only children's publication in Afghanistan between the late 1960s and the early 1980s.

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Mahboob's destiny changed after she joined the publications *Anis* and later *Zhwandoon*. She published her works in *Anis*, *Pashtun Zbagh* (The Voice of Pashtun) and *Zhwandoon*, and was broadcast on Kabul Radio. In the absence of any literary journals, the weekly magazine *Zhwandoon* was the most significant publication in Afghanistan<sup>4</sup>, not only because it published the major literary works of Afghanistani writers and poets, but because some distinguished writers of the time served on its staff.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, working on *Zhwandoon* provided Mahboob with the opportunity to come into direct contact with some of the country's most outstanding contemporary writers and to benefit from their advice and encouragement. According to her own statements, Najib Rahiq (the journal's editor-in-chief) and the leading Afghanistani author Rahnaward Zaryab were among those writers from whom she received great encouragement.<sup>6</sup> Some of the works that Mahboob published in *Zhwandoon* later appeared in the collection *Khāna-i Delgir* (*The confined house*), which was published in Kabul by Afghanistan's Writers' Association in 1990 while she was living in Canada.<sup>7</sup>

Another factor that changed her life and career was her travel outside Afghanistan for higher education. At the age of nineteen she went to Iran to study Persian literature at Tehran University. This opened up an opportunity to learn about classical and modern

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4 *Zhwandoon* emerged after the Second World War (in 1948) as the first general magazine in Afghanistan. Its foundation coincided with the acceptance of Afghanistan as a member of the United Nations, as well as a relative and short-lived relaxation of its political conditions (1947–1952) (for a fine account of the period, see Ghubar 1999:210–271). In 1980, *Zhwandoon* was transformed and became a publication of Afghanistan's Writers' Association.

5 These writers included Rosta Bakhtary, Rahnaward Zaryab and Jalal Noorani.

6 Personal communication, 10 February 2006.

7 Mahboob did not have a say in the selection of stories for the collection. However, her two recent books were self-published.

Persian literature and to focus more on studying and writing fiction. It also came with the prospect of developing a sense of independence. In those days it was not common for girls of her age from an ordinary family to go outside alone, including in the pursuit of further studies; only women from the upper class were privileged to do so. It encouraged her to leave Afghanistan for good and she left only a year after returning from Iran in 1980. For a young and unmarried woman to leave her homeland and search for sanctuary with a group of male colleagues stood in total contrast to the cultural norms of the time, and doing so showed the extent of her determination and desire for autonomy. Her decision was also rooted in the changes and developments that took place in the era and, in some ways, Mahboob and her writing can be seen to be very much a product of the socio-political and cultural developments in Afghanistan since the early 1960s.

### **The 1960s and the emergence of new voices**

Mahboob belongs to the generation of authors who emerged in the late 1960s, a decade that is located between two distinctive periods: first, the period during which a nation-state was established, beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and concluding with the establishment of the constitutional monarchy in 1964; and second, the year 1978, which saw the emergence of the leftist regime and the outbreak of a war that still continues.<sup>8</sup> A common feature of both of these periods is dictatorship. Mahboob's generation of writers often looked to Western cultural models rather than indigenous ones. As writers, they were the product of a familiarity with Western literature rather

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8 For more information on the constitutional decade, see Bezhan 2013a:635–36; 2013b:921–22.

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than an education in the indigenous literary tradition. (Some of them had a comparatively deep understanding of classical Persian literature.) Literature of this period became an experiment with new and essentially Western literary genres. It also became a means for exploring and analysing social, political and cultural realities, most of the time through the lenses of various foreign ideologies. The ground for such an approach was laid by at least two developments. The first was the ratification of the new constitution (1964), which resulted in, among other things, the establishment of political parties and new dynamics in political and cultural activities. The second was a growing familiarity with Western culture. This included an increasing familiarity with its literature, as it became more accessible, particularly as translation of such works made in Iran or Afghanistan became available (see Bezhan 2005).

While in the past most Afghanistani writers belonged to upper-class families, the majority of the writers of Mahboob's generation belonged to lower middle-class families. They positioned themselves and their work in opposition to the government, were critical of current socio-political and cultural conditions and demanded change, although they did not necessarily agree on the nature of the change they were looking for. They seized on the publishing opportunities presented by new cultural platforms, which included a number of emerging state and privately owned newspapers and magazines. Although the scale of opportunity became much greater in the 1980s (both inside and outside Afghanistan), the cultural expansion of the 1960s offered sufficient encouragement for this tiny group of writers to experiment with conventions of new literary genres and to express their political and ideological viewpoints. While these authors made their voice heard to the literary establishment and the media,

to a great extent they remained outsiders. Edward Said might have referred to them as ‘armature intellectuals’; they were individuals who never fully belonged to social authorities such as the media, the government or corporations, but rather developed and maintained themselves as the authors ‘of a language that tries to speak the truth to power’ (Said 1994:xiv).

Prior to the 1960s, realist works of fiction made up a considerable portion of modern Afghanistani literature, but during this decade ‘reality’ began to be read through class. Writers who were politically oriented toward the Left began to produce work that shows the influence of the *method* of socialist realism of the former Soviet Union and the realism of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe.<sup>9</sup> Maryam Mahboob belonged to this group of left-leaning writers.

The 1960s is one of the most significant periods in the history of modern Afghanistan in terms of the new ideologies and politics that were introduced during this time. It was also the last decade of monarchy in Afghanistan. Until the ratification of the 1964 Afghanistan Constitution and the subsequent ‘constitutional decade’ (1964–73), Afghanistan was ruled by an absolute monarch. After the proclamation of the constitution, diverse political groups began to emerge, with ideological and political dispositions that ranged from liberal to social democrat to ultra-nationalist to Islamist to left-ist. They organised themselves in opposition to the government or in response to one another.<sup>10</sup> Many of them operated on an ad hoc basis, without much organisational structure, while some modelled themselves on political parties. They did not pose a threat to the

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9 For more information, see Bezhan 2006–2007:187–89.

10 These parties emerged when the law for founding political parties had been approved by the parliament but not yet ratified by the king. For more detail, see Bezhan 2013b:923–27.

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status quo at the time. However, during the constitutional decade, Hezb-i Demokratik Khalq-i Afghanistan (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan or PDPA) and Jamyat-i Islami (The Islamic Association) emerged from this group of parties to play an important role in Afghanistani politics,<sup>11</sup> and they have remained active and influential.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1960s and early 1970s Afghanistan's engagement with the outside world reached a peak. Foreign feature films, books, magazines and journals, music and other cultural influences flooded into the country; some were in their original form while others were translations from Iran. A large number of students were sent overseas for higher education and many foreign experts were employed. Foreign tourism to Afghanistan also thrived. Cultural activities, such as conferences, seminars, exhibitions, concerts, theatre and language courses, were frequently arranged by foreign embassies (many of them Western). Richard Newell and Nancy Newell argue that the promise of this era of exchange and competition was 'most evident in the sudden freedom of the intellectuals and professionals to associate openly with each other and with foreigners' (Newell & Newell 1981:44).

The emergence of active political parties and an independent media sparked heated debates on social, political and cultural issues

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11 These two parties split into different factions shortly after their establishment. All the major political parties and organisations today can trace their roots back to these two parties.

12 One of the other influential political parties to emerge in the mid-1960s was the pro-Maoist *Sazman-i Jawanan-i Motaragi* (Progressive Youth Organisation), also known by its publication, *Shola-e jawed* (*Eternal flame*). This party soon split into smaller parties and organisations. One of the most vocal and active of these, especially during the mujahideen period (1992–96) and the Taliban period (1996–2001), was the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan or RAWA. This was the women's organisation of the Sazman Rehai Afghanistan or Afghanistan's Liberation Organisation. For more information, see Ibrahimi 2012; Emadi 2001; Bezhan 2013b:933–34.

that were carried out in parliament, via public demonstrations and through the press.<sup>13</sup> One of the main themes debated was women's issues. Some parties established women's associations, especially the leftist parties such as the PDPA and Sazman-i Jawanan-i Mutarraqi (Progressive Youth Organisation or PYO).<sup>14</sup> But it was not only on the political level that women's rights were debated and achieved. Rapid changes also occurred on the social level and these were especially evident in the alterations to women's appearances and the dress code among the educated classes that were occurring. Afghanistani historian Mohammed Ali observed the situation thus:

[The] Afghan girl is experiencing a new freedom in living and in new ways of dressing. Instead of dressing in the ways her mother did at her age, an educated Afghan girl slips quickly into exactly the kind of costume worn by her counterpart in London, Paris or New York. Instead of plaiting her hair, she bobs it in European fashion, pulls on some fine nylon stockings, pushes her feet into moccasins, and dabs her smiling lips with bright red lipstick. (Ali 1969:77–78)

Although this adaptation of Western dress codes predominantly took place in the cities and among the educated and upper classes, it was symptomatic of the rapid change, and the emancipation of women in particular, that Afghanistani society was experiencing in the 1960s. While at the political level the initiative for women's emancipation was in the hands of the leftist parties and left-minded intellectuals, at the social level, especially with regard to the appearance of women, change was led by women of the upper class. The members of the first group believed that, through increased

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13 In this decade the first female satirist, Masuda Kamal, emerged. She published her work in *Tarjoman* (see Bezhan 2014b).

14 These two rival parties were founded in 1965. While the PDPA was pro-Soviet, the DOA was a pro-Maoist group.

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political awareness and participation, women could achieve their rights; it was the leftist parties that organised mass strikes in which women actively participated. The members of the second group had little interest in political activities and were more interested in pursuing a modern lifestyle. They managed to organise activities such as ‘Miss Beauty’, which was called *Dokhtar-i Sāl* (Girl of the Year). The project was run by *Zhwandoon* magazine; women from the upper classes actively supported it. Despite their different aims, the activities of both groups were met with opposition from conservative elements and Islamist activists. Unveiled women who wore Western fashion, and especially those who participated in women’s rallies, were consistently threatened by Islamist activists. At a women’s rally in Kabul in April 1970, supporters of Islamic parties threw acid on female students, severely injuring many of the protesters.<sup>15</sup>

During this period, a relatively large number of people turned to writing fiction, not purely for its aesthetic value but also for its possibilities as a medium for expressing their political and ideological viewpoints. Throughout her career Mahboob has been a political thinker. Her early works deal with explicitly political issues, especially class struggle, which was a popular theme in Afghanistani literature at the time. In subsequent works, a developing interest in the subtler politics of gender issues is evident in her exploration of women’s issues.

### Diaspora and social restrictions

Severe restrictions on women’s mobility and their modesty were not confined to the refugee camps in Pakistan or other areas under

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15 It was not an isolated incident. For more detail, see Dupree 1971:17 and Kestmand 2002:200–201.



mujahideen control. Afghanistani migrants in the West had also been struggling with these issues. In the 1980s when the campaign for jihad and Western support for the mujahideen were at their strongest, the mujahideen exerted great control over migrants in Western countries.

The migrants' social patterns were largely connected to the nature of the different phases of war in Afghanistan. In the 1980s the war was mainly concentrated in rural areas and the majority of migrants during this period were villagers. In the 1990s the war was fought in the towns, primarily in Kabul, and it was mainly people from urban areas, especially the educated class, who migrated. This phase of migration caused a dramatic change in the dynamics that existed within these migrant communities in the West. While extremists could no longer openly campaign or force Muslim women to act 'modestly' in the West, especially as Western support for the mujahideen waned, the new migrants' rejection of Islamic radicalisation came into tension with the existing Afghanistani communities in the West who had been responsive to it. Afghanistani author and journalist Sana Mateen Nekpay, who migrated to Canada in the mid 1990s, describes the control of the mujahideen groups or *tanzims* over the Afghanistani community in Toronto during the 1980s and the tensions it created:

Religion had an extreme influence. The situation was maintained by official support for the jihad and the mujahideen in Afghanistan. While one cannot ignore the struggle and cultural resistance of some migrants, the dominating view in the community was based on jihad and war and the *tanzims*' ideologies. In this situation any different approach was harshly suppressed. In the 1990s new Afghan migrants came to Canada who, as a result of the mujahideen's suppression, killing and looting, had left their

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homeland. The new migrants who had escaped from Afghanistan because of religious radicalisation and extremism and imposing unnecessary restrictions, were faced with similar restrictions in Toronto. As a result ideological and personal conflict emerged within the community. Because the mass media as well as religious and cultural institutions were under the monopoly of the *tanzims*, they easily succeeded in defaming and accusing people of heresy and suppressed [the voice] of the vocal new migrants. I was one of the victims of this period who have been targeted by the leaders of these *tanzims*. (Nekpay 2009)

This explains why most Afghanistani authors living in diaspora kept silent and produced no literary work in the 1980s and it explains the gap of more than ten years in Mahboob's writing. It also demonstrates how significant her work is in dealing with issues that were not popular among the mujahideen groups. Another important aspect of her work is that its subject matter deals with the sensitive issues of Afghanistani women and Western culture, and how they intersect inside and outside Afghanistan. Mahboob's main female characters are born in Afghanistani society, are bound by its socio-cultural codes of conduct and try to challenge them, regardless of whether they succeed or fail.<sup>16</sup> There is not a single story in which a female character does not try to change her 'inevitable' fate in one way or another, even if some pay a heavy price for doing so.

### Mahboob and feminism

What does it mean to be a woman according to Mahboob's short stories? Her stories portray women who are overwhelmed by oppression,

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16 Abu-Lughod (1990:47), in her study of Bedouin society, comments that 'most people's ordinary public responses are framed in terms of the code of honor and modesty ... since the moral code is one of the most important means of perpetuating the unequal structures of power, then violations of the code must be understood as way of resisting the system and challenging the authority of those who represent and benefit from it'.

but are nonetheless characterised by their attempts to overcome it. Is Mahboob a feminist author, then? She herself denies being a 'feminist'.<sup>17</sup> However, a close study of her works reveals her approach as feminist in nature. According to Chandra Mohanty, women from a non-Western background may see the term 'feminism' with particular scepticism

Feminist movements have been challenged on the grounds of cultural imperialism, and of short-sightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism, and homophobia ... [these perceptions] have led to a very real suspicion of 'feminism' as a productive ground for struggle. (Mohanty 1991a:7)

Kumari Jaywardena goes further, arguing that in Third World societies, most people see feminism as a 'product of "decadent" Western capitalism' [... that] alienates women from their culture, religion and family responsibilities' (1982:1). Geraldine Heng concurs, and notes that because feminism has often been viewed as a Western import, it is seen as being at odds with nationalist commitments. The feminist archetype presents a 'subversive figure, at once of a destabilising modernity and of a presumptuous Western imperialism' (1997:34). Feminist agendas have attracted even more resentment in the Islamic world, although as Muslim feminist Leila Ahmed (1982a:162) argues, 'feminism is irreconcilably in conflict with the dominant ideologies in the West to more or less the same extent that it is with the Islamic'.<sup>18</sup>

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17 Mir-Hosseini notes: 'the general acceptance in Middle Eastern studies of a modernization paradigm, with its implicit progressive and activist approach, combined with an uncritical adaptation of theories of women's movements in the West, continue to blur the actual experience of women and politics of gender in the contemporary Muslim world' (1999:8–9).

18 There is a rich literature on the debates between Islam and feminism, see for example Hegland (1999); Mahmood (2005) and Bardan (1995).

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Therefore, it can not be too great a surprise if most Afghanistani women do not identify their interests and their struggle for gender equality belonging to a feminist movement.<sup>19</sup>

The different responses of Muslim women to feminism, for which there is no equivalent term in Persian or Pashtu, are integrally linked to the politics of communal identity.<sup>20</sup> In Afghanistan feminism is strongly associated with notions of Western culture, sexual orientation and social disruption. While some women activists, including .equality and empowerment, publicly they deny being 'feminist'. To identify as such would cause widespread criticism and further political marginalisation, which would have a disruptive impact on the task of raising the issues affecting Afghanistani women's lives. Addressing these issues is the priority, and if an association with 'foreign ideologies' might result in that woman being perceived as a disseminator of corrupting Western ideas, the avoidance of this association may be considered a practical decision as much as an ideological one. Buchi Emecheta, the Nigerian-born writer, articulates her response to feminist identification with her writing as follows:

I don't deal with great ideological issues. I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did

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19 However, Miriam Cooke argues that there is no better word to capture women's social and political activism in the Islamic world than that very word, 'feminism' (2001: ix-x).

20 Cagatay, Grown and Santiago maintain that:

Feminism ... constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds. There is and must be a diversity of feminism, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women, and defined by them for themselves (quoted in Johnson-Odim 1991:325).

not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small 'f'! (Emecheta 1988:175).

Not all works by women writers can be considered 'feminist'. Gayle Greene argues that 'feminist fiction' is not the same as 'women's fiction' or 'fiction by women'. A literary work 'may be termed "feminist" for its analysis of gender as socially constructed and for its enlistment of narrative in the process of change' (Greene 1991:292). Margaret Drabble (1983:159) claims that women write and read 'in order to find patterns or images for a possible future', to create 'a new pattern, a new blueprint'. Mahboob observes and articulates the experience of gender discrimination and voices the need for change. This gives her works a feminist outlook. In the introduction to *Gum*, Mahboob writes:

The stories in this collection, which are mostly images of affliction of my gender, cannot discard the social contract values, but they challenge them and question them in order to reach a better understanding of the deeds of our metamorphosed [condition], and learn about the invisibility of our gender and our generation and to contemplate the reasons. (Mahboob 1999:1)

### **Mahboob and political struggle**

Mahboob was not a member of any political party, but she belongs to the generation of leftist writers in Afghanistan who shared a commitment to literature and hostility toward the socio-political establishment. This was at a time when a commitment to creating a national literature became popular among writers in the mid-1960s. The emergence of political parties and an independent press as a result of the ratification of the 1964 Afghanistan Constitution

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led to a boom in literature as a means of both political expression and political propaganda. In these works, the main focus was a so-called reflection of reality, especially class struggle and the suffering (economic, social and emotional) of the lower class at the hands of the upper class. The majority of young writers, including Mahboob, began their careers writing this type of literature.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Mahboob's early work shows her to be a committed writer for whom class struggle overshadowed all other aspects of life. In these works, as the outcome of class division, the rich become richer, through their exploitation of the poor, and the poor become poorer and suffer more as a result. A typical short story of this type is '*Chāgh-hā wa lāghar-hā*' ('The fats and the thins')<sup>22</sup> in which a group of working men earn so little that every day is a struggle for survival (Mahboob 1990:1–36). The mega-building where they work

had only one metal gate which in the morning opened to swallow a big number of labourers, then it was shut until sunset when it regurgitated them. (Mahboob 1990:1)

Instead of increasing the labourers' wages, the owner of the building gradually decreases their pay. One day the labours do not receive their payment and they set the building on fire.

In these works, Mahboob does not identify gender discrimination as the cause of women's misery, but poverty. This can be seen in '*Yak zan wa yak mazdour*' ('A woman and a servant') and '*Do rāh*' ('Two paths'). In the first story, a tubercular peasant woman, Sakina, is a servant in the house of a rich man whose wife abuses Sakina continuously. 'Sakina realised how distanced she was from that

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21 For more detail, see Bezhan 2006–2007:187–88.

