ACKNOWLEDGING AFGHANISTAN

Notes and Queries on an Occupation

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ABSTRACT

This article questions the privileging of gender as the primary axis along which the experience of being a woman in Afghanistan can be understood and attended to. I argue that the privileging of gender is part of a two-pronged problem: first, there is a substantial lack of current knowledge on everyday life and subjectivity of Afghans, and second, this lack of knowledge is held in abeyance, while a limited set of analytical concepts and clichés—especially gender and Islamic fundamentalism—occupy the respective discursive space. My claim is that knowledge of Afghanistan that lays emphasis on a limited set of analytical parameters ultimately results in an impossibility of acknowledging the experiences of Afghans—men and women alike. A discussion of ongoing ethnographic work in a widow-run bakery in Kabul will serve as an entry point to reconsider the ways in which Afghanistan may inhabit our imagination.

Key Words ◊ Afghanistan ◊ feminism ◊ gender and suffering ◊ international aid institutions ◊ post-war reconstruction

Institutions once thought of as distinct—the state, NGOs, and international organizations—are now understood as woven together in an expansive conglomeration of management, control, and social engineering. In Kabul, as well as elsewhere in the world, such vast institutional assemblages—involved in the work of ‘regime change’ and ‘nation building’—take on a peculiar role as they work to assist an occupying force. Critical development specialists have since expressed dismay at the ‘reconstruction’ process in Afghanistan (Donini et al., 2004), and pointed out that humanitarian objectives have become eclipsed by the military and political agenda. How does one begin an attempt to understand what the international occupation of Afghanistan means for Afghans? What would an ethnography of occupation look like?
In dealing with these questions, this article will show that the present situation in Afghanistan needs to be approached by attending to the experiential knowledge resulting from living under war and occupation, in particular by carefully considering questions of subjectivity and social suffering (Kleinman et al., 1997).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s and into the first decade of the 21st century, ethnographic fieldwork has been largely impossible in Afghanistan. Recent anthropological research elsewhere has engaged with war and violence with great sophistication, especially with regard to the ways that the impact of conflict is woven into everyday lives of survivors (e.g. Daniel, 1996; Feldman, 1991; Jackson, 2004; Nordstrom and Robben, 1995). Even though the long-term consequences of violence have begun to be addressed, the particular circumstances resulting from prolonged war are still understudied.

Profound transformations in kinship and family structures have been noted as a result of the decades of political violence in Afghanistan. Not surprisingly, Nancy Dupree, for example, found that ‘the safety net of traditional closely-knit extended family support networks has been severely damaged’ (1998: 155). Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam describes how:

Economic vicissitudes have steadily transformed attitudes along with the feminization of poverty, due to loss or absence of male providers, which left many, especially urbanized families headed by females, with little choice but for women to contribute to the household’s cash economy. Previously, it was considered shameful for males to shirk their responsibility to provide for the entire family and to allow women to come into contact with corrupting influences by working outside the home, but men from rural and provincial families, as well as different income groups, gradually came to realize the benefits of allowing women to earn money or to have contact with foreign organizations that might give them assistance. (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2004: 109)

As I will try to show in the following, initial inquiries into Afghanistan might thus require fundamental reconsiderations of the analytical or conceptual toolset for anthropological research. How, for example, are gender and kinship in contemporary Afghanistan performed, considering that women’s and men’s roles have shifted dramatically throughout the almost 30 years of unrest and calamity? Likewise, how is widowhood—which is a focus of my ongoing research as well as of this article—now constituted, and how has it changed during the different layers of conflict? In discussing glimpses of my ethnographic fieldwork, this article attempts to show that anxieties about the specter of ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ and ‘customary’ Afghan patriarchy—particularly as they pertain to what is perceived as the oppression of women—have to a large extent eclipsed possibilities of attending to the suffering which geopolitics, war, and occupation inflicted (and continue to inflict) upon the people of Afghanistan.

Judith Butler points towards what is frequently overlooked in the present efforts of politics, media, and reconstruction in Afghanistan. She invokes the concept of the ‘face’ as explored by Emmanuel Lévinas (1985) to illuminate
how it is that the ‘Other’ makes an ethical claim or demand on a person (2004).
She applies the Levinasian idea that looking into someone’s face results in
a particular relationship that is marked by responsibility to the well-known
images of unveiled Afghan women, which circulated after the US invasion of
Kabul:

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 deaths of
civilians. Where is the 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)

Through engagement with Lévinas, Butler contemplates the ‘suffering
over war’ that is lost in the visual representations of ‘liberated’ Afghan
women. The visibility of their unveiled faces momentarily humanizes the
women, but the absence of their face in the Levinasian sense simultaneously
dehumanizes them. The ‘we’ in Butler’s quotation have not looked at the
face of an Afghan woman, because if ‘we’ had, ‘we’ surely would have seen
and felt the affectual residue of decades of violence and hardship. Butler’s
hesitation to celebrate the unveiling of Afghan women as their liberation
is of importance for my argument, because she seems to indicate that the
subjectivities and the experience of being a woman in Afghanistan are lost if
we are preoccupied with a perspective that only allows us to perceive them
as just that, women in Afghanistan. As I will try to show in the following, I
believe that anthropology has a distinctive role to play in Afghanistan at this
crucial moment of reconstruction by attending to questions of subjectivity
and social suffering. I will thus refer to my ongoing ethnographic research
to point towards the importance of considering the affects and sentiments
of betrayal, disappointment, and dispossession which link the present to a
long history of external interferences, which incited internal turmoil and
thus subjected the country to prolonged violence and social unrest.

*Pre-emptive Widowhood*

The area I call Kart-e-naan is one of the poorest, most devastated, yet
most inhabited neighborhoods of Kabul. Although 15 years ago it was
one of the up-market areas of the city, with Kabul University nearby, and
was spared by the Soviet occupation and the war against it that lasted 10
years, during the civil war in the 1990s much of the neighborhood was
destroyed. Amongst the bombed-out skeletons of buildings inhabited by squatters, heaps of rubble, two schools for girls run by international NGOs, a Shiite Mosque, a lively bazaar and rows of battered homes is also Bakery No. X. It is open from sunrise to sunset, seven days a week, and is part of what I am calling the Urban Vulnerable Bakery Project (henceforth, the Bakery Project) of an international aid organization. The Bakery Project was launched in 1996 in response to the multifarious effects of prolonged conflict and violence, drought, and the ensuing widespread food insecurity in the urban centers throughout Afghanistan. The main intent of the project is to provide subsidized bread to the urban poor, while specifically targeting the more vulnerable groups—primarily orphaned children, widows, other female-headed households, and the elderly. The beneficiaries of the project are selected according to criteria established by the Bakery Project administrators, and are given ration cards which they present daily at the bakery to get the bread which is fortified with micronutrients at 40 percent of the market price. While poor urban households in general are beneficiaries, that is, ‘customers’ of the bakery, it is primarily widows who are selected to work there as bakers. Fourteen women and a supervisor are employed in the bakery, working in two daily shifts. The first group of women begins at 4.00 a.m. and prepares bread until 9.00 a.m., when the second group arrives, which is usually there until 3.00 p.m., or later if necessary. Seven women work together at a time in a very small space as they rotate tasks—weighing the ingredients, kneading the dough, rolling it out, shaping it into the long flatbreads (resembling skateboards) which make Afghan bread distinctive, poking holes in the dough to allow air to escape, and then sliding it into the wood oven with a long paddle to bake until it is reddish-brown.

In addition to a meager but steady income, each woman can take home two pieces of bread per day. All of them live on the outskirts of Kabul, from where they daily walk up to 1.5 hours to get to the bakery. The bakers represent the major social groups in Afghanistan: three are Pashtun, two are Hazara, seven are Tajik, and two are Uzbek. The oldest one is 62, while the average age of the women is 34. The 14 bakers have come to Kabul from Panjshir, Kunduz, Qandahar, Parwan, Ghazni, Bamian, Taloqan, and elsewhere in search of work. Three of the women came to Kabul between 1997 and 2000, during Taliban rule, while the others arrived with the fall of the Taliban and the massive influx of international aid. During the 24 years of conflict, none of the widows had ever left Afghanistan. However, each of them had been displaced several times.

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork, I worked as a baker in Bakery No. X during the summer of 2003. At 25, Hila was the youngest of the bakers there at the time, where she worked a nine-hour shift—more than the others—because the community had decided that she needed to earn a little extra. She got her job four months before my arrival. Hila is a cheerful young
woman, always animated, and always looking out for others. She made it her daily duty to prepare the large pot of *qahva* (green tea) and to supply refills throughout the shift in the bakery; if somebody complains about back pain and wants to prematurely rotate to another task in the assembly line in the bakery, Hila immediately volunteers and follows with a friendly taunt toward that person. It was unanimously agreed by everybody at the bakery that she is the chief instigator of the laughter there, and that she has a remarkable gift for sarcasm. She stuck out, not because she was the youngest, but primarily because she joked about everything, nothing was off limits. Before my stay there, I myself did not know what to expect from working with a community of widows. However, despite no prior expectations, I certainly did not imagine myself to be laughing and joking as much as I did while in the bakery. After working in the bakery and interacting with Hila for two weeks, I began to ask her specific questions about her family and her support network. We started the interview talking about the details surrounding the deaths in her family. The youngest of her three older brothers died fighting in Mazar-Sharif in 1997, another one died due to unspecified illness in 1990, and the third one was killed by a bomb blast in 2000. The cause of her father’s death two years before our conversation was not known. He had been suffering from severe chest pain, and Hila assumes he died because he missed his sons so much, *dilesht tang shod* (literally, ‘his heart tightened’). She expressed how her father was especially depressed and quiet after her last surviving brother died in 2000. This eldest son of his was killed in a random rocket blast, and a deep sadness had overcome her father upon the unbearable realization that all his sons had died before him. Hila articulated that the cumulative loss finally became more than her father could bear, and in Hila’s opinion that ultimately resulted in his death.