22 'Fats' and 'thins' in Afghanistan culture symbolise, respectively, the rich and the poor.

woman' (Mahboob 1990:41) The origin of Sakina's ostracisation is class and the division between her and the landlord's wife exists in spite of the commonality they might have had as women:

The landlord's wife with her fat body and big breasts, who did nothing but eat and sleep, stood in front of her and gave her commands. She commanded, summoned her and shouted at her and criticised her for everything she did. (Mahboob 1990:39)

In '*Do rāh*', a young, poor widow has to choose between her future and that of her adolescent son, Akbar. After the death of her husband the family struggles for survival, unable to even pay the rent. When she leaves their home the neighbourhood women whisper about her behind her back and she must wear the *chādari*, which she finds oppressive:

She could hardly move her body ahead. Her heart was beating fast under the *chādari*. Occasionally she thought to herself to throw away the *chādari*, to claw her hair, to open her mouth and shout the loudest she could. But she did none of them. For her relief, she only moaned a bit under the *chādari*. (Mahboob 1990:77)

As a result, she leaves the house as little as possible. Despite encouraging Akbar to stay in school, he leaves to take up a job with a blacksmith. The blacksmith indirectly shows his desire to marry Akbar's mother and she also shows some feeling for him (1990:84). However Akbar hates his master talking about his mother and one day, after a fight, Akbar leaves his job. His mother, who has never outwardly indicated any feelings for the blacksmith—so as not to hurt her son—supports Akbar's action and even seems happy to sacrifice any further contact with the blacksmith (1990:95). The widow finally convinces her son to return to school and she in turn works in

the houses of others to earn a living. This story shows how class and gender inequality make a woman's life miserable. The widow cannot show her feelings towards the blacksmith, because tradition demands that she spend her life looking after her son. Society expects her to sacrifice and suppress her personal interests in order to bring up son who is not ashamed of his family. However, if the widow had an independent means of living, she would not be treated as a sexual object or be the subject of gossip and innuendo.

## Mahboob and the war story

The leftist coup of 1978 had a tremendous impact on the literature of Afghanistan. While a new generation of writers emerged on both sides of politics, the elite authors who were already established had to respond to the new situation. While some decided to abandon writing, at least for the time being, others sided with the new regime. Mahboob chose to side with the mujahideen and promote their cause in her narrative works. She published a collection of short stories, *Darakht-hā kārtoos gul mekonand* (*The trees bear bullets*), in Pakistan in 1982.<sup>23</sup>

In *Darakht-hā kārtoos gul mekonand*, the main characters have all lost someone at the hands of the Russian soldiers and are fighting for revenge. The enemy is not a specific personality or an individual, but Russians in general. Her characters succeed by undertaking extraordinary feats. However, *Darakht-hā kārtoos gul mekonand* is a work of propaganda and has little literary merit. There is no depiction

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23 I am grateful to Saburallah Siasang, a poet, writer and Afghanistani literary critic, for providing me with a copy of this book.



of Russian's cruelty, except in '*Yā Ali madad!*' ('Ali, help me!'),<sup>24</sup> which describes the nightly executions of Afghanistani prisoners. Instead, most of these stories concentrate on the importance of jihad. The main characters are the mujahideen, who all have good manners, behave well and are considered liberators. Amazingly, the settings of all these stories are rural Afghanistan and the people fighting against the Russians are all villagers. In none of the stories in this collection do we encounter people from the cities fighting against the leftist regime and the Russian soldiers.

Of the five short works that make up this collection, only one, '*Yak gur barāy hama*' ('One grave for all') is devoted to the story of a woman, Gauhar. In this story, Gauhar's village has been deserted after its destruction by Russian bombardment, and she is burying dead bodies in a single grave all by herself. Instead of leaving the village, she takes cover in a tower and shoots at the enemy. Her husband, Haidar, who has left the village to fight the Russians in the nearby mountains, once fired at the enemy from the same tower with the same rifle Gauhar uses. Gauhar does not want the rifle to be seized by the enemy. She dies dressed in Haidar's clothes. The story makes little reference to the gender-related issues Gauhar might have faced, but the main idea behind the story's plot may have been to acknowledge women's participation in the national struggle and to present the idea that women have the same strong patriotic feelings as men. Anne Simpson notes that there is a history of representing women's engagement in warfare as evidence of their equality with men:

Women are acknowledged when they engage in actions that have become noteworthy and significant in the male scheme of

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24 Ali was the Fourth Caliph of Islam and also the founder of the Shiite sect of Islam. This name is very common among Afghans, especially Shiites.

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social [and political] happening. The obstacles to them doing so are carefully kept a separate issue. Taking up arms is therefore given a lot of attention. It has become the touchstone of any discussion of women in liberation struggles, as if it proves that they are doing something fully equal with men, and therefore shows that they have left the bad old days behind. (Simpson 1983:895)

The occupation of Afghanistan by the USSR in late 1979 was an event that overshadowed everything else going on in the country. In '*Yak gur barāy hama*', Gauhar faces no other problem than the presence of the Russian soldiers. Before their arrival, she lived in love and harmony with her husband and the community. But suddenly the Russian troops come and upset everything. Everybody is overwhelmed by the occupation. Here, the struggle of a woman is represented as the liberation of her homeland, which can be achieved through avenging the death of her menfolk. In this story, Mahboob unsuccessfully attempts to portray Gauhar as the symbol of the *watan* or homeland.<sup>25</sup> While Gauhar succeeds in her two main goals, burying the dead and killing several enemy soldiers, she eventually is killed. But the significance of her actions lies in the fact that even her dead body does not fall into the hands of the enemy. Her body represents the honour of the community.

The stories in *Darakht-hā kārtoos gul mekonand* suffer from shortcomings that include characters and incidents based on stereotypes,

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25 According to Afsaneh Najmabadi, the notions of homeland or *watan*, and nation or *milat*, are gendered as female and male, respectively:

Closely linked to the maleness of *millat* and femaleness of *vaṭan* is the concept of the *nāmūs* [honor]. Rooted in Islamic thought, *nāmūs* was delinked from its religious affiliation [*nāmūs-i Islām*] and reclaimed as a national concern, as *milat* itself changed from a religious to national community. Slipping between the idea of purity of woman [*'ismat*] and integrity of Iran, *nāmūs* constituted purity of woman and Iran as subjects both of male possession and protection. (Najmabadi 1997:444)

a general lack of verisimilitude, predictable endings and even poor use of language. But the significance of the collection lies in the fact that it is the first attempt by a writer to introduce the subject of the war and its impact on Afghanistani women. Here Mahboob turns her fictional works into a battleground for the political confrontation between different ideologies and politics raging in her home country. After the collection's publication, Mahboob soon discovered that writing short stories with an explicit political agenda no longer satisfied her. As we will see later, she skilfully turned her pen to depicting fundamental issues faced by Afghanistani women at home and abroad.<sup>26</sup>

### Women and trauma

One of the main elements that mark the lives of Mahboob's female characters is trauma. Trauma is defined as 'a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind', and is experienced in 'response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena' (Caruth 1996:3, 91). According to Kalí Tal, the significance of trauma literature lies in 'the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it "real" both to the victim and to the community' and to tell 'a reality or truth that is not otherwise available' (1996:21). In these works, authors deal with trauma as a 'collective experience, an instrument of oppression, or as a means to explore and understand

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26 In recent years Mahboob has published a few short stories in which she concentrates on the impact of migration on Afghanistani men in the West. One of her most successful short stories, '*Zakh*' (Wart), is the story of an Afghanistani man who loses members of his family in the war and migrates to Canada to join his only surviving son only to die in despair and loneliness (Mahboob 2003:122–35).

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gender identity formation'. They 'enact the directing outward of an inward, silent process to other witnesses, both within and outside the texts' (Vickroy 2002:3).

Mahboob is one of the first Afghanistani authors to deal with trauma in narrative fiction. Two types of trauma can be recognised in her works: one is connected with the persistent social condition of women and the other is the result of an acute event experienced in the war. Often these types of trauma are experienced as one. As a subordinated group, Afghanistani women endure the trauma of oppression and this is a trauma that war often exacerbates.

It has been difficult for Afghanistani women to tell these trauma stories, some of which are beyond the limits of communication. The majority of Afghanistani women are illiterate and cannot express their feelings in written form. But above all, socio-cultural codes of conduct prohibit their telling; not only should women's bodies be covered, so too should their voices. It would be shameful for women and their families to talk about their traumatic experiences, especially if rape was involved, or for women to show their grief to outsiders. As a result, despite their severe traumatic experiences, there is little information about the experiences of these women, including in the field of academia. The way Mahboob's fiction addresses these experiences is of considerable importance. Not only does she show how Afghanistani women have been traumatised, she shows how they felt about it, endured it, reacted against it and yet kept silent.

Mahboob's writing shows that the trauma of war not only affects individuals, but can affect entire communities, giving rise to a collective trauma that may 'come to supply its prevailing mood and temper, dominate its imagery and its sense of self, [and] govern the way its members relate to one another' (Erikson 1995:190).

During the war hundreds of thousands of women were widowed, disabled, or raped by armed groups, especially during the civil war between 1992 and 1996. Millions of women ended up in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran, where they were also deprived of basic rights such as education and employment. For these women, trauma was experienced not only as ‘delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearances of hallucinations and other instructive phenomena’ (Caruth 1996:11), but also as an acute and intensely painful experience in the present. Some of Mahboob’s characters are struggling with the ramifications of events involving themselves or members of their family that occurred in the past, while others are struggling with wounds to their bodies and minds in the present. ‘*Khāk-i Yusof*’ (‘Yusof’s grave’) is an example of the former, and ‘*Rajim*’ and ‘*Tēlesmāt*’ belong to the latter group.

In ‘*Khāk-i Yusof*’, two of Bibijan’s sons have been killed, one after the other. When she tries to visit the mosque to see the body of one of her sons for the final time, she gets lost on the way. A neighbouring woman subtly holds her arm so as not to be seen by the Taliban and tries to persuade her not to go through with the visit:

—Where are you going, the path is this way?

Bibijan’s breath was short and hot sweat was dripping from her forehead. Bibijan lost her mind. She was talking to herself:

—I’ve lost my way. I am lost. Yusof’s death has ruined me and made me lost.

The woman neighbour once again said sympathetically:

—Bibijan they will not let you inside the mosque, where are you going?

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—I am going to see his body. If I do not touch a tuft of his hair, if I do not see his eyes, my restless heart will never rest.

—Among hundreds of men you are not allowed to enter the mosque. Women are not allowed to enter a mosque, don't you know?

Bibijan who was impatient, became even more impatient:

—Whether it is permitted or not I will go in. It is the funeral procession of my son. (Mahboob 1999:105–106)

However, at the mosque Bibijan is stopped from entering by a young Talib:

—Where are you going old woman?

Without paying any attention to the voice, Bibijan kept going.

—Where are you going?

With a tired body and melancholy spirit Bibijan turned towards the man with the domineering voice. A skinny young hairy man had stopped her, and impudently moved his hand to pull down the front of her *chādari* to cover her face.

—I asked you, where are you going?

Upset and glowering, Bibijan lifted the front of her *chādari* and uncovered her face once again. She stared at the young man. His cold look and evil eyes, and his strong hand with a whip wrapping around his fingers froze Bibijan and she replied:

—Where do you want me to go? I have come to the mosque to see my son's body. (Mahboob 1999:107–108)

Bibijan is not allowed to enter the mosque and fulfil her simple wish of seeing and touching her dead son for the last time; instead, she is beaten by the man. The man does not have the least respect or sympathy for her as an old woman, or as a mother grieving for her

son. For the young Talib the death of another young man means nothing. He fulfils his duty as an aloof creature. Bibijan has no option but to sit down:

She was staring at the faded gate of the mosque which was disappearing in a crowd of men. The blows of the whip of the young man did not make her move.

—No matter how many times you hit me with your whip, I am not going to move from here. (Mahboob 1999:108)

Bibijan has lost all the male members of her family except a son, Abdullah, who lives in Canada. Despite her unwillingness to leave Afghanistan, Abdullah brings her to Canada. In the new country she is cut off from all familiar things and is totally lost. For Bibijan, her homeland is synonymous with her sons' graves, which she longs desperately to be near. In Canada she has no one to talk or listen to. She blames Abdullah:

—I told you hundreds of times that I was not going to come to Canada. What am I going to do here? ... I told you so many times that I do not want to leave the graveyard of your brothers, which was a comfort for my sad heart. You've confined me in a tiny flat which has no rooftop, no dais or backyard. It is squeezed between the sky and the earth. From its windows only the sky can be seen. I cannot see the ground or people walking around. When I look down out of the window I feel dizzy. Walking up twenty floors will destroy my lungs ... The firing of rockets and bullets did not kill me. The death of your brothers did not cause my death. But Canada will kill me. (Mahboob 1999:112–13)

Bibijan's life is marked with the trauma of loss, and nothing can heal it, including her migration to Canada. As Dominick LaCapra explains,

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certain wounds ... cannot simply heal without leaving scars or residues in the present; there may even be a sense in which they have to remain as open wounds even if one strives to counteract their tendency to swallow all existence and incapacitate one as an agent in the present. (2001:144)

Bibijan never tries to counteract this tendency and migration to Canada only exacerbates her wounds. She carries her trauma all the time and everywhere. It remains what Kirby Farrell calls a 'psycho-cultural' matter, an injury that 'demands to be interpreted [... and] integrated into character' (Farrell 1998:6). The trauma of losing her children in the war follows her, subjecting her to continuous remembrance. This remembrance is not a choice but it requires 'a learning to live with loss, a learning to live with a return of a memory that inevitably instantiates loss and thus bears no ultimate consolation' (Didur 2006:130). The losses are so overwhelming that life itself has become a challenge for Bibijan. She loses the sense of herself and the meaning of life. Her trauma is a 'wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world' (Caruth 1996:3–4). What can Bibijan do in Canada? She knows no one and has little connection with her surroundings. Her only connection to the outside world is her son who works 'during the days and sleeps in the nights'. Bibijan's soul and memory is in another place. She eventually dies in despair in Canada.

### **Women and rebellion**

Revolt is one of the main themes of Mahboob's work. Her main characters all eventually rebel, though the kind of rebellion differs from one character to another. Her female characters not only dream of change in their lives, they actively work to bring it about. There are



three types of rebellion in Mahboob's works: firstly, the rebellions that occur in pre-war Afghanistan; secondly, those that occur during the war, when society was becoming radicalised; and finally, those rebellions carried out in diaspora. In these three contexts Mahboob's characters respond to the treatment of women, adopting different forms of rebellion.

Traditionally, Afghanistani women are defined through their family. The self is rooted in the religious and familial traditions of the community rather than in the individualism of the West. This is the basis of the differences between what may be called feminism in Afghanistan and feminism in the West. The oppression faced by Afghanistani women has its own character and so does the revolt against it; Afghanistani women's liberation does not end in a complete break from the family and the community. But when these women move to another type of society—a Western society—their cause changes along with their circumstances.

Mahboob's short stories express a revolt against many of the norms and attitudes relating to women and their place in family and society. In some of her works, the revolt remains strictly within the indigenous framework, as is the case in '*Khāna-i delgir*' ('A confined house') (Mahboob 1990:54–75). The main character in this story is conscious of her gender and of the problems associated with it. She loves school, but is prevented from attending, while her bad-mannered and violent brother continues with his education.<sup>27</sup> At first her rebellion is directed at the deep-rooted traditions that value male over female. Her father, who dominates her life,

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27 This short story first appeared in 1975 in the weekly *Zhwandoon*, and later in an anthology of Mahboob's short stories with the same title published in Kabul (1990:54–75).

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believes that 'a decent girl does not go to school'. She is outraged: 'Why does my father let him go to school? Why should I stay home within these narrow walls?' (1990:57). And so her world is 'reduced to small room with a single window' from which she watches 'the outside world.' In her home, 'there are no bars on the windows, no barbed wire fences ... the barriers to escape are generally invisible. They are nonetheless extremely powerful' (Herman 1992:74). The girl rebels against her father by going to school secretly, but she does not run away from home. Culturally and economically a girl cannot leave her parents' house because outside of it she has no place in society. Society would consider her 'dishonoured'.<sup>28</sup> In a society where women's 'primary obligation is to uphold family honour by conforming to accepted behavioural norms' (Dupree 1998:63), the act of secretly going to school is a direct confrontation of the system by disregarding its barriers. It also challenges the very core of the patriarchal system, 'the law of Father' (Millard 1989:156). Despite the opposition of all members of her family and even the headmaster, the girl goes to school and manages to arrange everything from her books to her uniform by herself.

After that day I read and read. I found many books and confined myself to the room, and until late at night I was reading them. Gradually I learned writing ... I had stepped into a new world, the wonderful world of the book and never separated from them again. (Mahboob 1990:69)

However, her father discovers her actions and locks her in a 'confined room' for a week. In the story's highly moralistic ending, the

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28 A woman who runs away is traditionally subjected to severe punishment, including being murdered.

girl is freed to go to school, while her brother commits murder and her father goes to jail as punishment for the crime.

It should be pointed out here that although '*Khāna-i delgir*' was one of the first short stories Mahboob published, the two key themes of the story, the confinement of women and their rebellion, have continued to be the backbone of her later fiction. Rebellion is not an abstract idea for Mahboob. In '*Khāna-i delgir*' the conflict is domestic, between father and daughter.

With the escalation of war and the spread of Islamic extremism, social change was accompanied by changes in the circumstances of women and in their strategies of rebellion. In war zones, kinship and family relationships were weakened and in some cases disintegrated. Everybody had to fight for survival. Women were deliberately targeted: for the sexual gratification of their assailants, as a means of humiliating rival ethnic groups, and as objects of a harshly implemented political and ideological authority. Under the severe conditions in the war zones and the refugee camps that were dominated by Islamic extremists and warlords, women were further oppressed. In these conditions, women's rebellion centred on basic survival and the defence of their families, as '*Hājji wa Arab*', '*Rajim*' and '*Telesmāt*' show.

Afghanistani women who migrated to Western countries turned their focus in other directions, as the stories '*Shelter*', '*Gum*' and '*Sadā*' show. Once these women step into Western society, Afghanistani traditions and notions of individualism change according to the socio-political and cultural norms of the new society. In this new environment, a woman's experiences, rather than her relations, define her and her quest for change. This is the milieu that the female character in '*Shelter*' grapples with. In doing so, she realises her potential

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for happiness and finds her own values, rather than meekly accepting her traditional role.

Women's struggle for liberation should be examined in the specific socio-political and cultural contexts in which they live and understand the dilemmas they are confronted by. These dilemmas are connected, on one level, to their loyalty to tradition—community, religious or national—and, on another, to their desire for gender equality. This conflict takes different forms in Islamic societies and Western countries. Muslim communities are preoccupied with the position of women and their role in the family and community. Concerns about preserving the integrity and purity of Islamic culture are linked to gender roles and to the family. In Muslim communities, women and their proper conduct are routinely used as 'symbols of communal identity and markers of "tradition" and culture' (Chhachhi 1991:162). Throughout much of the Muslim world, the Muslim identity of a community hinges on the regulation of family and personal matters (Shaheed 1994:1002). Muslim women, especially those who belong to a minority community in a non-Muslim society, are expected to be loyal to Islam and Islamic culture. Here Muslim women are considered the carriers of their culture and are expected to suppress their own needs and rights in favour of the interests of Islamic culture and the local community. But how do Muslim women themselves perceive these ideas and expectations? Many of Mahboob's female characters are living in diaspora, shouldering the burden of representing the minority community of which they are a part. While initially reconciled to the notions described above, they eventually reject them. The rejection does not come all at once, but develops from seemingly unimportant actions that end up as significant decisions.

Mahboob's female characters use different forms of agency. According to Saba Mahmood, agency is 'the capacity to realise one's own interest against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles' (2005:8).<sup>29</sup> For Talal Asad, locating one's 'agency' does not primarily mean locating the moments in which one can act, but rather examining the structure of possibilities that exist, enabling one to act (2003:78). Social actors operate within constraints that exist for them and they choose their strategies accordingly. 'The experience of violent conflict and migration ... is not built upon a single discourse' and neither are the individuals' responses to it: 'as social actors, they face alternative ways of formulating their objectives, however restricted their sources' (Moser & Clark 2001:4–5). In search of greater agency, Mahboob's female characters act to the furthest extent of their potential according to the situation they find themselves in. Most of the time they achieve their goals.

### Mother-father-daughter relationships

In almost all of Mahboob's work dealing with the lives of women, especially young women, there is a mother alongside her daughter. Some of the stories that depict this relationship are '*Khāna-i delgir*', '*Hājji wa Arab*', '*Sadā*', '*Rajim*', '*Maleka khwāb medeed*' and '*Chahār rāh-i Yonge wa Bloor*' ('The Yonge and Bloor intersection'). In all of these stories, mothers help their daughters in their struggle against

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29 For Talal Asad, agency is 'a complex term whose senses emerge within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things and oneself' (Asad 2003:78). Drawing the connection between agency and intention Asad notes, 'Yet, "intention", which is variously glossed as "plan", "awareness", "wilfulness", "directedness", or "desire" ... is often made central to the attribution of agency' (2003:78–79).