One day during an interview, I asked her about the circumstances surrounding her husband’s death—she had never mentioned anything about him to me, even though other widows would often speak about their married life. Hila looked at me and began crying, as she said in Dari: ‘I am a widow, dear sister, but I was never married.’ I was confused, and initially thought I was misunderstanding her, because although Hila used the common word for widow (*biveh*) in Dari, widowhood is also expressed with a range of terms that literally mean ‘woman without (protection, husband or male head of household)’ or ‘vulnerable woman’. But I continued to listen and quickly realized that her statement was not linguistically confounding. Hila was not merely expressing her current status as a female head of household, in using the term *biveh*, she was making a profound gesture toward her relationship to loss, as well as to her particular perspective of the future. Surviving the deaths of her three brothers and her father had left Hila alone to care and provide for herself and her mother. She cannot leave her mother since there is nobody else that could care for her; all her mother’s brothers
had died during the wars, and her father’s family—who would customarily assume the responsibility of care for her mother—is too poor to accept another household member, much less both of them. Hila said that she had lost all the men in her life. She had tried to get married several times, but the prospective grooms, or their families, could not afford to provide for both her and her mother. Hila therefore imagines her future not to include marriage. The widows working in the bakery, and the community, had thus presented her to the project administrators as a zan-e bi-sarparast (literally, a woman without a male head of household), who should be given a job. Hila, however, understands herself not only as a zan-e bi-sarparast, thus fulfilling the minimum requirements set by the Bakery Project, but more specifically a widow. Although never married, Hila has become a widow by classification, not due to the death of a husband, but due to the death of the possibility of marriage.

I found in my research that there is a common word for widow (biveh and kundda, respectively) as well as different expressions that translate as ‘widow’ in both Dari and Pastho which were used interchangeably, but which may have slightly different connotations. My preliminary understanding of the different expressions for ‘widow’ stem from the multiple possible reconfigurations of family and networks of care which have resulted from war and displacement in Afghanistan. In some cases, a widow or multiple widows reside in a household together with one or more males as the primary wage earner and/or head of household(s). However, also prevalent in Afghanistan are households which have no male head of household and thus where only a widow and her children reside. Yet another possible household arrangement is constituted by females whose husbands have migrated elsewhere in search of work, sending back remittances from Pakistan or Iran or somewhere else in Afghanistan. Sometimes households chose not to mention that they get remittances in order to secure some benefit from the aid community, who often target female-headed households specifically as their objects of intervention. The presence of the aid community thus naturally complicates an already complicated set of contingencies in the lives of Afghans. Widows in Afghanistan are customarily supposed to be absorbed by affinal kin in most kin arrangements after the death of a husband. However, kin structures have been drastically reconfigured due to the human and material losses of war and displacement. In the ensuing perilous economic situations it has become common for a widow to be turned away by her affines and thus to be absorbed by her agnates. In the case of Hila and her mother, they could not be taken in by either.

Hila’s predicament does not only need to be traced back to the harshness of her life circumstances, but also to the parameters with which international aid institutions categorize the experiences of Afghan women: the figure of the war-destitute, dependent, and subjugated widow has emerged as the paradigmatic object of intervention for the many international aid agencies
that currently work in Afghanistan. While this is related to the ways in which images of women as powerless victims circulate in discourse on Afghanistan, which ultimately impacts discourses and policies pertaining to development and state-building there, it is also grounded in demographic circumstances: among a total population of nearly 24 million Afghans, more than 3 million are young and middle-aged war widows, with 300,000 widows living in Kabul itself. It is estimated that one in eight households in Afghanistan is headed by a widow (UNFPA, 2002).

The World Food Program operates 85 bakeries throughout Afghanistan also run by widows providing subsidized bread to identified beneficiaries. In the city of Kabul alone, more than 170,000—mostly female-headed—households are beneficiaries of this project (WFP, 2004). The Bakery Project and its focus on women in general, and widows in particular, is considered to be exemplary among the international community’s reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. While women are considered to be severely disadvantaged in all aspects of life in Afghanistan, widows are seen to be suffering even further grievances. The international community considers the alleviation of women’s suffering, and improvements in their roles in Afghan society, to be the most urgent task at hand in rebuilding the country. This priority is informed by contemporary scholarly and humanitarian discourses which evolve around the victimization of Afghan women, employ culture as a deterministic explanatory device, and use Islamic fundamentalism as represented by the Taliban as a scapegoat to summarily account for all forms of distress in Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002). These clichés or tropes have not only governed representations of contemporary Afghanistan, but have now moved from the discursive into the domain of everyday life and are thus impacting the social worlds of Afghans. I would contend that the predominant mode of engaging with the suffering of Afghans, and Afghan women in particular, has been through an understanding of gender which is inflected primarily by static impressions of Afghan patriarchal culture and/or a particular rendition of Islam while failing to account for how gender has been inflected by violence, war, and occupation and subsequently what work war and its accompanying forces have performed on social institutions, family structure, and individual subjectivities in Afghanistan. Hence, Hila’s access to the bakery was gained through this category of widowhood as defined by the Bakery Project, which was, in turn, creatively engaged with and transformed by her community. But would she still articulate her predicament as that of a classificatory widow if the figure of the widow would not epitomize the trope of the suffering, oppressed Afghan woman in the discourses of the international aid community? What role does this trope play in mitigating or extending her suffering? Did the institutional scripts guide her to assume the subjectivity of a widow or did her conception of herself as a pre-emptive widow coincidently overlap with
the scripts and also offer some financial benefit in the form of a job? Or, more generally, what are the impacts on the possibilities for social reconstruction in Afghanistan of an analysis that conceptualizes women as victims, and ultimately, men and ‘culture’ as perpetrators? If international aid institutions included a more comprehensive agenda and commitment to livelihood development for Afghan males (those who would perhaps be prospective grooms for Hila) or Afghan families (instead of exclusively women), would this increase her prospects for marriage or at least enable Hila to imagine that possibility?

**Romancing Resistance**

In a recent article on widowhood in post-conflict Sri Lanka, Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake (2004) raises important concerns about the lack of comprehension in many development initiatives to account for the massive reconfigurations of family and kin structures that result from a situation of prolonged political violence. Such reconstitutions of family structures occurred in Sri Lanka due to the fact that many young widows have become heads of households because they replaced their deceased husbands as principal income earners. According to Rajasingham-Senanayake, the new position in the family provides these widows with spaces of empowerment, and contrasts with the predicament of women in post-conflict situations around the world who remain in status quo positions within patriarchal structures. Rajasingham-Senanayake’s claims about widows and post-conflict reconfigurations of family structures are very interesting and certainly pertinent also to Afghanistan, but I contend that it might be important to furthermore interrogate how empowerment is constituted. Following Lila Agu-Lughod’s (1990) work on ‘the romance of resistance’, I would caution against the assumption that notions of empowerment and agency can necessarily be ascribed to new or changing roles for women or widows, even if the new roles entail greater freedom of movement and economic independence. In the case of Afghan widows who find their lives reconstituted in the wake of the ‘liberation and reconstruction of Afghanistan’, it might also be important to find out what might be disabled (rather than enabled) when widows inhabit the spaces created by the new economic opportunities which foreign NGOs offer.

The bakery where I conducted fieldwork was frequently visited by UN officials accompanied by foreign dignitaries. On every occasion, the bakery project was presented to the visitors as a unique site where women of Afghanistan had been given control over their lives, thus enabling them to stand up against the oppression of the Taliban. The international aid community considers the Bakery Project a highly successful example for
interventions directed at improving the lives of women in Afghanistan. The project has been operating since 1996, that is, it was put in existence as the Taliban came to power. Despite the edicts the Taliban had issued against women working outside their homes, or against Western aid agencies, the bakeries were permitted to operate in Afghanistan. Remarkably, the Bakery Project became known in the international aid community as a space of resistance, where what was seen as the otherwise suppressed spirit of feminism defied the repressive regime of the Taliban (WFP, 2002). The unique success the Bakery Project administrators had in negotiating with members of the Taliban, on the other hand, is largely unnoted. What is celebrated with much dramatic zeal is only that the Bakery Project female bakers were courageous and bold and stood up to the Taliban:

They [women bakers] did not give in to despair; they battled in secret for their right to choose; they fought for their war ravaged people and their hungry children and they fought for them against the very law of the land. (WFP, 2004)