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oppression and inequality. This is a characteristic of Mahboob's work that sets it apart from some other Afghanistani women writers, including Maga Rahmani and Spozhmai Zaryab.

What is the significance of mothers occupying this supporting role for their daughters in Mahboob's fiction? Are they there because, individually, they are unable to change their own lives for the better? Having known oppression themselves, without the same opportunity for resistance, are they thus driven to assist their daughters to overcome it? Or perhaps the author intends to convey that all generations of women experience and resist oppression. Does the oppression of women in one generation lay the ground for the next generation's rebellion? Perhaps all of these meanings are involved.

The figure of the supportive mother, while a recurrent one, is neither a consistent nor one-dimensional character in Mahboob's work. The figure of the mother changes according to her individual character and personal history, as well as the temporal and geographical setting of the story. In '*Khāna-i delgir*' a mother secretly sends her daughter to school and in '*Sadā*', a mother sends her daughter unveiled to a wedding party against her stubborn husband's wishes. However in '*Hāji wa Arab*' and '*Rajim*', the mothers fail to rescue their daughters despite their best efforts. The failure is due to the force behind the oppressive influences affecting them, namely their religion. These two stories are set in socially conservative places, one in Peshawar, where the Islamic extremists dominate, and the other in a district of Kandahar not far from the birthplace of the Taliban. Both stories take place during the time when the extremists controlled society tightly.

The father is another recurrent figure in Mahboob's work and he typically symbolises the power of patriarchal domination both in

Afghanistan and in diasporic communities. As Hartmut Fahndrich argues, the father is the spokesman for a 'whole social order, the embodiment of power, force, ruthlessness and ignorance' (1995:109). In Afghanistan a father's power is supported by social and political structures, but it may still be challenged in one way or another; in diasporic communities, he may face resistance from a number of quarters. In both spaces, the father tries his best to maintain the status quo. He represents a link to the past that lends fixity to his family's identity so that the present and future are shaped by the past and by tradition. In Mahboob's work, the best example of a father embodying this role in an Afghanistani context is '*Khāna-i delgir*', while the best example in a diasporic context can be seen is '*Sadā*' ('The voice').

It should be noted here that in Afghanistan the enforcing role of the father is generally a product of patriarchal tradition; in diaspora it is more informed by religious imperatives. In Mahboob's stories set in Afghanistan, there is little reference to men controlling women in accordance with Islam, especially prior to the war. However, in the stories set in diasporic communities, Mahboob gives the religiosity of Afghanistani men greater emphasis and seems to imply that the degree of their religious feeling and observance increases in exile. This change could be a result of the time they spend in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran, where the dominant and official ideological discourse is political Islamism, or it may be due to a crisis of identity brought on by life in Western society. In order for men to maintain the status quo in their relationships with women and children, they need an ideological structure to support its existence. Religion can serve as the necessary recourse where culture will not. When Afghanistani men in diaspora become zealous Muslims, praying regularly and performing everyday religious rituals

in ways they had not done earlier in their lives, Mahboob suggests that any or all of these factors may be at play.

### **Women and the home**

The home is a very significant element of Mahboob's works that focus on women. The home has long been constructed as a woman's place and, for a society, as its symbolic centre, 'a source of stability, reliability and authenticity' (Massey 1994:180). According to Afghanistani cultural values, the great majority of women stay at home as wives and mothers and Mahboob's use of the home as the main spatial setting for her stories corresponds with this. The home is considered a feminine place, in part because women have historically been considered part of the home and its property: women physically belong to their fathers and husbands. They also embody their honour and the honour of the home. So in a significant way, it is the home that best symbolises the relationship between men and women, and women's subordinate position. In '*Rajim*', Mahtab is dishonoured when the men remove her from her home. Accused of adultery, she is stoned on public ground. She cannot be punished inside her home because that would symbolically dishonour the home, which itself represents society.

Home is not always a 'prison' and it does not always represent disempowerment and segregation. It is in the home that Afghanistani women gather, entertain and perform many of the rituals associated with women. Home is the site of women's socialisation. The female quarter provides women with the opportunity to share their experiences, seek help from other women for their problems, and express their emotions and feelings. The lyrics of women's songs and folk poetry, which are performed in the home, often convey sexual



references in Persian and Pashto. Because the audience for these songs is other women, they can be enjoyed without provoking disapproval in the community, even in tribal areas.

In Mahboob's works the home has a contradictory nature. As Juhani Pallasmaa notes, 'as well as being a symbol of protection and order, home can, in negative life situations, become a concretization of human misery: of loneliness, rejection, exploitation and violence' (1995:134). For Mahboob, the home is a symbol of identity. In '*Do rāb*' which has been discussed earlier in this chapter, the protagonist, a widow, has no home and while she searches for a new house, she moves from one short-term living situation to another. She belongs nowhere and thus she is felt to be no-one. Men in the neighbourhood approach her, seeking an affair, and the women regard her without respect (Mahboob 1990:76–102). In '*Hājji wa Arab*', the character Zulaykha also has no permanent home and, again, no identity as a result (Mahboob 1999:7–32). This leaves her open to every kind of exploitation at the hands of every member of the Hājji's family. As can be seen in the short story '*Diwār*' ('The wall'), home can also be a space of confinement that symbolises the imprisonment of women (Mahboob 1990:45–53).

But home also can be a place of comfort even if it has been previously experienced, or will be experienced later, as a space of confinement. In '*Khāna-i delgir*' (1990:54–75), the main character is happy in her room because she is free to look down on to the street below through the window. The room is above the street and it is the space (the home) from which she can view the outside world. However, once the window is covered and she is confined to the room in all senses, it becomes a prison and the primary site of her oppression. Freeing herself from the home means gaining other rights, including the right to an education.

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In Mahboob's recent works, such as '*Gum*' and '*Shelter*', she pays more attention to how the element of the home impacts upon the status of women. While in her early works women rarely try to leave the home, in these works the women attempt to liberate themselves by stepping outside of the domestic realm. Some actually do leave, as is the case in '*Shelter*', while others do not, but seriously consider it, as in '*Gum*'.

Traditionally a woman cannot leave her house without the permission of her husband or father. So, what does it mean when a woman decides to leave her home? Leaving home is not a simple act of changing one's place of residence. It is a substantial change in the mind and behaviour of the woman. It represents a new way of life. In '*Shelter*', the main character, Ghotai, first leaves the home of her brother, and then the home of the relatives she subsequently lives with: 'She was fed up with their attitudes and decided to live alone' (Mahboob 2003:12). Leaving home and ending up in a shelter is a permanent departure from the house in all senses. Here the home has a different meaning. It is a personal space. As Pallasmaa argues, it 'is frustrating to live in a space which one cannot mark as one's personal territory' (1995:137). The twenty-three-year-old Ghotai ends up in a shelter, where women from different backgrounds share the same fate. Here one is not identified as a member of a family, but as an individual. For Ghotai, moving to the shelter provides her with the opportunity to look to other women for support rather than to her family and community.

### **Women and sexuality**

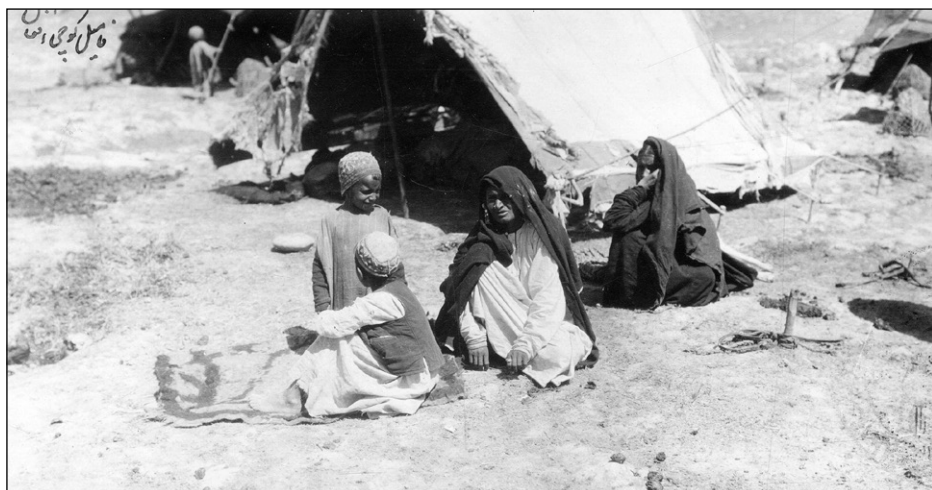
The control of women's sexuality is a central aspect of public life in Afghanistan and has long been at the centre of the country's cultural, social and political configurations. Women's sexuality is subject to the

control of everyone and every institution, but particularly the control of the male members of a woman's family, to whom her body and sexuality belongs. Its protection ensures the honour of her family. Having sex outside marriage is one of the biggest crimes that can be committed by a woman because in doing so she dishonours not only herself; she dishonours her husband, her family, her clan and the whole community. Thus, little has been written about women's sexuality in Afghanistani literature and any reference to sexuality is a taboo topic for both male and female writers. Mahboob is among the few whose work refers to female sexuality.<sup>30</sup> If she did not write from outside Afghanistan, it seems doubtful that she would still be able to address the topic in her short stories. '*Sag-i sihāh-i sharqi*' ('The black Oriental dog') is one of her more explicitly sexual works. It tells the story of a tabletop dancer and her dog. The dog enjoys watching the woman dance and touching different parts of the woman's body and vice versa.

Mahboob has published four collections of short stories so far. The publication of these collections reveals not only her transformation as a writer, but also the stages of her growth and empowerment. *Darakht-hā kārtoos gul mekonand* (The trees bear bullets) was published in Peshawar in 1982 under such severe political conditions that she published it under a pseudonym. The Afghanistan Writers' Association in Kabul published *Khāna-i delgir* without her approval, while she was living in exile in Canada in 1990. Most recently, *Gum* and *Khānum Jorj* were published in Canada by Mahboob's own publishing house. The nature of the stories in these last two collections were such that she would have had little hope of publishing them at the beginning of her career in Afghanistan.

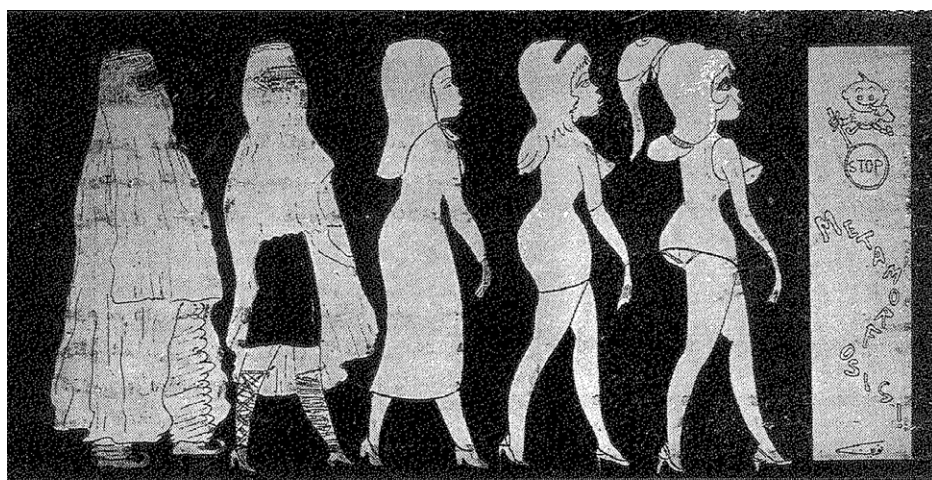
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30 The only author before Mahboob to include sexual references in his fictional work was Rosta Bakhtary.



Afghan *kochi* (nomad) family, in the late 1950s in eastern Afghanistan. In search of access to pastures with their livestock they move across the country and even beyond the borders. Nomadic women do not cover their faces and play a significant role in the family economy. They often trade livestock, skin, manure and dairy products.

Source: Afghanistan National Archive photo



دیر و زامروزه فردا

The caption reads: 'Yesterday, today and tomorrow'. The cartoon depicts the transformation of women's dress code. It starts with the old code, women dressed from head to toe, and through different phases until it reaches the modern mini skirt. At this point, the woman reaches a stop sign under which is the word 'Metamorphosis' with the letter 'F', which may indicate female.

Source: Rahim Nawin, published in *Tarjomān* on 22 April 1971



Dressed in traditional dress, Afghanistani women attend a rally demanding the liberation of Pashtunistan, in Kabul, August 1967. During the 1960s women participated publicly in political activities, including mass demonstrations.

Source: Gharzay Laeq private collection



Kabul University Library, 1970. The university was co-educational. Wearing Western clothes and choosing their favourite area to study, young women sit side by side with young men. There were no restrictions on their studies, appearance, movements, and meetings with men.

Source: Afghanistan National Archive photo



Outsie Kabul Airport, 1974. Maryam Mahboob (left) and a friend leaving Afghanistan for higher education in Iran.

Source: Mahboob private collection



Maryam Mahboob, Toronto 2015.

Source: Mahboob private collection





Students from the College of Midwifery rallying in Kabul's National Stadium on Afghanistan's Independence Day in August 1974. There was no restriction on women's appearance.

Source: Afghanistan National Archive



Female students studying music in the Afghanistan National Institute of Music in Kabul, June 2013. They come from the provinces and from disadvantaged families: Nazira from Nuristan (left), Negin from Kunar (centre) and Homa from Takhar (right). After the fall of the Taliban, new opportunities have been presented to young women, including studying music which had been deemed as un-Islamic by the fundamentalists.

Source: Bezhan private collection



Two Afghanistani female intellectuals, Homaira Qaderi (left), an outstanding author, and Zakya Mirzai (right), a successful private publisher, with the author in the centre, Kabul, July 2013. While they are feminist in their outlook, and active in promoting women's rights, due to the pressures from the radical groups inside and outside the government in the post-Taliban era, they have to conform to the new dress code and wear the *hijāb* when appearing in public.

Source: Bezhan private collection

## WAR AND THE RADICALISATION OF AFGHANISTANI SOCIETY

The immediate impact of war in Afghanistan has been the radicalisation of Afghanistani society. The Democratic Peoples' Party of Afghanistan, a Marxist-oriented political party, staged a coup in 1978 with social and institutional reform as its aim. However, the new regime's reforms, especially with regard to the position of women, provoked resistance from the country's citizens, particularly in rural areas. Some people left Afghanistan and settled in neighbouring countries. The subsequent invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979 heightened resistance further. The Islamist movement regrouped and took up leadership of the opposition.<sup>1</sup> With extensive political, financial and military aid from Western and Islamic countries, especially the USA, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran, the Islamist movement became so powerful that it controlled the refugee camps in neighbouring countries and also managed to seize some parts of Afghanistan. Jihadist volunteers from abroad, particularly from the Middle East, joined their Afghanistani brothers

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1 The leaders and activists of the Islamic Party had been living in exile in Pakistan since 1975, as a result of a failed uprising to topple the government.

in attempting to liberate *dar-ul Islam* or the land of Islam.<sup>2</sup> These jihadists had a tremendous influence on the political and religious views of the local mujahideen.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1978 and 1992, Afghanistan was divided into two parts. In the area under government control, the reforms brought about many social changes, especially in relation to women. As discussed in chapter one, as a result of the reforms, 50% of the students and 60% of the teachers at Kabul University were women. In addition, 70% of all schoolteachers, 50% of civilian government workers, and 40% of doctors in Kabul were women (see Skaine 2002:27; Nawid 2007:65).<sup>4</sup> The other part of Afghanistani society was under mujahideen rule, whether in rural Afghanistan or in the refugee camps of Pakistan and Iran. In these areas, there were even more restrictions imposed on women than had existed prior to the war.<sup>5</sup> They had no opportunity for employment or education and their movements were severely restricted. They were obliged to wear the *hijāb* whenever they left home.

## War and radicalism in Afghanistani society

In *Women and the War Story*, Miriam Cooke suggest that ‘there is no one history, no one story about war, that has greater claim to truth’. Instead, she argues, ‘history is made up of multiple stories, many of

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2 According to Olivier Roy, the main reason for sending these volunteers was ‘to turn potentially anti-Western fundamentalism against the communist camp’. Roy noted that the Saudis had the additional motivation of ‘trying to undermine Iranian prestige among the Islamists by promoting their own brand of fundamentalism close to the Wahhabi school of thought’ (2004:291).

3 For a good discussion of these jihadists and their impact on local mujahideen, see Gerges 2005:80–150 and Van Linschoten & Kuehn 2012:41–110.

4 Government reforms resulted in literacy increasing by up to 30% by the end of the 1980s (Keshtmand 2002:859). This was a substantial change in a country that, prior to the 1978 coup, had only 2% literacy rate.

5 On the impact of the Afghan jihad on women’s rights, see Human Rights Watch 1991 and Amnesty International 1995.

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them herstories, which emanate from and then reconstruct events' (1996:4). She identifies an increasing determination among female survivors of war to resist 'the ways in which patriarchy seizes and then articulates women's experiences so that they will seem to be marginal and apolitical' (1996:4–5). Mahboob, in writing about women who lived and suffered during the war, may be seen as part of this resistance. According to Elaine Scarry, the 'record of war survives in the bodies [... of the people] who were hurt there' (1985:113).

War had a tremendous impact—though in conflicting ways—on women. In the words of Sima Wali, jihad was 'waged against women's mobility, freedom and human rights' (1995:178). It has been estimated that there were 3 million Afghanistani refugees living in refugee camps in Pakistan alone. Afghanistani women who migrated to Pakistan either secluded themselves or were subjected to punishment or even death.<sup>6</sup> These women suffered the most during the war. Women, especially widows, had to provide security, food, education and healthcare for themselves and their children in an atmosphere of extreme physical and sexual violence. In the refugee camps, they often faced discrimination in terms of access to food, shelter, education and training (Wali 1995:177).<sup>7</sup> The camps served as laboratories for the Islamic fundamentalists, allowing them to practise the control and segregation of women that they would later implement in full when they took control of the country in the early 1990s. Educated

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6 One of these victims was Meena Keshwar, the founder of RAWA or Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. She was assassinated along with her sister in Quetta, Pakistan, in 1987 (for an account of the life and philosophy of Keshwar, see Chavis 2003 and Fluri 2008).

7 Pamela Collett (1996:399) reports that, in 1996, up to one-third of women refugees were widows who could neither support their families in the refugee camps, nor return to Afghanistan, where there were even tighter restrictions on employment and movement (1996:399).

and uneducated women alike were removed from the public arena and confined to the home and a life of enforced domesticity.<sup>8</sup> Nuria, a former schoolteacher, who fled to Pakistan in 1981, explains the differences between her living conditions in Afghanistan and in Quetta refugee camp:

Not only did I flee my homeland, but a way of life as well. In Lashkar Gah [Helmand Province] I had a profession and was able to travel freely between my home and the school. I wore Western clothes; never did I wear the chadar. I felt no constraints. Even the fact that I was not married, generally a stigma in our society for one my age, was not a problem. Here in Quetta, however, I felt pinched in everyway.... Here we have no space. Not only was the living area small, the women were confined to their quarters. Suddenly, my freedom of movement was taken from me. I was not allowed to work or go outside without at least wearing the chadar.... Always I was accompanied by a male. I become very depressed. (Tamang 2009:7–8)

Moghadam, who visited Peshawar, Pakistan, in the late 1980s, confirms that under the mujahideen, gender segregation became the official way of life. Moghadam compares life in Kabul and Peshawar in 1989 (the year Russian troops withdrew from Afghanistan) and the contrast is startling. While women were a visible presence everywhere in Kabul, including in government offices and social organisations, in Peshawar women were publicly invisible (Moghadam 1989; 2004).