However, there is a remarkable silence about the daily circumstances of the widows’ lives and about the fact that most of the women had very little choice in the matter, because the survival of self, family, and others was at stake. The praising of the alleged resistance of the widows working at the bakeries—reminiscent of what Abu-Lughod has criticized as the ‘romance of resistance’ (1990)—is starkly at odds with the meanings that the widows themselves gave to their role as community bakers. As I found in my research, the widows working at the bakeries appreciated the project because it provided them with a job, and because it allowed them to feed their children and often to support other family members, as well as to assist other widows in the community by making low-cost, fortified bread. The widows sometimes asked me to translate the conversations among the official visitors, and were usually somewhat annoyed to hear that their daily work was celebrated as a heroic political struggle. As a matter of fact, some of the widows even wondered why they were not treated with more consideration by international organizations, especially since they were presented to visitors as heroines of resistance against oppression. Why could aid institutions not make daily life less of a struggle, for example, by increasing the salary the widows received from the bakery? One of the bakers expressed herself with tears: ‘One day we are heroines for them, the next day something else, at the end we are useless.’ Another baker continued by saying, ‘they know nothing about our lives yet they tell our stories on our behalf’, while other bakers found it disturbing that the visitors never tried to speak with them and only wanted to take their photographs.

The celebration of the alleged feminist resistance of the widows at the bakery implies that the most salient forces which women in Afghanistan would want to oppose are Afghan men, and traditional social structures and
institutions. In maintaining such perceptions, international aid institutions are pitting widows against Afghan men or a misogynistic, patriarchal cultural environment, and are thus glossing over the possibility that their own presence in the lives of Afghan widows (as well as women in general, and men and society at large, for that matter) could be experienced as that of a force that needs to be negotiated, and might be opposed. Obviously, the widows working at the bakery are happy that they have a job and that they can feed their children. Yet what about the impact that the prioritizing of improving the conditions of women’s lives has on the society as a whole (and by extension of that, on women, including widows)? As I showed in Hila’s example, it was the undoing of kin obligations of care (not misogynistic males enacting some form of patriarchy) which prohibited her father’s family from assuming responsibility for Hila and her mother. The premature deaths, not only of the four members of her immediate family but also of her maternal uncles, in conjunction with paralyzing poverty, eventually culminated in Hila being forced to find a job that would feed herself and her mother. But even in a ‘liberated’ Afghanistan she could not do that freely, but had to submit herself to the conditions under which the Bakery Project Program allowed her to work in the bakery—she had to become a widow. Her story is not unique. The priorities of the international aid community to help Afghan women have created circumstances under which it is much more difficult for men than for women to find paid work. As a consequence, many families are now provided for by women (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2004; Dupree, 1998). Men are not only left unemployed—but they have to live in an environment that is controlled by foreign agents who consider Afghan men to be inherently misogynistic and anachronistic. It therefore needs to be considered that the ways in which the international community determines the conditions of possibility under which Afghans—men and women alike—can or cannot make ends meet might not primarily be perceived as liberating, but maybe as stringent, limiting, and arbitrary. Furthermore, the mapping of a gendered political consciousness over the everyday concerns of women sets up a dichotomy between the oppressed, voiceless woman on one side, and the heroic, autonomous figure of the resister on the other. The maintaining of such a dichotomy, and the exclusive celebration of only certain forms of resistance, ultimately discounts the everyday struggles of women like Hila, and other ordinary widows—Afghan women in general—and moreover represents a misreading of the complex forms of agency they enact. I take my understanding of agency from Talal Asad, who defines it as ‘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). For Asad, as I understand him, to locate ‘agency’ is not primarily to attempt to locate moments in which individuals act to change their lives, but to examine and analyze the structures of possibilities
that exist in which one is able to act. It becomes important to look at how relations are formed, situated, and sustained rather than define singular actions by individuals as agentive. Saba Mahmood further complicates Asad’s notion of agency, relating it to her work on women in a non-liberal Islamic movement in Cairo (Mahmood, 2004). In addition to providing an ethnographic account of the Islamic Revival in Egypt, she applies Asad’s notion of agency to open up ways of analyzing modes of women’s agency that are not reduced to the language of resistance or subversion of norms. Her work challenges feminist assumptions about women’s self-determination that see the voluntary limitations to which the women in the Islamic Revival movement submit themselves as misguided or false consciousness. Mahmood thus raises questions about why women’s self-determination should be understood only in terms of particular, ‘enlightened’ ideas about freedom or liberty, and not also in terms of the liberty to submit oneself to other, for example, religious, norms and values. I find her insights useful because she calls into question feminist assumptions about what is good for women who are considered to be living under conditions where their freedoms are curtailed by religious or social norms. A feminist herself, Mahmood raises questions about the difficulty to resist patronizing women who adhere to different notions of liberty than oneself—a sentiment which Lila Abu-Lughod succinctly expressed with regard to Afghanistan: ‘even after “liberation” from the Taliban, [Afghan women] might want different things than we want for them’ (2002).

**Under Occupation**

Any analysis of Afghanistan at the present must necessarily account for the presence of the international community and the multinational forces, particularly in Kabul. Since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the subsequent military occupation by coalition forces, an international community of aid workers and military force have reconfigured not only space, but everyday life for Afghans in Kabul. A fleet of weapons, soldiers, technology, development planners, gender consultants, and other foreign ‘experts’ from around the world, with shiny SUVs and big expense accounts in tow, descended upon Kabul. Since 2002, the population of Kabul has increased almost fivefold to five million, not only because of the presence of the aid and military community, but also due to forcefully repatriated refugees from Pakistan and Iran who came to Kabul to actualize their dreams of a dignified return to their *watan* (literally, homeland) (Daulatzai, 2004; Turton and Marsden, 2002). Among the forcefully repatriated refugees are the hundreds of thousands of young adults who were born in refugee camps throughout Pakistan and who had never even been to Afghanistan—
a circumstance which has been described as ‘a reconnecting of people deemed to be Afghans with a place deemed to be Afghanistan’ (Fielden, 1998). In addition, many Afghans from villages throughout the country have been sent to Kabul to take advantage of the presence of the international community by earning much needed salaries to support their families. In fact, most of the widows in the bakery came specifically to Kabul in search of a job. Thus, displacement continues to be a familiar feature of life for many Afghan families. So while none of the 14 widows had ever left Afghanistan, each narrated undertaking multiple journeys, frequently resulting in loss, including accounts of family members dying (usually young children and the elderly, but not exclusively), as well as descriptions of untreated illnesses haunting them, and stories of miscarriages occurring due to the hardships of their journeys.7

Since housing prices skyrocketed with the arrival of the international aid and military missions (rent for a dilapidated four-bedroom home went from $400/month to an astounding $10,000/month), the returning refugees and those Kabulis evicted from their houses for inability to pay rent have become squatters in the skeletal remains of the buildings destroyed during the devastating civil war in the 1990s. To the dismay of many Afghans, commanders and representatives of the former warring factions—many who are well-documented human rights abusers—were appointed as ministers or governmental positions by the occupying forces and the Karzai government. The residents of Kabul watched with anxiety, fear, and loathing, as this cast of foreign and indigenous characters settled in the city.

For many Afghans, the uncertainty of the international occupation of Afghanistan, which came along with the dim sense of hope that arose with the overthrow of the Taliban, has morphed into renewed feelings of dispossession and despair. Kabul, and for all intents and purposes Afghanistan, is under siege. Less than two decades have passed since the Soviets occupied Afghanistan, and for many Afghans the thick international presence of military and humanitarian forces, combined with the lack of significant changes in their life circumstances, is too reminiscent of that earlier era of occupation. In addition to feeling neglected, many Afghans are sensing betrayal from the international community at large (Stockton, 2004). As one foreign correspondent who was based in Afghanistan from 1999 to 2002 noted: ‘Almost lost amid all this were the voices of Afghans, particularly Afghan civilians. The whole world was talking about Afghanistan, but there was little evidence that it was listening to Afghans and their view on unfolding events’ (Clark, 2004). This same pattern plays out with international aid agendas for Afghanistan, for which Afghans are rarely consulted as experts or asked about their needs. This has ultimately led Afghans to feel dispossession, shame, and the sense of not being relevant enough for the world.8
Security concerns and logistical difficulties notwithstanding, without long-term, ethnographic research the possibilities for acknowledging the suffering of Afghans will remain elusive. I do not want to claim that only anthropologists are in a position to contribute valuable research data, but my contention is that important aspects of social life and experience in Afghanistan are largely unknown and desperately need to be studied. Anthropological methodologies permit the study of hopes, desires, anxieties, sensibilities, affects, and insecurities, and of the impact of violence, as well as of kinship structures and social networks—all of which, I have tried to argue, are very critical to comprehending the contemporary social world of Afghans. Furthermore, in my estimation, any attempt to comment on problems, needs, or the struggles of Afghans in general and Afghan women in particular will remain subject to conjecture without sustained and engaged inquiries into the everyday lives and subjectivities of Afghans.