In urban areas, and even in some rural areas, Afghanistan women had played an important role in the family economy; in the refugee camps, they were forced into seclusion and denied the possibility of

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8 The mujahideen did not allow women to leave the refugee camps. Beatrice Koekoek, a member of the French medical organisation that services a refugee cam, describes her experience with women visiting their hospital: 'We have to fight with the men to take women to a hospital when necessary. They sit around and chat ... to go to the doctor is their only chance to get out of the house' (Emadi 1991:240).

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paid work. Only a tiny group of them succeeded in securing employment, mostly in healthcare and with international aid agencies. *Fatwās* or religious decrees read out during Friday prayers were used to provoke public violence against women who disobeyed or did not completely observe the mujahideen's codes of conduct regarding modesty.<sup>9</sup> When the mujahideen took power in Kabul in 1992, the first decree they issued involved the banning of female television announcers and the prescription of an Islamic dress code for women (Malikyar 1997:395).<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, aid to Afghanistani refugees was highly politicised, with Western aid often been characterised as aiming to 'undermine and destroy the Afghan Communist regime' (Tamang 2009:7). Certainly, international aid workers and organisations co-operated with the mujahideen groups in the refugee camps. According to Mathew Fieldman, refugee status was granted and a ration card provided only to those individuals who could produce a certificate showing them to be a member of one of the mujahideen parties. International aid workers and non-government organisations (NGOs) who were responsible for development work during the mujahideen and Taliban eras inside Pakistan (1992–2001) worked, to varying degrees, in cooperation with them (Fieldman 1998:467;

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9 'A *fatwā* is a non-binding legal opinion issued in response to a legal problem' (El Fadl 2002:70). In Islamic legal parlance, *fatwā* refers to a 'clarification of an ambiguous judicial point or an opinion by a *mufti*, a jurist trained in Islamic law, in response to a query posed by a judge (*qāḍi*) or a private inquirer (*mustafti*)' (Joseph & Naḡmābādī 2003:171). Before the Taliban came into power, Afghanistan did not have a national institution for *fatwās*, unlike Islamic countries such as Egypt.

10 Via the Supreme Court on 27 August 1993, the mujahideen government issued the decree '*Fatwā-i shari satr wa hijāb*' (a sharia *fatwā* on women's covering and *hijāb*), which clearly drew the boundaries for the role and obligations of women. Among other things, the decree obliged women to completely obey their husbands; not to leave home alone at night; not to laugh or talk to strangers; not to walk with pride; and not to wear colourful, attractive and tight clothing.



see also Khattak 2003:202–203 and Weinbaum 1991:77).<sup>11</sup> Most of these aid workers accepted the mujahideen's, and later the Taliban's, views on women (Moghadam 1994a:859–75). As a result, most development programs targeted men, with little regard for how such projects would impact upon women and their lives.<sup>12</sup>

In 1992, the leftist government lost power and was replaced by the mujahideen. But this led the various mujahideen factions to fight a bloody civil war between 1992 and 1996.<sup>13</sup> The Taliban, which emerged in 1996, finally took almost the entire country. The Taliban enforced measures against women that had no precedent in Afghanistan. Under their rule, Islamic observances were in sharp contrast to the moderate form of Islamic practice that had existed for centuries prior to this period. For 'the first time in Afghanistan's history the unifying factor of Islam has become a lethal weapon in the hands of extremists, a force for division, fragmentation and enormous bloodletting' (Rashid 2000:83). Afghanistani society underwent rapid radicalisation.<sup>14</sup> Women were the first to go through this

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11 One of the NGOs, the Afghan Support Team, claimed that 'it educated Afghan refugees about guerrilla warfare' (Fieldman 1998:469).

12 Moghadam notes that Western scholarship on Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s exclusively emphasised 'geopolitics' and was 'ideologically charged':

Many of the of the published accounts were explicitly partisan; they favoured the Islamist Mujahidin, cast them as heroic guerrillas, and denounced the left-wing government in Kabul as a Soviet puppet regime espousing alien ideas (such as women's rights!). Geopolitical and partisan perspectives precluded an understanding of the class, gender, and cultural dynamics of the battle within Afghanistan. In particular they obscured the importance of the struggle over women's rights, a question that has long confronted Afghan modernizing elites but whose resolution has been consistently thwarted. (2003:228)

13 Kolhatkar notes that, after ousting the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan, the mujahideen 'instituted laws banning alcohol and requiring that women be veiled. Both of these new crimes were punished by flogging, amputations and public executions' (2002:16). On the civil war, see Sayed 2009 and Sinno 2008.

14 Radicalisation or Islamisation of a society takes place when political Islamic activists 'advocate total adherence to the *shari'ā* ... as formulated in the medieval period

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process. The mandatory covering of women's bodies from head to toe belonged to this political strategy of domination; it had nothing to do with tradition or Islam. Rema Hammami describes such acts as 'fundamentally an instrument of oppression, a direct disciplining of women's bodies for political ends', which she argues was also the case in the imposition of the *hijāb* during the late 1980s *intifada* in Palestine (1990:25). It is clear, she says, that 'the "intifada *hijab*" was not about modesty, respect, nationalism or the imperatives of activism, but about the power of religious groups to impose themselves by attacking secularism and nationalism at their most vulnerable points: over issues of women's liberation' (1990:26). In addition to forced veiling, women under the Taliban also had to submit to bans that prevented them from working, pursuing education, and leaving the home without being accompanied by an immediate male relative.<sup>15</sup>

During the war, Afghanistani women experienced two types of violence: first, the violence that men and women endured alike; second, the violence that women alone endured, because they were women. Sexual violence has been described as 'one of the most extreme and effective forms of patriarchal control' and an act that 'simultaneously damages and constrains women's lives' (Kelly 2000:45). During the war, violence against women was two-pronged:

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and see in Islam a monolithic religio-political construct to countervail competing Western ideologies' (Afsaruddin 1999:4).

- 15 Indeed the first announcement of the Taliban after capturing Kabul was about women: 'All of those sisters who are working in government offices are hereby informed to stay at home until further notice ... Since *satar* [covering] is of great importance in Islam, all sisters are seriously asked ... to cover their faces and the whole of their body when going out' (Griffin 2001:5–6). A few weeks later the new regime introduced a number of regulations that would be enforced by its religious police, some of which targeted women. For the mistreatment of women during the Taliban era, see Dupree 1998:45–66 and Cole 2008:118–54.

humiliating individual women reasserted male power in a general sense; and it demoralised the enemy by striking them at their weakest point, symbolically damaging the honour of the family, clan and tribe:

The sexual violence against women is shocking not only for its savagery, but for what it tells us about women as objects in male constructions of their own honour. Women's sexuality symbolises 'manhood'; its desecration is a matter of such shame and dishonour that it had to be avenged. Yet, with the cruel logic of all such violence, it is women ultimately who are most violently dealt with as a consequence. (Menon & Bhasin 1998:43)

Sexual violence was a common tactic during the period of 1992 to 1996 when various mujahideen groups were fighting for supremacy, mostly along ethno-religious lines.

### **Mahboob and women's suffering**

According to David Morris, 'suffering encompasses an irreducible nonverbal dimension that we cannot know—not at least in any normal mode of knowing—because it happens in a realm beyond language' (1997:27). Suffering tends to make people inarticulate; silence points to something ungraspable and resistant to description (Morris 1997:28). It is this suffering of Afghanistani women and the way they lived during the war that many of the narrative works of Mahboob seek to capture. She is among the early Afghanistani writers who wrote about the war, the radicalisation of Afghanistani society and the mistreatment of women at the hands of the mujahideen (both local and Arab) and the Taliban. The involvement in the Afghanistan war of foreign fighters, especially Arab fighters, is a topic rarely discussed by local or international observers, but it is an issue that Mahboob explores in her stories.

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Commenting on post-war Lebanese writing, Makdisi observes that ‘history and pain are inextricable from one another’ (2006:209). The pain inflicted by the restrictions and violence imposed on women in the name of Islam was perhaps the most damaging to a country whose history is marked by pain and suffering, both physical and mental. For Mahboob, Islam is one of the main forces that condition socio-cultural and political attitudes, especially towards women.<sup>16</sup>

While patriarchal custom and tradition are generally considered the main causes of women’s oppression in Afghanistan, men of religious status and those who claim to champion the establishment of a pure Islamic state use Islam as a means of suppressing women’s rights and status in order to fulfil their own political and personal interests. Mahboob is the first author who asserts that Islam also made some contribution to women’s oppression.

Mahboob’s stories depict the misery and suffering of women during the war, the radicalisation of society and its impact on women’s lives and the role Islamism played in these developments. They also depict women’s resistance to these various forms of oppression and their achievements in the face of such difficulties.

### **War and Islamic radicalisation and women’s invisibility**

With the empowerment of the mujahideen and then the Taliban, the very look, smell and air of the cities changed. So did the appearance of its men and women. The windows of homes had to be painted black and remain shut at all times. Entertainment of any kind, including playing or listening to music, even inside the

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16 Spozhmai Zaryab, who is another prominent female author in Afghanistan, has in her recent work of fiction *‘Kburos-i man’* (‘My Rooster’) dealt with the impact of Islam on women’s lives.

house, was strictly forbidden, because music was deemed un-Islamic. Those listening were subject to punishment. Women were confined to wearing the *chādari* when outside the house and within the four walls of their homes. Basic rights became dreams. In Mahboob's '*Maleka khwāb medeed*' ('Maleka was dreaming'), glimpses of these developments are given:

The top floor room was as bright as the daylight. It was filled with the smell of the flowers. It excited Maleka. She was standing in the middle of the room. Surprised and perplexed she was staring around. She looked out and said:

—What a bright day! What weather! It smells like paradise!

In her view the world had been changed, but she did not know the secrets. Wazirabad district was filled with joyful noise and sunlight. There was no sign of black paint on the windows. There was no noise of explosions and rockets. The strong smell of blood and explosives was no longer suffocating Wazirabad. There was no sound of mourning people walking in the streets. A happy feeling moved Maleka towards the window. She turned her excited gaze to the bottom of the street. She saw the street was calm and empty. No one had red eyes and sore chests carrying a corpse. What had happened? Was this a dream of a young woman?

Maleka could not believe that the weather was so clear; the sun was shining and the space was calm. She had not seen such weather, sun and atmosphere in her whole life. She had become a stranger to the blue sky. The naked beauty of the sun seemed unbelievable to her. In her eyes, life had been restarted ...

She stepped onto the balcony. She felt the warmth of the sun touching her body. She opened her arms to hug the sun. The sun moved inside her. Her face lost its dejected look. She felt a sense of life inside her ...

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Maleka could see everything now. Down in the corner of the courtyard her mother was baking bread in the oven... She saw activity in the street. She saw a group of women accompanying a bride to the public bath. The bride wore a bright blue dress. Walking a few steps ahead of the group, an unveiled woman was playing music and singing songs. Maleka felt she was the bride and women were singing for her; and she was heading to the public bath.

Maleka's mother was bringing the bread to the living room. The smell of the fresh bread compelled Maleka to follow her mother. Her mother said:

—Aren't you going to school today? ...

Maleka was dreaming. (Mahboob 1999:96–102)

What has happened to a society when the sun does not shine, the sky loses its blueness, the streets are virtually empty, bride and groom are never seen in the streets, playing music becomes a crime and the smell of fresh bread can only be imagined?

'*Maleka khwāb medeed*' is the story of all Afghanistani women, young and old, whose wishes and desires can only be fulfilled in their dreams. They have little say in their destiny and little freedom in their choices and desires; no matter how small or big, how basic or sophisticated, they can only happen in dreams. It is about the shortcomings, limitations and subordination of Afghanistan women. Fifteen-year-old Maleka dreams of simple things such as hearing a piece of music, smelling hot bread, looking at the blue sky and feeling the sunshine.

In '*Maleka khwāb medeed*' no violence against women is explicitly taking place. There is no mention of a *fatwā* or decree to condemn them, there are no armed men rounding them up, no flogging and

beating in the street, or confiscation of musical instruments, radio-cassettes and TV sets. And yet all the threat of punishment is present.

### **The mujahideen and violence against women**

In '*Do chashm khasata-i qosh*' ('The falcon's two tired eyes') a widow, Ajay, is unable to protect her sons. Her eldest, Zamen, is killed by the Russians and she eventually convinces her other son, Salar, who has been injured fighting the Russians, to leave the country. They pay for a trafficker to take them by caravan to Pakistan. On the way, they stop in a deserted caravanserai near the border for a final rest, only to be surrounded and questioned by a group of mujahideen.

When the mujahideen approached, Ajay was sitting near Salar. She was puzzled. "What do they do in this desert?" she whispered to herself.

—What do you want? Don't touch him, he is sick. Whatever you want ask the caravan leader. We don't have anything with us.

The man who had searched Salar asked Ajay:

—What is your relationship with him?

—He is my son. He is the only one that is left to me.

—He is wounded, where was he wounded?

—He is not wounded; he has a lump in his leg. During the long journey the lump swelled and now is bleeding, can't you see? Can't you distinguish a wound from a lump? (1999:50–51)

Because Salar is wounded and feverish, he can do and say very little and Ajay must represent them both. She does not expect support from the mujahideen, but certainly not harm either. For the mujahideen, a man who is wounded in fighting the Russians should be treated as

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a hero, not an enemy. But Ajay smells danger and knows that if they discover the truth it might be a disaster. She knows the complications of the war. She knows that most of the mujahideen are not fighting for the freedom of the homeland, but for self-interest. The first thing they may want from a wounded person is his gun. For the mujahideen, fighting was their monopoly and only they had the right to fight. In other words, for most of them, war was synonymous with power and financial interests. Moreover, Ajay also knows that they hate members of the educated class.

The mujahideen find Salar's identity card, which shows he is a teacher. To the mujahideen, this makes Salar an infidel:

—Where have you come from?

Ajay stared at the man and asked:

—Who are you? You asked once and I answered, and now you are asking me again?

—It is none of your business who we are. I asked you a question.

Ajay gripped the wall. Fear was written all over her face.

—We've come from Kabul and are going to Peshawar.

—From which part of Kabul?

—From Kabul itself.

—You are lying, old woman. We know you've come from Dasht-i Barchi. That is okay, but you didn't say what your son was doing.<sup>17</sup>

—What he was doing? He was a shopkeeper. He worked for himself.

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17 Dashti-Barchi is an area in Kabul inhabited by Shiite Hazara. The commander, who is a Sunni, does not like Hazaras. Amazingly he forgives Salar this 'crime' of being a Shiite, but punishes him for his education.



## WOMEN, WAR AND ISLAMIC RADICALISATION

Commander Nasim looked sharply at her and just a moment later his shout shook Ajay:

—You are lying.

Ajay was scared and stepped back:

—What am I lying about? If I am lying you tell me the truth.

—Lying about everything. Your son was a teacher.

—What does it matter to you if he was or wasn't a teacher?

The commander said firmly:

—Teachers are infidels, understand?

—My son is a Muslim...

Ajay's voice broke and she felt her head became heavy. She opened and closed her eyes:

—Am I dreaming? No, I am not. You call us infidel. Who has stolen your minds? A genie has entered under your skin.  
(Mahboob 1999:64–65)

Ajay has never thought of the mujahideen as the enemy, but is faced with the stark reality that they now pose a more serious threat to her and her son than the Russians. The climax of the confrontation between the commander and Ajay—between a powerful man and a powerless woman—occurs when Ajay goes to the fire to make tea for Salar, who is burning with fever, but is stopped by the commander, who tells his aide, Ghulam, to put the fire out.

Ajay looked at the fire, surprised and astonished, and then at Ghulam, who kicked wet dust around the fire with his boot and put it out. With the barrel of his gun, he mixed the dust and coals. Ajay's breath was taken away. Her eyes filled with tears and she thought someone was pressing her throat with his hands:

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—Your hearts are made of stone. I am powerless against your stony hearts. (Mahboob 1999:65)

The mujahideen question every move of Ajay for reasons she does not understand. She may admit her powerlessness to soften the confrontation between her and the group, but it is also a protest. Her accusation that her interrogators possess a ‘stony heart’ shows her courage in defying those who only use the language of violence. The mujahideen mistreat an elderly woman who could have been their own mother, and who could be considered symbolically as the mother of the nation. She has raised sons to defend their homeland and she is risking her life to save her only living child.

Ajay does not lose her capacity for resistance and hope. And not even for a moment does she try to ensure her own survival. But despite her efforts, the mujahideen take Salar away with them. The caravan also leaves, and Ajay is left to die in the middle of the desert:

Ajay is still sitting in the middle of the road. Her hands have dried out in the air. Her flesh and skin are gone, as are her face and hair. However, Ajay’s stone skeleton is still there. If you go there, close to the Shamshad Mountain, there is Ajay’s stone skeleton from which the wind spreads these words: “My brothers, have you seen Salar?” (Mahboob 1999:69)

Ajay’s question is for all the men who are responsible for the violence, directly or indirectly. To witness violence committed against innocent people and react with silence and indifference is as bad as committing the violence: the outcome is the same.

In the story we are confronted with three characters: the commander, Salar and Ajay. What features distinguish Ajay from the commander? There are the obvious differences of age and gender. Then, Ajay has borne a son and is more concerned with his life than

her own. The commander has no children and no concern for the safety or wellbeing of others. Ajay and her son's relationship is based on the love between a mother and her child, while the commander's relationships, even with members of his own group, are a means of furthering his own interests. Love has brought Ajay to this very rough part of the country; hatred and self-interest have brought the commander to it. Ajay is a passenger in the desert, while the commander is the lord of it. Strikingly, the space reflects the hostile nature of its inhabitants—the commander and his group—and it is in this space that Ajay dies.

What are the differences between Salar and the commander, the two young men who are ostensibly fighting on the same side? The commander is illiterate and Salar is educated. The commander has a gun and Salar does not. The commander is accompanied by a group of armed men who obey him and support his behaviour, while Salar travels only with his mother. The commander's 'holy war' is fought against his own people, while Salar has fought for the liberation of his homeland against the Russian soldiers. The commander's power is his gun, not knowledge or love. Crucially, Mahboob undermines any claims that the mujahideen group might make to genuinely fighting in the interest of Islam. The commander and his group smoke hashish, a sexual element to the men's relationship is implied (both behaviours that are forbidden by Islam and by custom) and no traditional respect is shown to Ajay as a mother or as an old woman. Their commitment to Islam is nominal.

'*Do chashm khasata-i qosh*' also presents a different image of the war and the mujahideen. The mujahideen, who were fighting the leftist regime and the Russian troops, also considered members of the educated class as their enemy. For them all three groups were

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foreign, anti-Islam and against local traditions. It was the ideology of Islamism that guided the mujahideen's conduct rather than national interest.

When the caravan stopped in the deserted caravanserai, Ajay found time to consider where she had travelled from and where she was heading, as if she was glancing at her entire life from the past to the future. She was sensing that the last chapter of her destiny was unfolding here in this rough place.

In the eyes of Ajay the path, which was made of soft sand, was hard and looked further away from where she was heading. It led to the slopes of the mountain. And the high mountain, whose sight made her vision dim, was Shamshad Mountain. Its summit was connected with the black clouds. Apart from that there was the desert expanding everywhere, covered with thorns coming out of the hard ground. (Mahboob 1999:50)

Ajay's body, turned to stone in the middle of the desert, stands as one with Shamshad Mountain: two silent witnesses to the atrocities committed against innocent people. They are monuments to death, as well as to patience and hope. Shamshad Mountain has no choice but to be a witness, while Ajay is a conscious witness to her own death and that of her son. Ajay's dried body represents the hope and great endeavour of a woman who fought for the salvation of others.