I thus argue that careful studies of both Afghan men’s and women’s subjectivities are required to identify the institutions, experiences, events, and structures which make up their everyday lives. Careful accounting for the inner workings of subjectivities and their contingencies can be found in Veena Das’s work on violence and social suffering in India (Das, 1995a, 1995b, 1998, 2000; Kleinman et al., 1997). The manner in which she details how drastic events or circumstances are folded into the everyday relations of individuals is what I consider of great importance for understanding the predicament of contemporary Afghanistan. In the case of Hila, this might entail not only the death of all her male relatives, but also her subjection to the narratives of vulnerability propagated by the international aid community, and her consequent assumption of the status of widowhood. It is the unfolding of such intricacies against the background of Afghanistan’s recent history which makes the study of subjectivities a dire necessity for a project to recast the terms by which we have come to know Afghanistan. Das follows Judith Butler in stating that subjectivity is not only constituted by experiences of subjugation, but also by the manner in which the subject inhabits the respective subject position. She explains: ‘individual lives are defined by context, but they are also generative of new contexts’ (Das, 2000). Das’s idea of the ordinary not as something primarily uneventful, but as that which is recovered from the rubble of tragic circumstances, might thus be helpful in making sense of the predicament of women (but not only women) in Afghanistan today (Das, 2000). For Hila it was not an oppressive system of gender imbalance that took away her husband before she ever had one—it was her life in a war-torn, poverty-struck, neglected environment, and the pressure to submit to scripts that others had written for her, those who had come to ‘liberate’ women like herself. Kinship structures and social networks had to be redrawn for her to inhabit something like the ordinary."
The suggestions I make in this article are not exclusive, the examples I discuss are not conclusive, and the analyses I attempt are not complete. I am merely offering the approach that currently guides my own investigations to reimagine and further the available modes of engagement with Afghanistan.

The direly needed ethnographic study of contemporary Afghanistan will necessarily have to account for the impact of violence on the experiences and the social worlds of Afghans. My appeal for the anthropological study of subjectivity and social suffering is guided by a compulsion to enable the conditions for the possibility of acknowledging the suffering of Afghans. I do not wish to imply that the only subjectivity Afghans can inhabit is one marked by suffering, and even less do I intend to suggest that Afghans are merely traumatized victims. Acknowledging their suffering means lending an ear to their pain. 10

My plea is simple: the lives of Afghans—men and women alike—need to be situated within larger social, historical, political, and economic webs of significance, and not only within a narrow grid of tropes such as the suffering Afghan woman, culture as a deterministic explanatory device, and/or Islamic fundamentalism (lest understandings be gridlocked). But as we zoom out to incorporate these larger scale contingencies, we simultaneously need to zoom in and carefully focus on the social worlds and the experiences of Afghans; the ways in which the decades of violence and deprivation are mapped onto the lives of Afghans need to be studied in detail, as must the ways in which these lives are rendered dependent on international and institutional interventions. When I am thus searching for ways to acknowledge the suffering of Afghans I am not typecasting Afghans as victims. Rather, I am asking what it might mean to acknowledge suffering.

I do believe that the study of individual and social suffering, the different expressions of suffering, and the meanings and purposes it carries would be a worthwhile and important aspect to understanding the subjectivities of Afghans. While the horrible misdeeds performed both by the political and humanitarian enterprises on the people of Afghanistan, as well as by the US media (which has been so horribly implicated in the problem for decades), cannot be excused, the scholarly enterprise can do something to make the acknowledgement of the suffering of Afghans possible. It is in this spirit that I undertake the task of excavating the meanings and experience of being an Afghan in Afghanistan as a mode of enabling the possibility for acknowledgement to occur.

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NOTES

1. With exception of the supervisor who went to Pakistan for three months, but subsequently returned.

2. I wish to thank Ramin Takloo-Bighash, Niloofar Haeri, Khwaga Kakar, Mahvash Shahegh, and Hossein Ziai for clarifying nuances pertaining to Persian and Pashto.

3. Her status could thus be termed pre-emptive widowhood. I would like to thank Amira Quraishi for this formulation.

4. It would be interesting in future work to see if there are certain patterns that guide the choice of one expression for ‘widow’ over another. For example, it would be interesting to investigate if widows prefer one specific signifier when they engage with foreign NGOs, and whether that usage would have particular implications for their relationship to the NGO. In her work, Elaheh Rostami Povey (2003) found that the expression zanane bee sarparast (literally, women without a male head of household) was determined to be derogatory in Iran and thus was changed by some NGOs to zanan sarparast (literally, women-headed household). I am curious about the implications that such a change of language may have from the perspective of the widows in Afghanistan.