### **Afghanistani women and the Arab fighters**

If a mother cannot protect her son in the face of violent mujahideen, how can she save her daughter? In '*Hajji wa Arab*' ('The Hajji and the Arab'), the Hajji, which is an honorific title given to pilgrims who have been to Mecca, is also an enslaver of girls and women. Two of his victims are the widow Zulaykha and her 11-year-old daughter,

Guldasta (Mahboob 1999:7–32). Here the confrontation is between a disempowered woman who stands up for the rights of her daughter, and a Hajji, who has economic, political and religious power behind him. Zulaykha's revolt shakes all three bases of the Hajji's power. When the Hajji informs Zulaykha that he has decided to marry off her daughter (he has in fact sold her to an Arab), she asks who the husband is to be and why she is not aware of his suit. The Hajji's response is one of authority: 'Who are you to know about the suit? I am the one who has the right to decide', but Zulaykha will not back down.

Zulaykha stood up and confronted the Hajji. She stood chest to chest with him, and blocked his way. Like an eagle who opens its wings, she opened her hands and hung onto the two sides of the door. She planted her feet firmly on the ground. She stood the way a wrestler stands on the ground to fight another wrestler. Fear had disappeared from her ... The anger which was bubbling inside Zulaykha entered her veins ... Excited and motivated by the power she had gained from every part of her body, she felt her fear of the Hajji disappearing ... In her anger, Zulaykha's eyes sparkled like swords. She looked directly into the Hajji's eyes and boldly told him: "Be aware Hajji! I am not going to give my daughter to an Arab". (Mahboob 1999:24–25)

However, Zulaykha's anger is not enough to change the situation. If the Hajji, who represents all power, were defeated by Zulaykha, his failure would be at the hands of a woman and it would call into question the whole socio-political and cultural structure of society. When the Hajji slaps her, Zulaykha realises her situation and her resistance suddenly melts away. She receives no support from anyone, not even from the other women of the house:

Zulaykha begged the Hajji's wives for help, and approached the Hajji's friends who were in a position to help her, but all of them remained cold and unmoved, and rejected her saying: "the Hajji

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has authority over you and Guldasta. It is none of our business".  
(Mahboob 1999:13)

In fact, the Hajji's wives participate in readying Guldasta for her marriage to the Arab. They forcibly dress her up, put make-up on her face and take her to the Hajji. They occupy Guldasta fully and separate her from her mother in order to make sure nothing will get in the way of the Arab taking her. When Zulaykha begs the Hajji's first wife for help, she is told:

—Don't worry, your daughter will be better off.

Zulaykha explodes. She grabs the collar of her dress and tears it, as if the flame of the fire inside her wants to get out. She cries:

—How can she be better off! Guldasta is a child. She has not reached puberty. Hajji does not care about her comfort. He only cares about his own business. Hajji is selling my daughter to the Arab. (1999:31)

Zulaykha's resistance ends in failure, because in this struggle she is alone. Even though the Hajji's wives live in relative comfort, they experience a similar mistreatment. They are enslaved and are objects of the Hajji's sexual pleasure. His third wife is the same age as his daughter. By rejecting Zulaykha's pleas for help, these women accept their own destiny. Being a wife is shown to be a position of both power and powerlessness. It supposedly represents the core of womanhood and is the source of a woman's dignity, respect and social status. Yet, she is completely dependent upon her husband for these privileges. In the end, it is a state preferable only to the situation Zulaykha finds herself in.

Zulaykha knew nobody was listening to her wailing and groans, so she might as well be silent. The people who surrounded her

were strangers to her and her pain. If sometimes they noticed she was crying, they reckoned it was her habit and said that Zulaykha always cries. (Mahboob 1999:11)<sup>18</sup>

Zulaykha's silence is an example of what Cathy Caruth terms the 'voice of the wound' (1996:2). It speaks for her.

The Hajji represents himself as a religious man. He not only bears the religious title of Hajji, he also performs the five prayers daily. His appearance, which changes according to the occasion, clearly portrays the deeds of the Hajji: he wears 'the long Arab dress which touched his ankles', a Peshawari scarf to cover his head and his beard is 'long and huge' (Mahboob 1999:15–16). The Hajji serves the mujahideen who are fighting against the Russian soldiers and the leftist regime. But behind the outwardly religious appearance is a man who misuses religion for his own self-interest. By marrying women and girls in his household to Arabs, the Hajji pretends he is performing his Islamic duty and 'sharing' in the jihad. In reality, he acts to consolidate his position in society and to profit economically.

While engaged in the conversation, the Arab man moved his hand under his cloak and took out a bundle of money and gave it to the Hajji. He said something in Arabic which made the Hajji laugh. The Hajji took the money, bowed and said:

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18 Compared to the circumstances of women in refugee camps, perhaps Zulaykha and Guldasta were not altogether unlucky. Many women and girls were forced into prostitution, especially during the civil war:

Beside professional prostitutes, some Afghan women were forced by circumstances to sell their bodies to make both ends meet. Their power-hungry leaders and commanders are responsible for pushing them into the flesh trade because of continued fighting in Kabul and elsewhere in the war-ravaged country has killed their breadwinners and destroyed their homes. Women who lived in *Purdah* had to come out to beg or prostitute their bodies to feed themselves and their children. (Quoted in Zulfacar 2006:59)

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—She does not deserve you. She is only 11. With the grace of God I will organise someone a bit more mature in the future.  
(Mahboob 1999:28)

For Zulaykha, the Arab is a stranger, but the Hajji argues that this is not the case: ‘There is no difference between an Arab and an Ajam [non-Arab]. They are all Muslims.’ The divide between their two viewpoints is rooted in their ideological views. The Hajji has come to Peshawar to make jihad against the leftist regime, and to profit personally from it. Anyone who is in line with the jihad is his Muslim brother. For Zulaykha, who was brought to Peshawar by force after the death of her husband and who has no stake in the jihad, religion is not the defining element in determining friend or foe.

Zulaykha’s viewpoint also reflects a general mistrust of Arabs that was common among the refugee community. According to David B Edwards, who conducted anthropological research in Peshawar in the 1980s, Arabs were perceived by the refugee community as promoting unwelcome fanaticism and attempting to impose ‘foreign’ and rigid forms of Islam on the local traditions of the people (2002:270).

Guldasta resists going with the Arab. When the Hajji takes her hand and enters the room to present her to him, Guldasta ‘screamed, released her hand from the Hajji and escaped, as when a bird does from a trap’. Guldasta’s resistance is really because she does not want to be separated from her mother. As a child, she does not understand what is awaiting her. When she baulks at going with the Arab, one of the other men ‘tied her hands and legs, put her over his shoulder and left the room’ (Mahboob 1999:32).

‘*Hajji wa Arab*’ depicts a new situation that arose in relation to widows as a result of the war. Widows in Afghanistan are supposed to marry one of the members of the husband’s family after his death.



However, kin structures were drastically reconfigured due to the human and material losses that occurred during the war and displacement of Afghanistanis. In perilous economic situations it became common for a widow to be turned away by the family of her dead husband. Although the author does not explicitly say so, it would seem that this was Zulaykha's fate.

With astonished eyes Zulaykha sees herself as a lonely woman. Mosa is not there any more. She realises that after the death of Mosa she and Guldasta lost everything; they became homeless, became nothing, just nothing. They became moving ghosts ... When she and Guldasta were taken to Peshawar, Hajji had bought them from those who had captured them and brought them to Peshawar. From that moment on Zulaykha became Hajji's virtual slave (Mahboob 1999:12).<sup>19</sup>

Zulaykha is indeed a slave in Hajji's house: she works from dawn to dusk and she has no rights. She is so concerned with the fate of her daughter that she barely finds time or opportunity to mourn for what she has lost—her home and husband—and what she has become. Trauma 'is caused when we are unable to release blocked energies, to fully move through the physical/emotional reaction to hurtful experience', argues Peter Levine. 'Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness' (2010:xii). Zulaykha's traumatic memories have become a continuing presence. She also endures an enormous amount of anguish at the way she is treated in the Hajji's house. Without any support from

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19 There is little data about human trafficking by the mujahideen and the Taliban. In 2002, *Time Magazine* reported on the kidnapping and enslavement of women during Taliban rule. The report states that '600 women vanished in the 1999 Taliban offensive' in Shamali, north of Kabul. The women were transported mostly to Peshawar and were forced into marriage with militants, including Arabs (McGirk 2002).

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the Hajji's three wives, Zulaykha has to endure all the pressures, anxieties and fears alone: she 'not only keeps her tears to herself, but also the pain and anguish she feels every moment' (Mahboob 1999:12). *'Hajji wa Arab'* depicts a harsh reality suffered by many displaced women during the Afghan war.

*'Hajji wa Arab'* also describes what was happening to displaced women during the Afghan war. Zulaykha and her daughter are what De Alwis calls 'bodies out of place' (2009:377–78), who have been dispersed into an unfamiliar landscape. They are not related to anyone and know no one. They are cut off from everything and everyone they called home and family. But the cut-off is not temporary; it appears permanent. It seems their bodies are not only out of place but also out of time; they are disappeared into the unknown. Void of agency, Zulaykha is powerless; she not only cannot represent herself, but indeed has little say in her destiny and that of her daughter. During the war, while some Afghanistani women, especially those without male relatives, ended up in refugee camps, others became virtual slaves in private homes or under the control of warlords. Here the women were subjected to double victimisation.

### **Radicalism and the destiny of women**

*'Rajim'* ('Stoned') portrays another aspect of the radicalisation of Afghanistani tradition. *'Rajim'* is the story of Mahtab (literally 'the moon'), a young woman who is condemned to death by stoning because she is believed to be guilty of adultery, though her real crime is refusing to submit to a man's sexual advances (Mahboob 1999:71–83).

On a day when Sihabad (a black storm) is passing through the village, covering everything and everyone with dust, Mahtab is put

on the back of a donkey with her hands tied behind her back and taken away to be stoned to death. The village crier invites the local men to part in her public execution.

Covered in dust, Gundigan village was listening to the voice of the crier. The voice was broken by the wind. Like a sweeper's dust, the noise of the wind, which started from the deserted gardens, was rising from the earth, hitting the walls and houses and moving to the village field where Mahtab, the crier and the people were coming together. (1999:73)

Sihabad is the seasonal windstorm of the Kandahar region, but here it is a metaphor for the religious extremism that swept through Afghanistan in 1992. Its peak was the emergence and empowerment of the Taliban, first in Kandahar and then in most of the country until 2001. Among their main targets were women, who lost everything during their rule.

Mahtab was not an ill-famed woman. It was the black storm that wanted her to be disgraced. Men had attacked her by surprise in her home. In the attack they broke the house locks, ... grabbed her and dragged her to the street ... Men plundered her. (Mahboob 1999:77)

The black storm stirs anger in the people and the anger of the people drives forward the narrative in the same way it drives the mob who follow Mahtab. Their anger at the black storm is multiplied by the suggestion of an adulterous crime committed by a young woman. The effect is dehumanising.

People with anger in their faces because of the black storm, their hearts dark with what was imposed upon them, their looks tired of the cruelty they suffered from, confused and without purpose, were following the crier. Their eyes did not see other eyes. One man did not recognise another man. As human beings they were

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unrecognisable. The dust had metamorphosed their faces, and the noise and dust of the black storm moved the people and pushed them confusedly in different directions. (Mahboob 1999:74)

No one bothers to question the identity of the other adulterer involved in the alleged liaison. They ignore the explicit Koranic injunction that both parties involved must be punished with the same severity, which is also traditional custom. This suggests that the new code of conduct the Taliban has imposed on the people is not strictly Islamic or traditional in origin, but is based on the Taliban's particular interpretation of what is sanctioned by the Koran.

The mob's anger and the influence of the black storm leave little room for logical inquiry: 'The noise comes from the running of people, the unpleasant voice of the crier and the hubbub of the black storm above the rooftops. In these noises the streets and the square seem to be boiling' (1999:74). In the midst of the noises that engulf the entire village, the truth is lost.

To prove adultery and subject a woman to punishment, the Koran and Islamic law or *sharia* demand there should be hard evidence including the witnessing of the actual intercourse by four adult men. The Koran also advises: 'those who accuse free [chaste] women and bring not four witnesses, flog them (with) eighty stripes and never accept their evidence, [for] these are the transgressors' (24:4). In addition, if a woman is convicted of adultery, she should be sentenced to one hundred lashes and not to death by stoning.<sup>20</sup> According to

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20 According to the Koran (24:2) 'The adulteress and the adulterer, flog each of them (with) a hundred stripes'. There is no mention of stoning. According to this verse the punishment should be applied both to the man and the woman. Considering this verse, stoning to death is not mentioned as punishment for adulterer and adulteress. However, some Muslim scholars claim that according to *sharia*, if a woman is convicted of adultery, she should be sentenced to one hundred lashes if unmarried and death by stoning if married (see Khan 2003:100; Quraishi 2008: 167; Mir-Hosseini 2011:23).

these verses, if there are less than four witnesses, then those who are ‘making the charge are themselves punished for slander’. The ‘punishment for slander is almost as bad as the Koranic punishment for *zina* itself—both are lashing’ (Quraishi 2008:168). However, with the radicalisation of Afghanistani society such measures were no longer required. Mahtab is not married and thus should not have been sentenced to stoning, even if she was proved to have committed adultery. In such a society women are at the mercy of men.

The public nature of Mahtab’s murder is another notable deviation from traditional practices of punishment for adultery. According to Haleh Afshar, the concept of honour killing is seen in many Middle Eastern and South Asian countries as ‘the national duty of men’ (1998:173). However, in Afghanistan, the onus of punishment was always on the family, because ‘women have traditionally been the appointed site of familial honour and shame’ (Afshar 1994:129; see also Kurkiala 2003:7; Anwar 1988:287). The punishment of women who committed *zina* or adultery,<sup>21</sup> or in some other way brought dishonour to their family, was the private responsibility of the woman’s family.<sup>22</sup> When honour killing was committed, it occurred as a private matter carried out by male members of

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21 *Zina* is sex outside of marriage.

22 If there is any suspicion that a woman may have had a sexual affair, it is likely that she will be put to death by a male member of her family.

In the Muhmand region of eastern Afghanistan, a woman was accused of having illicit sexual affairs and became pregnant while the husband was away from home. Her husbands’ family ... returned her to her father’s house, expecting that he kill her to preserve his family’s name and honor. In accordance with tribal customs, the father killed his daughter without any hesitation, and soon afterward, people from neighbouring towns and villages came to congratulate him for the deed he performed that was necessary to restore his family’s honor. Even the local government administrative officer came to offer his congratulations, instead of issuing an arrest warrant and trying him in a court of law for his actions. (Emadi 2005:171)

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the family, be they husband, father, brothers or even uncles. The public stoning of women was not practised in Afghanistan prior to the empowerment of the mujahideen and the Taliban, and is not sanctioned by the Koran. Honour killings were transformed into public events in accordance with the Arab-influenced interpretation of Islam favoured by the mujahideen and the Taliban, even though this went against the traditional social codes of the country. As Amrita Chhachhi argues, 'state-supported fundamentalism reinforces and shifts the right of control over women from kinsmen to any man of the community' (1991:167).

Mahtab is the only child of a widow, Keshwar, who has to work for every family in the village. She and her mother are helpless against her accuser, a man who has public power. A woman who says no to the advances of such a man and tries to protect her honour, indeed the honour of the whole community in a traditional society, courts destruction. Women's lives and destinies, their bodies and souls, are at the mercy of men in a society based on men's interests and pleasure. They can be victimised by men who are close to them, like their husbands, and they are vulnerable to other men of power and authority, especially those in possession of the deadly weapon of a *fatwā* or Islamic decree. Women have no opportunity to fight back or expose men's brutality, particularly if they lack family protection. While in other of Mahboob's stories women are victimised by their husbands or powerful men in private, in '*Rajim*' Mahtab is victimised by the entire male population of the village.

When the men break into Mahtab's home, they first try to tie her hands, but she still has her voice and she shouts for help.

One of the men who was struggling to tie her hands, angrily spat on the ground and shouted:

—Close her mouth.

Mahtab did not have a chance to shout any more. The man's rough hands covered her mouth with a dirty handkerchief. With his fingers he pressed on her throat; he punched her in the head:

—Are you going to keep silent or do you want me to kill you right here, you whore?

Mahtab did not have a voice anymore. (Mahboob 1999:77)

Before being taken to the place where she is to be stoned to death, Mahtab is stripped of the power of her voice and hands, her two means of defence against the aggressors. She is prevented from saying anything or doing anything. After being placed on the back of the donkey, Mahtab gradually realised her situation:

She had a calm face. She did not even blink. She was sitting straight on the back of the donkey and did not move at all. She had dried up because of the fear and the black storm. All her being had been ground away under the pressure of fear. She fainted, then with the slap of the wind she became conscious again. She did not weep. Her tears had no way to come out. Her tears had become thin inside her and there in the cells of her body they were mixed with her urine and toxins spread under her skin. (Mahboob 1999:76)

What else does Mahtab possess, except her body and soul? During the humiliation and terror of being put onto the back of the donkey and being called an adulterer by the crier, with people following her carrying stones, Mahtab soul leaves her body before even reaching the stoning ground. Torture entails a loss of 'trust in the world' (Laub and Auerhahn 1989:377), but it also makes her feels she no longer belongs to it. According to Holocaust survivor Jean Amery, under torture the metaphysical self splits from the all-too-present

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body in pain, and experiences death firsthand (1980:34). Mahtab's body hastens towards death too:

Mahtab's legs and body slowly lost movement ... Her skin gradually loosened ... Fear took control ... Water came out of her body ... Wild voices were ringing in her head and biting her veins. Mahtab felt her flesh falling off. She imagined her bones were separating and piece by piece were falling down. Her body was empty ... Her eyes lost their sight ... Mahtab had no teeth anymore. Her shoulders were hanging by her skin. Her eyes were empty and her insides were emptied of her heart, stomach and intestines. Fear entered into every single cell of her body and squashed every drop of her life. Mahtab's hair turned white; large and small wrinkles covered her young face. Her neck loosened ... her eyebrows fell down. Mahtab turned old. (Mahboob 1999:81–82)

What do the men feel or understand about Mahtab's pain as they follow her to the place she will die and then stone her? Are they happy that they are stoning a woman, or angry because they are obeying an order? Veena Das suggests that we may think of pain as 'asking for acknowledgment and recognition ... In the register of the imager, the pain of the other not only asks for a home in language but also seeks a home in the body'. When observers do not recognise or acknowledge it, Das argues, it 'is not about the failing of the intellect but the failing of spirit' (quoted in Asad 2003:82). The story gives us little clue as to their feelings, but the only witness to outwardly show sympathy for Mahtab is the donkey that carries her through the village.

The donkey was alone with Mahtab on its back and it was going to drop her on the ground. The countless wounds tormented her body. The donkey sat down calmly and put down its load. The donkey's big eyes were crying ... Nobody knew that Mahtab



had become old. Nobody knew that the donkey was crying.  
(Mahboob 1999:82–83)

Something has happened to the people of this village that they can cooperate in the punishing of an innocent and unprotected woman. In this atmosphere the only creature that can react with natural compassion is the donkey. The distortion of the people's humanity is emphasised by their inability to account for time:

Although it was midday and the sun was standing in the middle of sky like a copper plate, time was lost. People within the waves of the black storm and black dust had lost their sense of time. People were wandering in the whirlpool of the black storm. The black storm was going to overturn the wheel of life unendingly. The day, struggling with the black storm, had fallen into a black dungeon. (Mahboob 1999:74)

The radicalisation of the country has caused its people to lose the sense of meaning of their lives.

## Women and resistance

In '*Hājji wa Arab*' we are not told Guldasta's fate at the hands of the Arab, but in '*Telesmāt*' ('Talisman') a similarly shocking and tragic picture is presented more fully. '*Telesmāt*' is a story about the enslavement of women for the sexual pleasure of the jihadists or holy warriors. Nazebu, after being exchanged several times by jihadi commanders as 'war booty', ends up in the house of an Arab fighter:

For a while an Arab man had taken her to his home and given her the name Shahd [Honey]. He himself had recited the *nekāh* [the marriage contract], but after a few months he divorced her.<sup>23</sup> After a few months, a Yemeni man had taken her into his house

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23 A husband can dissolve a marriage verbally and unilaterally simply by saying: 'you are repudiated'.

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and given her the name Homaira. This man was speaking a strange language, perhaps jinni's language, as she had not heard it until then ... One day when everybody was busy praying, Homaira jumped from the roof of the house, but she was caught ... and her master, who did not want to see her any more, ordered her hands and legs to be tied and put her in the basement. (Mahboob 2003:142–43)

A name conveys identity, and as Kathryn Woodward notes, identity is 'invoked in the summoning of and binding of individual agents into groups, as social actors' (1997:315). The renaming of Nazebru by the Arab and the Yemeni is suggestive of their lack of regard for her as an individual. The Arab names her Honey, something to sweeten his sexual life. Likewise the Yemeni calls her Homaira, or red, which may be taken as a symbol of sex. For them she stands only for colour and taste, only for sexual pleasure.

When the area is taken over by a rival commander—Khanshereen—Nazebru falls into his hands. However, she continues to resist him, despite being confined to a room with all its windows covered, and being subjected to beatings.

Nazebru, while covering her face with her hands out of fear, made sure she was ready to fight back if Khanshereen attacked her with his whip ... The only way she could fight back was to escape from his whip and run around the room. (Mahboob 2003:139)

Recalling Elaine Scarry's observation that 'in torture, the world is reduced to a single room or set of rooms' (1985:40), Nazebru's world becomes the basement of Khanshereen's fiefdom. Here she lives between what Cathy Caruth identifies as the 'crisis of death' and 'the correlative crisis of life'. She is 'between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival' (1996:7). Nazebru is in this limbo many times, but each time she manages to

survive. Despite her suffering, Nazebru never questions the value of living in the world. Indeed, she tries everything to cling onto it.

After enduring abuse after abuse and encountering Khanshereen, yet another captor, Nazebru reaches the point of saying no to him from the very beginning.

—I am not going to be your wife.

—Then whose wife do you want to be?

—Anyone's but not yours.

—I was the one who saved you from the streets.

—You did not save me from the streets but kidnapped me. You stole me, as you do with others. Put the gun to my neck. You brought me to your home with my hands and legs tied. (Mahboob 2003:140)

In reality these kidnappings and abuses by the mujahideen were a common occurrence:

Women and girls were not safe. Girls were abducted by commanders and forced into marriage, that is[,] raped. Commanders were reported to have as many as ten 'wives'. If the girls and their families objected or resisted they were often killed. (Zulfacar 2006:58)

Once Khanshereen realises that Nazebru will not submit,

he hurls her against the wall with all his strength and then throws her into a room. In order to stop the rays of the sun from entering the room, he completely covers the window with wood. He leaves her a jar of water and a bucket for her waste, and locks the door. (Mahboob 2003:141–42)

It is an accumulation of anger and determination that leads to Nazebru's boldest resistance. 'A moment arrives when one can no

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longer feel anything but anger, an absolute anger' (Nancy 1993:5). This is the anger Nazebru feels when she decides to escape from the Arab and the Yemeni and when she refuses Khanshereen. She knows the consequences, but her anger is so overwhelming that she resists to the end.

The half-mad Nazebru imagines she is followed everywhere by a creature that is half-spider and half-old-woman, who advises and encourages her to submit to Khanshereen and reproaches her when she rejects him. Nazebru is unwavering in her determination and resistance: cursing the creature, she refuses its advice. Nazebru's resistance eventually pays off. When Khanshereen's base is blown up and he and his companions are killed, Nazebru is free. While Nazebru has nothing to do with the explosion, on a personal level, by resisting and not submitting to his will, she challenges and destroys his authority. She achieves what Herman calls 'the empowerment of the victim' (1992:133).

Khanshereen, a mujahideen commander and a man in a position to have whatever he wants, represents the harshest type of patriarchy in a society ruled by tradition and struggling with war. But as a commander of a mujahideen group he is defeated by rival groups; as an individual he loses the battle against Nazebru. His personal power and authority come to an end when Nazebru rejects him.

Nazebru's life is marked by captivity. She has been a captive since her childhood and remembers no other reality. Judith Lewis Herman describes prolonged captivity as producing 'profound alterations in the victim's identity. All the psychological structures of the self—the image of the body, the internalized image of others, and the values and ideals that lend a person a sense of coherence and purpose—have been invaded and systematically broken down' (Herman 1992:93). In

Nazebu's eyes all men are captors and she is a captive. Time begins to lose its meaning. As there is no difference between men, there is no difference between day and night. The 'disruption of how we experience time' is another symptom of trauma (Eagleston 2014:17).

In this story, mental illness serves as a resonant metaphor for the disruption and alienation caused by the gendered radicalisation of a society. The civil war of 1992–96 was fought between different mujahideen groups along ethno-religious lines, but it was also marked by what Barbara Harlow describes as the 'sexualized and gendered tension between a nation's honor and its people's dishonor' (2002:123). In such a conflict, female bodies provide a 'space over which the competitive games of men [...] are] played out' (Das 1991:69). Thus, to humiliate their rivals, women from opposing ethnic groups were targeted sexually. In armed conflicts in the modern world, 'women's sexuality became a weapon in the hands of men with authority, a tool with which to humiliate and control them' (Jolluck 2006:194). This was exactly what happened in Afghanistan, particularly during the period between 1992 and 1996.

In '*Telesmāt*' the mujahideen commanders show no real respect or sympathy for women, even when they belong to the same ethnic group, as do Nazebu and Khanshereen. When Khanshereen seizes Nazebu and her village, the old spider woman asks Nazebu why she resists when she and Khanshereen have the same ethnic background:

—Where are you escaping to? You are lucky. Khanshereen is the best man amongst them.

—Death is better than submitting to this best of them. How do you know he is the best amongst them?

—At least he belongs to your own ethnic group, he speaks your language, he is not a stranger.

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—He is like the others, haven't you heard he is a murderer? Haven't you heard how many people has he killed?

—Who is not a murderer? Wherever you escape, one of them will appear in front of you.

—Then I will escape again. (Mahboob 2003:141)

'*Telesmāt*' is a story that does not follow a conventional line in relation to time, events and characters. Here, nothing is in its place and everything is mixed up. Men, women and animals are mixed up with each other. The dust, sun and explosions cause confusion. Fear and death seem to have changed the appearance and the very nature of the city and its inhabitants:

Nazebu observes that she sees a cursed city whose sun is grey. With their sunken eyes and deformed faces, the men and women of the city are grey-skinned. They make monotonous repetitive noises and sink further into the grey-coloured ground. With each sound their faces become uglier and more frightening ... Around her, Nazebu sees men and women who are cold and numb. With their eyes bulging from their sockets, they barely breathe, they are lifelessly trapped in spiders' webs like insects. (Mahboob 2003:138)

The explosions, which are heard and seen everywhere, seem particularly linked with the city's transformation, both on a physical and metaphorical level. The story begins with an explosion and they punctuate the rest of the story, seeming to throw people unpredictably from one place to another; every explosion, for instance, pushes Nazebu into the hands of another cruel man. And of course the story ends with the explosion that kills Khanshereen and destroys the fiefdom in which Nazebu is imprisoned. But this is not the end of her miseries: as long as the war continues there will be another Khanshereen who will imprison and rape Nazebu.

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*Chapter Five*

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## EXILE, GENDER AND IDENTITY

As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country.  
As a woman my country is the whole world. (Virginia Woolf  
1939:109)

Mass emigration is not unknown to the Afghanistani people. Due to the severe political turmoil that has afflicted the country, many of its people have been displaced, both internally and internationally. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, during Amir Abdul Rahman's campaign to establish a strong central government (1880–1901), hundreds of thousands of Hazaras and Shiites fled from central and western Afghanistan to British India and Iran, where most settled permanently. In an effort to change the ethnic make-up of the northern part of the country, he forced hundreds of thousands of Pashtun families from the south and east into northern and western Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

However, the recent mass emigration of Afghanistani people to other countries only began in the late 1970s. In the past, Afghanis rarely migrated beyond neighbouring countries, but today,

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1 Here I am not talking about the groups, families and individuals who were routinely exiled during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of a change of ruler or dynasty. Most of them were exiled to British India, though some ended up in Ottoman Turkey and others in Persia.

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a considerable number are settled in Western countries. The recent mass migration began amid the turmoil that ensued after the leftist coup of 1978. Subsequent developments, such as the empowerment of the mujahideen, the civil war of 1992 to 1996 and the rise of the Taliban (1996–2001), caused further exoduses.

What became of these displaced Afghanistanis in their new environments and what became of Afghanistani women in particular? Pnina Werbner describes diasporic communities as ‘historical formations in process; changing and responsive to different political and social contexts; reconstructed and reinvented imaginatively in new places or as political circumstances change in their place of settlement’ (2010:74). As a group, diasporic Afghanistani communities have undergone transformation as a result of changes to the socio-political and cultural contexts in their host countries, as well as in their homeland. One of the ways that the impact of emigration on the lives of Afghanistani women can be discerned is through an examination of the literary works of female Afghanistani writers living in diaspora.

As discussed in chapter two, Mahboob was one of the first Afghanistani authors to leave Afghanistan and she has been living in exile since the early 1980s. Through investigating her life and her work, one may be able to discover answers to some of the above questions, and learn something of what it means to be an author—more precisely, a female author—who has moved from the East to the West. How has exile affected Mahboob’s creativity and has it provided her with new motives for writing?

### **Mahboob and exile**

With the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Mahboob left for Pakistan in early 1981. However, Islamic extremist groups



dominated the socio-political environment in Pakistan. There was no room for those who did not share their views to even live there, let alone to convey their views. They were particularly harsh towards female intellectuals. Accused of being spies for the Kabul regime, Mahboob and her two female friends were arrested and imprisoned by the Pakistani government. It was only after a continuous hunger strike and with the intercession of a moderate Afghanistani Muslim leader that they were released after a week.<sup>2</sup> Realising that there was no place for her in Pakistan, Mahboob moved to Delhi a year later. She migrated to Canada in 1986.

Her decision to emigrate was unusual, in the sense that Mahboob comes from a conservative patriarchal society in which women are regarded as the embodiment of family and clan honour. Typically, women have to obey their family or their husband, and must be accompanied by them if they travel. However, Mahboob left her country without the accompaniment of any members of her family and as a single woman. She left Afghanistan with a group of colleagues from Kabul Radio, including Karima Vida, Zalmai Babakohi and Farida Anwari. In addition to their journalistic work, all of them were outstanding artists and writers in their own right.<sup>3</sup>

It was a brave move for a woman to leave her homeland by herself and move to a conservative society dominated by the mujahideen. In both the refugee camps and the urban areas of Peshawar, the mujahideen groups had a strong presence, including the most strongly fundamentalist Hizb-i Islami (or Islamic Party). The mujahideen ran their own security service and even maintained their own jails,

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2 Personal communication with Mahboob, December 2014.

3 Zalmai Babakohi, another member of the group, and Mahboob's future husband, published his anti-leftist regime poetry in Peshawar under the pseudonym Sangchele Sakhi (personal communication, September 2010).

‘incarcerating and badly treating’ whomever they did not like (Weinbaum 1991:78).

How Mahboob and her colleagues survived in Peshawar remains a secret.<sup>4</sup> Mahboob’s group were well known for their work and for their secular and liberal views, which did not make them welcome to the mujahideen. In Peshawar, Mahboob was a target not only because she was a female intellectual or unaffiliated with any mujahideen group, but because she was a single woman living with non-*mahrams*, or non-relative men.

As Mahboob’s experiences in Pakistan and India show, Afghanistani women underwent tremendous hardships in the neighbouring countries they emigrated to. They were subjected to more restrictions in their movement, appearance and employment than in the homeland they had fled. In Afghanistan, Mahboob had encountered no such restrictions and she had been able to publish literary and journalistic work; in Peshawar, and even in Delhi, she lost most of these rights. This situation provided her with firsthand experience of how women were struggling in these places.

### From the East to the West

In Delhi, in the early 1980s, a group of Afghanistani intellectuals founded a journal, *Gāhnāma* (literally, ‘an irregular journal’).<sup>5</sup> They regarded it as a form of cultural resistance against both the leftist regime and the mujahideen groups. But the journal published no

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4 Authors and politicians who did not associate with the mujahideen were risking their lives. Bahuddin Majrooh (1933–88), a scholar and writer, Meena Keshwar (1956–87), a female politician and the founder of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, and Keshwar’s sister, are among those assassinated by the mujahideen in Pakistan in the 1980s.

5 For the contents of *Gāhnāma*, see Ahmadi 2008.

more than three issues, a number that is suggestive of the difficulties the group faced both financially and politically. Delhi turned out to be not much different from Peshawar as far as the mujahideen's influence was concerned. Despite the fact that the Indian government supported the leftist government in Kabul, the mujahideen had a strong presence among Afghan migrants in Delhi. While the majority of exiles in Delhi were not members of the mujahideen parties, those who were member were the most vocal. There was little room for independent voices, let alone for women. Mahboob decided to leave the East altogether and in 1986 she moved to Canada with her husband, Zalmai Babakohi, a fellow writer she had married the year before.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1980s Afghanistan's politics were already internationalised and the mujahideen were at its centre. Those who did not share the mujahideen's political views, even if they opposed the leftist regime, had no opportunity to raise their voices. Because the mujahideen were receiving enormous amounts of weapons, training, money, and moral and political support, they completely dominated the political scene. The international community, especially the West, put all its weight behind them in its effort to fight the leftist regime and the Russian occupation. There was no support for the third voice of the Afghanistani polity or the voice of the democrats and intellectuals. Only the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan and Islamic groups were active on the battleground, in international politics and in cultural activities inside and outside Afghanistan.

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6 Zalmai Babakohi (b. 1951) is an outstanding Afghanistani writer and journalist. He published two collections of short stories, *Helāl eid az pase panjera* (A Crescent from behind the window) (1988) and *Parwāna-bā dar zemistān parwāz mekunand* (Butterflies fly in winter) (2008).

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For Mahboob and other Afghanistanis who moved to the West, there were few avenues for cultural and political expression. Up until this point, the Afghanistani diaspora in the West was a small one. When Mahboob migrated to Canada there were no Afghanistani-language radio programs, newspapers, journals or publishers. The few newspapers that did exist were run by political groups and served mainly to propagate their own causes. So Mahboob, Babakohi and Nawzar Ilyas founded the newspaper *Wāzha* (The Word) in the early 1990s and in 1996 Mahboob and Babakohi established a bi-weekly newspaper, *Zarnegār*, which has also operated as a book publisher, and through which Mahboob has published two collections of her short stories.

With the outbreak of the civil war in the early 1990s and the fierce fighting that erupted in the cities between the mujahideen factions competing for supremacy, a new wave of emigration began. Most of these emigrants were members of the urban, educated class. This changed the cultural make-up of the diasporic Afghanistani communities abroad, which up until this point had been mostly made up of migrants from rural parts of Afghanistan. Some members of the migrant intelligentsia began to establish literary and artistic associations.

Afghanistan was no longer occupied by a foreign country, but was being ravaged by fighting between the mujahideen groups. The war had taken on an ethnic dimension that was fuelled by the regional powers. While ideologically all the groups wanted to establish an Islamic state to be governed by *sharia*, they fought over which group would hold power; so in order to mobilise supporters they played the ethnic card. The destiny of the country was now in the hands of the commanders and warlords who knew only the language of

the gun. What Afghanistan had been was getting lost in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and ethno-religious conflict.

The establishment by Afghanistani migrants of newspapers, radio stations and literary and artistic associations was a response to this dilemma. While the mujahideen groups hid themselves behind ethno-religious discourse, members of the educated class established cultural outlets to express their dismay and frustration.

### Diaspora and female writers

How do Afghanistani women who have lived their entire lives in a strongly patriarchal society deal with the relationship between men and women in Western societies? All women who live in patriarchal cultures experience what Shari Benstock characterises as internal exile: they are ‘expatriate *in patria*’ (1989:20). Women in such circumstances perceive their exclusion as ‘imposed from the outside and lived from the inside’, so that it is difficult to distinguish ‘the separation of outside from inside [and] patriarchal dicta from female decorum’ (1989:20). For the woman writer, exile can take forms other than physical exile or internalised exile: the act of writing itself symbolises resistance and it is a means of empowerment that provides a space within which the writer can locate and position her identity. A country with a less pronounced or less traditional patriarchal structure may also provide a sense of psychological space to an immigrant. This is described by Mahnaz Afkhami in *Women in Exile*:

Along with the loss of their culture and home comes the loss of the traditional patriarchal structures that limited their lives in their own land. Exile in its disruptiveness resembles a rebirth for the woman. The pain of breaking out of a cultural cocoon

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brings with it the possibility of an expanded universe and a freer, more independent self. (Afkhami 1994:45)

The emergence of Afghanistani diasporic literature began in the 1980s, but it was the 1990s that saw its real establishment. It was a new type of literature dealing with the lives of Afghanistanis who live in diaspora. While the majority of these works have been written by Afghanistani authors based in Iran and Pakistan, there are a growing number by authors living in the West. Mahboob is the first Afghanistan female author to write from diaspora and she also is the first to deal with the position of women living in diaspora.<sup>7</sup> Diasporic literature acts as a bridge between the exiled writer's host society and their country of origin; it is a space where home and host cultures converge, intersect and clash. This literature can express the pain of exile—characterised by loss, longing and a search for identity—but also the joy of achievement.

According to Edward Said, most 'people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision give rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that, to borrow a phrase from music, is contrapuntal' (2002:186). It is this contrapuntal consciousness that Mahboob writes about. In fact, much of her work reflects the transformation of Afghanistani women from exiles to émigrés, a result of continuous rethinking and changes in personal circumstances. Her work also reflects on how migrants lived in their homelands and how they live in their new countries, on the differences between the two worlds and the new opportunities their new world presents.

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7 Spozhmai Zaryab's novel *Dar keshwar-i digar* (*In another country*), which covers her time living in France as a student in the early 1970s, does not fit into the category of diaspora literature (see Zaryab 1988).

Another layer to these stories, although it may not be explicitly spelled out, is what the protagonists went through in their homeland, which resulted in their emigration and prevents them from returning.

The transformation from exile to émigré is not a simple one, it happens as a result of multiple personal, social and cultural challenges and encounters. Mahboob's short stories about exile show the diversity of Afghanistani women in diaspora who go through these processes. While for some, diaspora is marked by exclusion and loss, for others it is marked by new opportunities and achievements. Some immigrants exist temporally in the past, while others exist in the present or future.

Migration initially slowed Mahboob's creativity, at least in terms of quantity of her output. Between 1982 and 1991, a period during which she moved from Pakistan to India and then to Canada, she did not write anything.<sup>8</sup> However, during that period she underwent a tremendous transformation personally and politically, especially in relation to the war in Afghanistan. In an earlier collection of short stories, *Darakht-hā kārtoos gul mekonand* (*The trees bear bullets*), written in Pakistan and published in Peshawar in 1982, she shows a great deal of sympathy for the mujahideen and their cause. But living in Pakistan provided her with a different perspective. While her antagonistic views of the leftist regime were maintained, her later works of fiction draw different conclusions about the mujahideen.

In more qualitative terms, migration was a turning point in Mahboob's creativity. As Carine Mardorossian observes, exiled writers are often 'seen as better equipped to provide an "objective"

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8 Going by the date that Mahboob mentions at the end of '*Hājjī wa Arab*', it appears this story was written in 1991.

view of the two worlds they are straddling by virtue of their alienation' (2002:16). Looking at the relationship between Afghanistani men and women from a distance helped Mahboob gain a better understanding of it. Marrying Zalmai Babakohi placed her for the first time in close contact with an Afghanistani man to whom she was not related and this was an important factor in shaping her views of male-female relationships.<sup>9</sup> No longer having to negotiate the social codes of conduct that made women second-class citizens in Afghanistan and enjoying her relative freedom in the West, Mahboob developed on increasingly feminist approach to writing fiction and acquired a better knowledge of the position of women in Western society.