5. Leila Ahmed has shown that representations exclusively privileging heroic and explicit forms of resistance are implicitly endorsing explicitly imperialist sentiments, in that ‘the unstated message . . . is often, just as in colonial days, that Arab men, Arab culture, and Islam are incurably backward and that Arab and Islamic societies indeed deserve to be dominated, undermined, or worse’ (Ahmed, 1998).

6. The presence of the ISAF forces and the international aid community has drastically skyrocketed the cost of living in Kabul. The dependence on a steady income has thus increased dramatically, which further exacerbates the pressure of making a livelihood in an already stressful environment.

7. Considering the impossibility of conducting long-term research in Afghanistan, which pertained for more than two decades, the available (but nevertheless limited) scholarship on Afghans has concentrated on the 4–6 million refugees in Pakistan and Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2005; Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, 1988; Centlivres-Demont, 1994; Dupree, 1990; Edwards, 1994; Hoodfar, 2004; Khan, 2002; Khattak, 2004; Marsden, 1999; Tober et al., 2006; Turton and Marsden, 2002). Although such research has been vital to understanding the subjectivities of the long-standing Afghan refugee populations in neighboring countries, there has been little to no work on those who stayed behind—the
18 to 20 million Afghans who somehow, and for varying reasons, managed to stay in Afghanistan, or could not afford to leave. The fact that they remained in Afghanistan does not imply that they were not uprooted. Up to 3 million Afghans have been internally displaced, that is, had to flee to another part of the country, many of them several times. Due to the problematic nature of the official UN definition of what constitutes a refugee, *internally displaced persons* (IDPs) do not get the care and assistance that ‘official’ refugees can receive. IDPs fall out of the realm of legal responsibility and ‘care’ of the international community. Due to the different legal and institutional investments of states and the international community towards refugees and IDPs respectively, the predicament of IDPs—although resonant with the hardships of refugee life in many ways—often fails to be comparable to the latter. Because of the diverging experiences and subjectivities of refugees and IDPs respectively, the literature on Afghan refugees is beyond the scope of this article. However, the ongoing research on Afghan refugees who remain outside of Afghanistan, as well as work on refugees who have repatriated, are certainly topics of critical importance and concerns which I will take up elsewhere.

8. Political scientist and Afghan specialist Barnett Rubin has called Afghans ‘a people with a history of being deceived and disappointed by both their rulers and the outside world’ (Rubin et al., 2004). Rubin’s observation and his work in general (1988, 1995, 2000, 2002a, 2002b) raises important questions about the spectral presence of indifference and neglect felt by Afghans manifested and accumulated over the decades due in large part to their unmitigated suffering despite and because of the international strategic meddling into their affairs. Afghans often express how they are marked, collectively and/or individually, by neglect and indifference, yet such neglect is also noted by policy analysts, such as James Dobbins of RAND, the former special envoy for Afghanistan, who calls Afghanistan ‘the least resourced, large-scale American reconstruction program ever’ (Rubin et al., 2004). Despite being relevant for strategic purposes, money for the reconstruction of Afghanistan is low, causing many Afghans to wonder what the intentions are of the considerable international presence in Kabul. From January 2002 through the end of February 2004, donors pledged $7 billion, committed $5.4 billion, but actually disbursed only $2.9 billion of aid to Afghanistan (Rubin et al., 2004). Rubin et al. note that the various studies done by the RAND corporation, the IMF, many US strategic think tanks, and CARE (a non-governmental organization) have all found that compared to other recent post-conflict countries Afghanistan has received far less aid, which is a statistic difficult to understand considering the significant strategic value and importance placed on reconstruction by the major super powers. In 2002 and 2003, Afghanistan received only $67 per person/year in foreign aid, which is much lower than past conflicts: Kosovo ($814), East Timor ($256), Bosnia ($249). Even those countries referred to as paradigmatic cases of donor neglect—Haiti ($74) and Rwanda ($114)—received more in aid per capita, per year, than Afghanistan in 2002 and 2003 (Rubin et al., 2004).

9. Hila’s story, however, should not be seen as concluded—her quest for the ordinary is not over, nor is my interaction with her.

10. My understanding of acknowledgement and suffering follows the work of Veena Das, who on her part is influenced by Stanley Cavell (1969: 263–4):
One could say: Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I do something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.) . . . The claim of suffering may go unanswered. We may feel lots of things—sympathy, Schadenfreude, nothing. If one says this is a failure to acknowledge one’s suffering, surely this would not mean that we fail, in such cases, to know that he is suffering? It may or may not. The point, however, is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated . . . A ‘failure to know’ might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A ‘failure to acknowledge’ is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness.

Cavell thus makes an important distinction between knowledge and acknowledgment, one which I believe provides some space for scholars to work from.

REFERENCES


Daulatzai: Acknowledging Afghanistan


BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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