Hélène Cixous argues that a female author in exile 'writes herself' and, in doing so, can 'carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history' (Cixous 1976:880). Mahboob has written her major works of fiction from diaspora. In some of her work, she concentrates on the position of women and their struggle in Afghanistan, while others are about the experiences of women who have left their home country behind. In all of these works, Mahboob is examining those 'ruptures and transformations' in her own life and, as Cixous would have it, is writing herself.

### **Diaspora and the transformation of women**

Mahboob's diaspora stories generally concentrate on the position of women in relation to gender issues. In these works, she depicts the suppression and marginalisation of women, not because of their class or family background, but simply because they are women. For

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9 Mahboob is exceptional among Afghanistani women writers in that, after marriage, she retained her family name.



Afghanistani women, generally, migration has had a complicating effect on this dynamic. As James Clifford observes that it can be difficult to say whether gender subordination is reinforced or loosened by the ‘diaspora experience’:

On the one hand, maintaining connections with homelands, with kinship networks, and with religious and cultural traditions may renew patriarchal structures. On the other, new roles and demands, new political spaces, are opened by diaspora interactions. (1994:313–14)

In diaspora, women are not only confronted with a new physical reality—they must also undergo a fundamental transformation, regardless of age and family background. In their new environment, women find the opportunity to review their status in the family and society, and to bring about lasting change. According to Mahboob, education is not the essential element for freeing women; rather, it is the environment they live in and, even more importantly, their understanding of their own conditions and rights. While Afghanistans who relocated to neighbouring countries often struggled for survival and had to fight for basic rights, in the West women found new opportunities to improve their lives and status.

### Exile in the region

In Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries, which are geographically and culturally close to the homeland, Afghanistani women undergo tremendous hardships, harder even than those they faced in Afghanistan. Women lack any opportunity for employment, education or personal freedom. In Pakistan, women are deprived of most of their primary rights, including going outside their homes and choosing their husbands, as Mahboob shows in *‘Hājjī wa Arab’*

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(‘Hajji and the Arab’), which is discussed at length in Chapter Four. In Pakistan women lost the basic rights and traditional protection mechanisms that they had once enjoyed in Afghanistan. The severely conservative environment, coupled with the intense radical political atmosphere within the Afghan communities, left little room for women to exercise their rights or demand any role in politics or society, or even to have a say in their own fate. Here men become synonymous with jihad, and women with confinement.

The situation of Afghanistani women in Iran is different, as seen in ‘*Hawli sangi*’ (‘Stoned courtyard’). Young non-Iranian women (and men) are not permitted to study in Iran unless they have a refugee identity card. Afghanistani refugees can cross the border and live in Iran but it takes years to obtain a refugee identity card. Without this card, they cannot work lawfully and can be sent back over the border at any time.<sup>10</sup> Sima, the protagonist of ‘*Hawli sangi*’, has lived all her life in Iran. She is one of the more than two million Afghanistanis who have been living there since the late 1970s. In a passage that suggests she does not quite belong to either country, we are told that Sima was born during her parents’ journey to Iran ‘on a hilltop covered by sand in a place on the border belonging to neither side’ (Mahboob 2003:93).

Sima follows all the norms of her host country, including dress code:

She wears a black *hijab* that is tight above her eyebrows, under her cheeks and across her shoulders and covers her body. Apart from the hijab her clothes include a long black blouse, a long black skirt, tight black trousers and a pair of black socks. Black was the illustration of her destiny. (Mahboob 2003:94)

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10 However, while only those families registered with a ‘blue card’ were entitled to do so, others were not. See Hoodfar 2004; Hoodfar 2010; Adelskha and Olszewska 2007; and Chatty 2010.

After adapting to Iranian norms, Sima wants to enjoy its advantages as well, including the right to education. Sima and her sister apply once again for a refugee identity card. Thousands of women have submitted their applications and have been awaiting a decision from the department for days. An old woman sitting on the ground clings to the legs of the soldier at the gate and begs him for help. The soldier responds to the old woman with a stick, but seeing Sima and her sister, Golalai, he lets them go inside. Even the director of the department welcomes them, but when he discovers that they are Afghanistani, he throws them out.

Confused, Sima and Golalai rushed out onto the street as if they were escaping from a horrifying crime ... They were humiliated, and nothing more was left of them. Everything collapsed inside them, and a huge black hole opened in their minds. (Mahboob 2003:98)

From this time on, Sima does not leave the house. She has decided to 'be without any identity', as she was born without an identity' (2003:101). Her family's house with its stone courtyard becomes her world.

It was a small stone courtyard with high walls. On the opposite sides there were rooms. The curtains cover the windows all the time. In the corner of a wall, from a crevice in the stone, a thin rose has found its way out with a single flower. (2003:92)

The flower is the only interesting thing in the house and Sima, most of the time, finds herself looking at it or watering it. She is similar to the flower in appearance and existence. When her uncle tells her that the Iranian government has decided to register their family and provide them with identity cards, she thinks it is a trap and refuses to go back to the government office.

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The Iranians do not consider us as human beings. They treat us with humiliation and beatings. They call us murderers, thieves and criminals. Even if they provide us with an identity card, what is the use of it? (Mahboob 2003:94–95)

Sima's assumption turns out to be right. In fact, the government has accepted their applications only in order to round them up a week later and throw them out of Iran. Sima, who dreams of becoming an educated woman, must now concern herself with the bigger issue of avoiding deportation from Iran. Living in Iran since her childhood does not qualify her to stay in the country until her homeland is safe for return.

As represented in '*Hawli sangi*' and '*Hājji wa Arab*', women refugees to Iran and Pakistan undergo a double victimisation and disempowerment. Their experience fits that which is described by Rita Manchanda as follows:

The woman refugee represents the epitome of the marginalisation and the disenfranchisement of the dislocated. Her identity and her individuality are collapsed into the homogenous category of 'victim' and of her community. She is constructed as devoid of agency, unable and incapable of representing herself, powerless and superfluous. (2006:206)

### Migration to the West

Migration to the West provides a different dimension to the life of Afghanistani women. Here opportunities such as education are widely available, and women are encouraged to take advantage of them. But the West's relationship with Islam created other issues for the female Muslim immigrant, 'urging her to silence her criticism, remain loyal, reconcile herself to, even find virtue in the central

formulations of her culture that normally she would rebel against' (Ahmed 1982a:162).

A number of Mahboob's works look at how her female characters respond to this situation in accordance with their religion and the politics of community identity. As discussed in earlier chapters, in Muslim communities women and their conduct are routinely used as symbols of family honour and communal identity and as markers of tradition and culture (see Rajmi 2007). The preoccupation with the properness of women's roles in the family and community is strongly connected to a concern with preserving the integrity and purity of Islamic culture. For Muslim women there is continual pressure to be seen as loyal to Islamic culture, as well as to their own local culture.

However, not all Muslim women submit to this pressure. The majority of women take advantage of the opportunities they have in the West to improve their lives. In the case of Mahboob's female characters, they rebel against this pressure in different ways, including by going to school and adopting Western values and new ways of dressing. They become intentionally disloyal. But, in doing so, they face resistance from the male members of their families. The resistance provokes confrontation, which changes the relationship between men and women in their families. Mahboob's women, struggling between two cultures, make choices that begin to change the traditional view of women's duty as being to look after home, husband and children.

### **The invisible becomes visible**

'*Gum*' ('The invisible') is the story of an Afghanistani woman, Shereen, who lives in Canada with her hard-working husband

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(Mahboob 1999:117–35). In this environment Shereen, like other women of her generation, encounters ‘a way of thinking to be herself ... to reorganise her life’. This ‘reorganisation’ results in a permanent shift in identity. Living in Canada, ‘a different land, full of colour and people from different backgrounds’, has altered the relationship between Shereen and her husband. Both Shereen and her husband realise that something is happening:

The man realised that the woman had changed. Canada’s climate made her happy and fresh. She had become interested in fashion ... The man realised she was paying more attention to herself, and to the beauty of her skin and the dying of her hair.

—Why did you dye your hair? Don’t you feel ashamed of doing it? Did you ask my permission?

She replied from the other room:

—Does dying hair need permission?

—As long as you are my wife, everything needs permission.  
(Mahboob 1999:120)

This exchange represents a deeper change in the couple’s views of themselves and their relationship. For Shereen, life in Canada means bettering her life and status. For her husband, it means his authority is undermined:

Since the time they had come to this country, something was added to the woman and something was taken from the man. The status of the man was changed. He felt the arena for his actions was becoming limited. (Mahboob 1999:123)

The husband has lost his traditional authority. He no longer has the control over his family, over his wife’s body, which he was accustomed

to. Shereen has been transformed, and the key to this transformation is her becoming aware of her opportunities and seizing them. For her husband to assert his authority, he would need to cut her off from the outside world, but Shereen won't obey any attempt by her husband to do so.

—Where were you?

—I went to the language course.

—Which kind of course?

—I have taken an English course.

—Since when have you been interested in English?

—Since I've come to Canada.

—Stop it. Stop it. English is not of use for you and me.

The woman said calmly:

—If English is of no use to you, it is of use to me.

The husband said suspiciously:

—But you are not literate.

—I'll learn. (Mahboob 1999:120–21)

Going to school and learning English is a significant step towards transforming Shereen into an autonomous individual. For her, individual achievement, not homemaking and motherhood, becomes the means of asserting her selfhood. In Afghanistan, women rarely seek education after marriage; even most educated women become housewives after they marry. But going to school provides Shereen with the opportunity to improve her status and is a significant step towards her freedom, autonomy and personal identity.

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When it is clear that other reasons cannot convince Shereen to stop going to school, the husband brings up her responsibilities as a mother:

—What will happen to our son if you go to school?

—You are the father, you should know what is going to happen to him.

Powerless against his wife, her husband said softly:

—From dawn to dusk I work very hard. You should be at home. He shouldn't feel lonely.

—He is grown up now. He goes to school, and when he comes home I am here. These are just excuses. You create them to prevent me from going to school. (Mahboob 1999:122)

For Shereen to gain freedom, the first step is to break her silence. Cixous and Kuhn describe this as a vital step in women's liberation: 'first she would have to *speak*, start speaking, stop saying that she has nothing to say!' (1981:50–51). Shereen starts speaking and she speaks about her body and her needs.

She did not like the house anymore. She could hardly breathe in it. In every corner of the house there was the shadow and rough voice of the man. Where could she escape from the man or hide herself? She did not want to become invisible. She wanted to stay at home with her husband, but not to be destroyed by his continued obscenities. (Mahboob 1999:125)

However, Shereen's attempts to gain some measure of autonomy within a traditional relationship ultimately fail. The more she changes and becomes aware of her surroundings, the less interest she has in her marriage. Barbara Johnson argues that it is 'impossible for the woman to protest, since she cannot do so with seeming ungrateful



or at least without losing her centrality in her husband's world' (1980:28). Shereen, annoyed by her husband's bad temper, ignores him and tries to stay out of his sight. By avoiding him, she begins to overcome those 'ungrateful' feelings, but she can't avoid the gulf that has grown between them. When her husband finally forbids her from going out, she makes her decision. Determined to change her life, Shereen has no option but to refuse:

—I warn you, you are not allowed to leave home anymore.

She moved toward him and stared at him with a tired look. She stood up next to the man and said:

—I do not want to step into this house anymore.

Then she walked forward...With her shoes in her hands, she was running down the corridor. With fast firm steps, she was departing from the home and her husband. (Mahboob 1999:133–34)

It is a seemingly permanent departure from the home, which has become a symbol of the past. However, Shereen is still not sure of a positive outcome. She has the determination to free herself and takes practical steps in that direction, but can she really leave behind her home, her husband and her son? Is this the right choice? She has no idea what will happen to her when she leaves home:

It was a dark night and a fresh breeze was moving the leaves. She was frozen. Fear had occupied her whole body. She put on her shoes and walked in the empty street, nervously looking at her surroundings. (Mahboob 1999:133)

Under a streetlight Shereen sees a tall woman heavily made up and wearing a garish outfit. The woman jumps into a car, which has braked for her. Shereen imagines herself as that woman:

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Suddenly Shereen was disturbed. The smell of the strange man and his hard breath was nauseating. She looked behind her. She hoped Payenda, her husband, regretted what had happened:

—I hope he regrets it and does something about it!

Doubtfully she asked herself:

—Should I go back home or not? (Mahboob 1999:134–35)

This doubt and uncertainty is so deep and complicated that it overshadows not only Shereen's determination, but also her future. Her hesitation in going through with her decision hints that freedom is not just a matter of opportunity and perspective.

### **Diaspora and new power**

Women in diaspora do not always need to escape from home to enjoy freedom. '*Sadā*' ('The voice') is the story of an illiterate housewife, Deljan, who challenges the power dynamic between herself and her husband. She is also a support to her 16-year-old daughter, who is trying to find her place in society.

The hidden conflict between husband and wife comes to a head at the moment when Deljan's husband, Aqashereen, is leaving on pilgrimage to Mecca (the *hajj*). For some time, Aqashereen has been becoming increasingly concerned with religious observation. Deljan wants her daughter, Nelofar, and her son, Ihsan, to attend a wedding party. She feels it is necessary for Nelofar to fit in well with the Western code of dress and appearance, and feels she should be able to dye her hair and wearing make-up and a nice dress. But Aqashereen opposes his daughter's desire and tries to stop her going to the wedding.

Months before going on the hajj, Aqashereen already saw himself as a Hajji. He asked his wife and children to call him Hajji ... Now it took him longer to finish his prayers. He stopped wearing jeans and instead bought a white shalwar-kameez. And few months before his departure, he stopped shaving ... (Mahboob 2003:69)

Aqashereen has recently asked his wife, Deljan, not to leave home without a *hijāb*. For Deljan this was strange. For 19 years he had not asked her to do so. The last time he asked her to wear *hijāb* was just two days ago. This time Deljan could not keep silent anymore:

—Whatever you say, I am not going to listen to you and wear the *hijāb*.

—How do you respond to God?

—Since when have you become God-fearing? Before intending to go on the hajj, was there a God, was there a Prophet and praying? My bare head did not matter to you. But now, because you are going on the hajj, you have become God-fearing. If you believe so firmly, you should look after your manners. The money you get from the welfare is not very clean. A person should go on the hajj by spending money that he has made through working hard. (Mahboob 2003:69–70)

This excerpt shows that all migrants undergo change, some embracing assimilation to varying degrees, while others actively resist it. While women often fall into the first category, men are more commonly in the second. It is the illiterate woman, Deljan, who is open to change because it improves the life of her children, and it is her husband who is resistant because it means losing his authority. In this situation something has to be done from the inside, because Aqashereen increasingly blocks change and tries to close the window onto the outside world. Unexpectedly, the internal rebellion comes

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not from his educated daughter, but from his seemingly docile wife. A voice that was 'relatively inarticulate, even silent, in relation to men' becomes louder and clearer (Ardener 1975:xii).<sup>11</sup> Deljan is not much concerned about her own rights, but fights for the rights of her 16-year-old daughter in the context of a traditional family structure. The woman not only attains her goal but also inadvertently acquires more power. She ends up in control of the family.

Deljan tells Nelofar and Ihsan to go to the party. After closing the door behind them she rushes to Aqashereen and says:

—I send them with my own permission. What can you do now?

Anger is sparkling in Aqashereen's eyes. His authority is lost. His wife is standing in front of him and dictating to him. Something is breaking inside him and is about to explode ... With hatred he looks at Deljan and slaps her and then for the second time ... With pride and a firm voice she says:

—What else can you do?

—Divorce you.

—I don't want a divorce.

Her younger son rushes to the telephone to call the police. Deljan says:

—There is no need for the police. My voice is sufficient!  
(2003:75–76)

In this way, Deljan attains power at home and in the relationship. She becomes the decision-maker and she also keeps the right of rejecting divorce.

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11 'What is it that makes a group muted?', asks Edwin Ardener. 'It is muted simply because it does not form part of the dominant communicative system of society—expressed as it must be through the dominant ideology [... This] phenomenon of "mutedness" is a technically defined condition of structures—not some condition of linguistic silence' (1975:22).

## Diaspora as loss

Perhaps for many Afghanistani women, the most important loss experienced in diaspora is the loss of common ground with their children, especially with their daughters. This sense of loss is explored in Mahboob's story '*Chahār rāh-i Yonge wa Bloor*' ('The Yonge and Bloor intersection'). In this story, Fauzya, the mother of a family, realises that one of the main means of male domination of women is financial. Traditionally the man is the breadwinner of the family, which gives him the right to control others. By contributing directly to the family economy in diaspora, women challenge men's domination. This changes relationships between men and women. By taking an active role in the family's economy, in order to fulfil the material needs of her three daughters, Fauzya moves from the margin to the centre, and her relationship with her husband, Hakim, changes.

Fauzya was tired of replying to Hakim's phone calls. While she had to concentrate on driving she also had to listen to Hakim's complaints. All the time he complained about working hard. She had to calm him all the time ... what a man! Although he was fifty, when he was talking to her he was more like a child talking to his mother than to his wife. He was like a blind man who had lost his stick; whenever he had a problem he called Fauzya. (Mahboob 2003:17)

For Fauzya, working every day in the shop with Hakim is a means to improve the lives of their three daughters.

In her youth she had lost all her wishes and was still sighing for her unfulfilled dreams; she did not want her daughters to have to suffer the same way. She wanted all the wishes of her daughters to be fulfilled. (Mahboob 2003:19)

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But is providing financial resources the core to raising successful children? As a result of working long hours, 'Fauzya has not spent enough time talking to her daughters for a long time. Any kind of contact with them happened by telephone, or in short meetings' (2003:18). The girls are either by themselves watching television or going to the cinema or spending time with their Canadian friends. There is a widening gap between Fauzya and her children. One day, hoping to spend the day with them, Fauzya takes her daughters shopping. But she loses them in the crowd. She searches all day but cannot find them.

The girls were lost. Fauzya did not know where they had gone. People were moving like waves, and crossing the waves made her tired. She was looking into the far distance, hoping to find a sign of them. Suddenly under the bright lights, over the shoulders of people who were crossing the intersection, she saw her two daughters waving to her. Fauzya rushed towards them, but realised that her daughters had moved away quickly and had disappeared. (Mahboob 2003:30)

This intersection between Yonge Street and Bloor Street metaphorically divides the two generations, which have grown up in different cultures with little understanding of each other. The intersection is also known as an area of prostitution, which suggests the loss of Fauzya's daughters may also encompass a moral loss. Fauzya and her daughters live in two different worlds and, despite Fauzya's attempts, she cannot close the gap that has grown between them.

### **No returning home**

According to Edward Said, exile is an 'unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home' that results in a fundamentally 'discontinuous state of being'

(2002:173–177). Existing in diaspora does not always bring good fortune for women migrants and not all women are happy in Western society. The home they leave behind represents their culture and a way of life and being. In *‘Khānom Jorj’* (‘Mrs George’) the title story of Mahboob’s 2003 collection, Shahla suffers a loss of identity after marrying a Canadian man and having two children.<sup>12</sup> She has become Mrs George. After 18 years of marriage, she suddenly realises that she misses something terribly.<sup>13</sup> She longs for the ‘good old days’ and the culture she belonged to. This nostalgia takes her mind back to the past.<sup>14</sup>

Shahla had been thinking about the past for a while. She did not know where the feeling was suddenly coming from, or why memories of the past were reviving in her. She decided to take leave from work and stay at home ... The first thing she thought about was the celebration of the traditional *Naw Roz* (New Year). She began to think about *khāna takāni* (house cleaning), of making *haft mewa* (seven fruits), the special food *samanak* (wheat) and of dying her feet and hands with henna. (2003:79)

Shahla’s memories of *Naw Roz* spark her nostalgia because of its cultural and emotional significance. The celebration is all about starting a new year of life and forgetting the past. So for her it is the perfect event to begin a life that will allow her to regain the identity she lost during 18 years of living in a different world. She decides to

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- 12 This is the only story by Mahboob in which an Afghanistani woman marries a Western man.
- 13 Christopher Bollas suggests that the passing of time itself is traumatic, involving as it does the ‘loss of the self, its continuous destruction through consignment to oblivion’ (quoted in King 2000:134).
- 14 The word ‘nostalgia’ is derived from the Greek root *‘nostos’* (homecoming) and the stem *‘algos’* (pain, grief, distress), and is defined by Svetlana Boym as ‘a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed’. Nostalgia, she continues, is ‘a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy’ (Boym 2001:xiii).

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carry out all the customs and rituals connected with the occasion, from cleaning and decorating the house to preparing special dishes and fruit and buying new clothes. The preparation provides her with a feeling that connects her with her past and her former identity.

When Shahla was done with the cooking, she put on a beautiful dress and make-up. She put the tablecloth on the floor under the chandelier, then decorated it with a bunch of flowers. She wiped dust from the mirror which had been given to her by her mother, and placed it on top of the tablecloth... When her husband and children came in, she shouted:

—Surprise! Surprise! (Mahboob 2003:88)

The preparation to celebrate *Naw Roz* takes time. *Khāna takāni* (house cleaning) is a signal to the ancestral spirits that their kin are ready and willing to entertain them. As Claudia Roden notes, food plays a special role in all cultures:

Behind every dish lies a world, a culture, a history. Dishes have social meaning, they have emotional and symbolic significance. Food is about power. It is an expression of identity and ideology. It touches on issues of class, gender, race and ethnicity. It is a clue to history. It is a language. (Quoted in Monsutti 2010:215)

The preparation of *samanak* and *haft merwa* and other *Naw Rozi* dishes provides Shahla with a different sense of herself. It gives her life meaning. Her preparations suggest how deeply she remembered *Naw Roz* in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

For Shahla, this day not only reminds her of her cultural identity, it is also full of personal memories. ‘For an exile, habits of life,

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15 Traditionally, Afghanistani women celebrate *Naw Roz* with *samanak*, which is made of wheat germ. They cook it from late in the evening until daylight, during which women gather around the pot and sing *Naw Rozi* songs and dance. No men are allowed to take part in this ceremony.



expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment', observes Said (2002:186). But for Shahla's husband, a bank clerk who has little knowledge of his wife's cultural background, celebrating the traditional New Year has no special meaning. When Shahla asks him to join her and their children for the special dinner she has prepared, he replies: 'It is not interesting for me, darling. Let the boys go to bed' (Mahboob 2003:88).

Despite Shahla's nostalgia, she does not consider returning to her homeland. As Said argues, an ability to return is part of the condition of exile. Its pathos 'is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question' (2002:179). In *Cartography of Diaspora*, Avtar Brah offers a critical distinction between a desire for the homeland and the 'homing desire' (1996:180):

On the one hand, 'home' is a mythical place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust ... all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. In other words, the varying experiences of the pains and pleasures, the terrors and contentments, or the highs and humdrum of everyday culture ... The concept of diaspora places the discourses of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins. (1996:192-93)

Shahla's sense of belonging is problematised by this tension between the homing desire and lack of a fixed homeland. Her 'homeland' is in the past and has little to do with her present life. Shahla has only

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a few memories of it, which have surfaced after a long time. She is strongly linked to her present by her two sons and her marriage.

Shahla's story suggests that with the passing of time an immigrant becomes more integrated, but this comes at a cost. Memories of the lost homeland become blurred and are based more in mythology than reality, even as the immigrant feels the homeland's pull.

She could not separate her past from herself and just throw it away. Her past was part of her ... While vague and distanced, the past had a hold on her memory and spirit ... Nevertheless for Shahla the past was past, and was something that she could not have access to. (Mahboob 2003:78)

Jacqui Alexander argues that there is a need to differentiate between memory as nostalgic yearning and memory as intentional reflection—remembering critically to understand our relationship to the past:

Can we *intentionally* remember, all the time, as a way of never forgetting, all of us, building an archaeology of living memory which has less to do with living in the past, invoking a past, or excising it, and more to do with our relationship to time and its purpose. There is a difference between remembering *when*—the nostalgic yearning for some return—and a living memory that enables us to re-remember. (Alexander 2002:96)

As William Safran (1991:87) has put it, 'diaspora consciousness is an intellectualisation of an existential condition', an existential condition that becomes understood and reconciled through the myth of a homeland from which one is removed but to which one imagines one actually belongs.

Jocelyne Dakhliya claims that forgetting is part of the process of remembering, since memory erodes at the margins (2001). Forgetting

can be conceptualised as a process of reconstruction in which elements that are less relevant for the present context are latent. Shahla, who has forgotten almost everything from her past because it is not relevant to her new circumstances, suddenly recalls the details that feel important to her.

She imagined that it could take her closer to something that was not accessible anymore. She observed that with this new feeling she can be herself; she can be reconnected with her past and liberate herself from assimilation. (Mahboob 2003:79)

This feeling shows that Shahla has been living in a condition of exile, but ignoring the identity politics inherent in this at her peril. Although her renewed interest in her homeland is at this stage only a feeling, her celebration of the traditional New Year is an affirmation, at least, that the connection to her past still exists deep in her heart and mind.

### **Women's bodies and power struggles**

In Mahboob's work there are two types of power struggles for women: one is to do with general social and political issues, such as the position of women in the family and society; and the other is specifically related to women's struggles for control over their own bodies. For Michel Foucault, power is a set of forces that establish hierarchies and patterns of behaviour that influence people in their everyday lives (Danaher, Schirato & Webb 2000:48). Power dynamics exist in all relationships, but power is unstable, moving from one side to the other as relationships evolve. Power is not absolute but is relative to any given relationship or situation.

In some of Mahboob's works, women's struggle to access education, say, or to choose a partner, is characterised by direct confrontation,

as in '*Khāna-i delgir*' ('The confined home'), '*Hājji wa Arab*' ('Hajji and the Arab'), '*Rajim*' ('Stoned') and '*Telesmāt*' ('Talisman'). In these stories, women are deprived of their essential rights and are treated as merely objects in the hands of men. They have no choice but to stand and fight.

In Mahboob's stories about Afghanistani communities in the West, the power struggle takes a different form. It is often the bodies of women that serve as a site on which power struggles take place. Some of Mahboob's female characters insist on doing what they want with their appearance in contrast to what they were previously able to do: they cut their hair short or dye it, wear make-up, dress the way they want to and so on. Does this change in appearance depict changes in identity too, or at least a conscious step towards them? According to Mary Douglas, 'the body provides a basic theme for all symbolism' (1966:163–64).

Traditionally, women's subordinate position has been justified by a perception of their bodies and minds as inferior, or *nāqis-i aqal* (see Weitz 2013).<sup>16</sup> Women are taught to believe in their own natural inferiority and to be ashamed of it. It should be no surprise, then, that the female body is often at the centre of struggles to improve women's status. As Foucault argued, the body can often serve as the site of a 'micro-physics of power' (1979:28) through which 'the larger social struggles over power are refracted' (Afsaruddin 1999:16). This sort of informal, unorganised and often covert form of struggle is embedded in everyday life and may be contrasted with the forms of open political resistance that are far more rare (see Scott 1990).

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16 See, for example, Tapper (1991:210). Tapper also notes that among the Pashtuns 'men are said to be "authentic" and noble (*asl*) while women are imitations (*badal*) or imperfect (*kam asl*)' (1991:52).

Judith Butler suggests that such actions play a more important role in social change than does overt political resistance (2006). Thus, we cannot understand the nature of power, accommodation and resistance in women's lives without looking at the way women's bodies are controlled and the way women resist that control. The body as the site of a power struggle is not rigid; it changes in the context of economic, political and historical exigencies.

In her early work, Mahboob focused almost entirely on political struggle and confrontation, but in her later work, stories that were mostly about women in diaspora, she connects women's struggle for power with daily acts of resistance and assertions of authority over their bodies. All references to the body in her stories are significant and depict the nature of power, resistance and accommodation in women's lives. This was a theme that was taboo and so almost totally absent from women's fiction in Afghanistan before Mahboob and her contemporaries turned their attention to it.<sup>17</sup> Living in diaspora has opened a window for women writers to discuss the body and its significance for women.

Dressing oneself is an act that Joanne B Eicher and M E Roach-Higgins define as both 'body modification' (such as hairstyle) and 'body supplement' (items displayed on the body) (1992:15). All aspects of dress are 'imbued with meaning' by the 'wearer and viewer'. For Eicher, dress is 'a coded sensory system of non-verbal communication that aids human interaction in space and time' (1995:1).<sup>18</sup> It 'helps

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17 Spozhmai Zaryab is an exception. In one of her short stories, '*Chapan-i siāhrang*' ('The black cloak'), she presents the female body as the main site of power struggles between men and women. For detail, see Bezhan 2008a:263–64.

18 Eicher proposes that: 'the codes of dress ... set off either or both cognitive and affective processes that result in recognition or lack of recognition by the viewers. As a system, dressing the body by modifications and supplements often does facilitate or hinder consequent verbal or other communication' (1995:1).

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people establish an identity as individuals and as members of a group' (Heinze 1990:90)<sup>19</sup> and it 'simultaneously differentiates the same individual from all others; it includes and excludes' (Barnes & Eicher 1992:1).

Like language or culinary or religious traditions, dress marks what groups share and the boundaries around them (Eicher 1995:1). Dressing differently may result in challenging not only traditional cultural codes, but—in cases where women's dress has previously been culturally or formally circumscribed—it may also challenge the authority of men and the traditional relationship between men and women.

In Mahboob's stories, many of her women characters initially choose new modes of dress only to appear compatible with their new environment. However they soon confront resistance from their families and communities, as we see in the stories '*Sadā*' and '*Gum*'.

Other characters consciously choose a new dress code as part of the process of developing a new identity; they have no intention of maintaining the traditions they left behind. The character Ghotai, in Mahboob's short story 'Shelter', is one example of a woman who makes this choice. Ghotai associates her new style of dress with her increased freedom, but it also symbolises her individualism: 'She wore the same colour underwear and bra, and on the top of it a red singlet, and a short black skirt which made her look tall' (Mahboob 2003:10). The Western style of dress she adopts emphasises feminine flamboyance and sexual allure rather than traditional modesty. It is

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19 Turner (1996:122) notes: 'we no longer define ourselves through blood or breeding ... Consumerism and the mass market ... liquidated or at least blurred, the exterior marks of social and personal difference.' Turner believes consumer culture encourages the negotiation of 'social relationships with a calculating frame of mind' (1996:186). How the body is read and how the person is understood is determined by 'the observing eye that reads it' (229).

a dramatic challenge to the gendered presentation of self that she has been confined to. It is also a step towards defining herself as separate from her family, its history and expectations:

After dying her hair, she poured out all the items from the case and handbag onto the bed. She separated useful things. Other items, including some old clothes, a white dress sent by her mother ... and a small mirror broken in the bottom of the handbag, a few letters and addresses, postcards and a few family photos, a torn map and calendar which did not appeal her anymore, were all left aside ... And then she put them in the garbage. (Mahboob 2003:14)

The white dress was Ghotai's wedding dress, and by throwing it away she seems to reject her inherited ideas of marriage. She also no longer wants to look at herself in a small, broken mirror, a metaphor for traditional world views and values. If 'through symbolic devices the physical body exhibits the normative values of the social body' (Arthur 2014), Ghotai is aligning herself with the values of the new culture she lives in.

Muslim women who are a part of minority community (as in Canada) find themselves facing the burden of expectation that they will be the carriers of culture, ensuring the continuity of the values of Islam and/or Afghanistan in their new country. The cost of an outright rejection of these values can be high, and as a result most women compromise to a greater or lesser degree. In 'Shelter', Ghotai chooses to reject them altogether.

[Ghotai] had left her brother's home a while ago, moved to the house of one of her relatives but soon discovered that it was not the place for her. She was fed up with their attitudes and decided to live alone. (Mahboob 2003:12)

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This departure from home provides Ghotai with the opportunity to live how she chooses. She has come to see her most reliable home as ‘the house of self ... the place of her most private self’ (Davies 1994:36).

The 23-year-old Ghotai ends up in a shelter. Here one is not identified as a member of a family, but as an individual. For Ghotai, moving to the shelter provides her with the opportunity to look to other women for support rather than to her family and community. When a woman at the shelter named Miss Lobo asks Ghotai whether she has a family, she says ‘No’. This is a real denial of any sense of belonging or connection to her culture of origin. In order to find a job and take an active role in society, she approaches Miss Lobo who, according to Ghotai’s friend, Sue, ‘is a famous woman with good income’ who ‘has many contacts and ... can easily find jobs for us’ (Mahboob 2003:12). To Ghotai, who has left her family behind and is cut off from her community, Miss Lobo is the means to a new life. Ghotai also attracts Miss Lobo’s interest from their first meeting: ‘Her long hair, her long neck, her charming smile and her innocent gaze deeply attracted Miss Lobo’s attention’ (Mahboob 2003:11).

Michel Foucault suggests that bodies are ‘dressed and managed through both self-discipline and surveillance and a general panoptic lens’ (Gupta 2015:94). The power of the panoptic is not only directed toward others, it is internalised and becomes part of an individual’s self-appraisal. In other words, people monitor their dress through ‘a disciplinary gaze that they direct upon themselves in order to gain a sense of self-empowerment’ (Danaher, Schirato & Webb 2000:57). When Ghotai embraces Western modes of dress, she experiences this not as oppression but as an achievement that is accompanied by rewards and freedom. Ghotai’s story suggests the importance of



‘positioning’ rather than ‘essence’ in the shaping of cultural identity (Hall 1990:222–37).

Andreas Pflictsch notes that there are three types of ‘hybrid’ identity: the multicultural, the intercultural and the transcultural. The multicultural and the intercultural are a mosaic-like identity of multiple components. By contrast, transcultural identity is ‘mobile, flexible, and has no fixed borders’ (quoted in Hout 2011:337). Ghotai, in her attempts to free herself from physical and emotional attachment to her culture and family of origin, perhaps sees the freedom of this completely new, transcultural identity as her goal. However, this change is not necessarily positive. By the end of the story, Ghotai is working in prostitution, suggesting that a complete destruction of the former self can only bring about the destruction of the present self.

It is significant that the story is called ‘Shelter’. There is an irony to this title which plays on the problematic assumption that Western culture is a safe haven for immigrant women, and itself is not supported by a patriarchal structure. By ending up in the “shelter”, Ghotai believes that she has found a place where she will have the support of other women in search of a better life. But it turns out to be simply another way of being exploited. By leaving her family and avoiding its influence, and by embracing Western dress codes, Ghotai is freeing herself from others’ attempts to control her body and individuality. However, the predatory way that Miss Lobo assesses Ghotai’s physicality suggests that women’s bodies and sexuality can be equally exploited in the West—there is just a different face to it. It seems that by migrating to a Western society, the exploitation of Ghotai’s body and mind has not ended. The “shelter” is not a place for a woman to be free, but rather to tie her to another method of

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exploitation. The shelter takes Ghotai to King Street, a place where prostitutes look for customers. 'After styling her hair, wearing a sexy and revealing dress and perfume', and hanging onto both Sue's and Miss Lobo's arms, Ghotai enters King Street where 'everywhere, in front of shops, restaurants and clubs, half-naked women were standing or walking' (2003:15).

# CONCLUSION

Traditionally, Afghanistani literature was considered a male-dominated field; women stayed in the shadows. Those few women who wrote, mainly poetry, had to conform to masculine literary traditions and see the world through the eyes of men. There were no outlets for women's prose beyond the tradition of oral folktales. However, the emergence of women writers in the 1940s changed the literary landscape. From the mid-1960s, an increasing number of women writers of literary merit began to emerge, especially in the late 1970s as Afghanistani literature became more politicised. This period also saw literature being used by some as a means for exploring women's causes. In poetry and prose, women writers began to portray the world of women: their miseries, struggles, hopes and achievements. In this way, they ended the monopoly men had in Afghanistani literature and the imposition of a male worldview on female writers' work.

Since the 1978 coup, Afghanistan history has been marked by war. This had had a paradoxical impact on the lives of women. While it created more opportunities for education and employment for some women, it also contributed to the marginalisation of others, and it sparked the mass migration of a very large number to neighbouring countries. Needless to say most women lost loved ones and homes during the war, while others suffered the fate of rape and enslavement.

Maryam Mahboob is one of the forerunners in this emergence of female writers seen over the last four decades. Mahboob devoted

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most of her work to exploring the experiences of women in a diverse range of situations before and during the war. She herself had experienced or observed most of these situations firsthand. Her own life tells the story of how educated women in Afghanistan have dealt with oppressive socio-cultural pressures and war and how they have survived these to achieve individual agency and to struggle for progress.

Because of the involvement in the Afghanistan war of so many players—internal, regional and international—accounts of the conflict are often largely composed of myth. The truth about the war disappeared in the propaganda of the warring sides and their international supporters. Each side depicted itself as occupying the moral high ground and each claimed to have the support of the nation behind it. While this convinced some segments of society, locally and abroad, and still does, the reality remained largely misunderstood. Because the government and the opposition controlled the mass media, the third voice, which belonged to neither side, was virtually absent. Most of Mahboob's work, particularly her later work, speaks with this voice. Her perspective is that of an insider, a woman who lived and experienced the war, and was an eyewitness to the experiences of others. In this way, Mahboob's writing presents a completely different picture of the war, its protagonists and the misery of the ordinary people.

After the empowerment of the mujahideen and the Taliban, Afghanistani society underwent rapid radicalisation. The mujahideen groups' influence on the country's social politics was initially felt in Pakistan, where a large number of Afghanistani refugees had fled, and in the territories that they captured inside the country. During the chaos of civil war, many women became war booty in the hands

of powerful men, who justified their actions through recourse to religious law and rhetoric. When the Taliban took power, socio-cultural traditions were broken down and new codes of conduct, rooted in a radical interpretation of Islam, were enforced. This meant further suppression and marginalisation for women.

Mahboob's writing portrays women's plight during the war and how they lived, resisted, suffered, survived and died. Her stories portray women at home, on the frontline between warring groups, being treated as slaves or sexual objects by those who claim to be the defenders of the nation and liberators of the homeland, living in refugee camps, and resettled abroad. They explore women's hopes, desires, anxieties and insecurities, and the impact that violence has inflicted on their minds and bodies. Her characters undergo tremendous hardship, but their weapon is their resistance. While some of them are forced to give up, others succeed in overcoming oppression.

Significantly, Mahboob is one the first Afghanistani authors to contribute to our understanding of the position of Afghanistani women in diaspora. Her own experience of exile brought a new dimension to her writing. Like her characters, she was transformed in exile; not only were her political views in relation to the Afghanistani conflict changed, so were her politics in a broader sense, especially with regard to gender politics and women's rights. In diaspora she has adopted a feminist approach to her writing and much of her work began to focus on women's suffering and their empowerment.

While Afghanistani women who fled to other Islamic countries struggle for basic rights, in the West they struggle to balance their cultural heritage with the new ways of life that open up for them. While in the East their rebellion seems doomed to failure because religious, political and economic structures act to maintain the

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status quo, in the West the obstacles they face seem less pernicious but more opaque. In the West they must face the realities of cultural loss, the pressures of family and community to uphold tradition, and a foreign way of life that is at times dangerous and difficult to navigate. For Afghanistani women, migration is shown to be not only a physical journey away from home, but also a psychological journey towards a new one.

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# *Women, War and Islamic Radicalisation in Maryam Mahboob's Afghanistan*

FARIDULLAH BEZHAN

AFGHANISTAN IS REGARDED as a classical patriarchal society, where social tradition, religious doctrine and socio-economic and cultural backwardness have made women second-class citizens. But what has been the nature of life for women in Afghanistan? How have they been treated, both in the private sphere and in public? How did they resist mistreatment during the war inside Afghanistan, in refugee camps or in diaspora? Who are the sponsors and perpetrators of violence against Afghanistani women? And what are the connections between Islam, local customs, the mistreatment of women, and women's connectedness to revolution and jihad? This book provides answers to these questions through an innovative study of the life and short stories of one of the country's leading female writers, Maryam Mahboob. It offers a different image of both the suffering and resistance of Afghanistani women than that which the 'West' has come to know.

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